“I AM OTHERWISE”:
THE ROMANCE BETWEEN POETRY AND THEORY
AFTER THE DEATH OF THE SUBJECT

DISSERTATION

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* * * * *

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The broad questions the dissertation poses are 1) What is the poet’s relationship with language? and 2) How do post-structuralist theories of linguistically constituted subjectivity affect how and what the poet writes? The examination applies this issue to a range of American poets working in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the new theories of how language and literature worked were being spread through the academy and the general culture alike. The dissertation’s method first reads a poet’s work from this period with a keen focus on what her poems both explicitly and implicitly say about language. Then, the work of a theorist, whose work is contemporaneous with the poet, explication in terms of its consequences for language and subjectivity. Finally, the two—poet and theorist—are engaged in a dialectic that exhibits how theories of language affect how and what a poet writes.

The dissertation proposes four poetic relationships with language. Using the poetry of Adrienne Rich and the theory of Harold Bloom, anxiety is determined to be the initial way a poet relates to language. Subversive irony quells such anxiety, according to the poetry of John Ashbery
and the deconstructionism of Paul de Man. Maurice Blanchot conceptualizes a space of literature which allows a poet like Jorie Graham to anguish herself out of existence. Alternatively, a Language poet like Barrett Watten so obsesses over language that he comes upon a relationship with language that is like psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s theory of subjective destitution in which one uses language but is divested of its meaningful influence of anxiety, irony, and anguish.

The dissertation determines the inauguration of a new kind of poetry, one which merges poetry and theory. One of the results of the study finds that the new theoretical poetry suffers itself to understand language’s effect on subjectivity and then clear away the saturation of language in order to construct a subjectivity that exists both inside and outside the realm of language. Whereas poets of the past tarried with philosophy or criticism, poets of this time period unite lyric feeling with literary theory.
For K.
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CHAPTER 1

SUBJECTIVITY, POETRY, THEORY, DEATH

1.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEATH IN POETRY

Since Blake’s experienced “chimney-sweeper” was “clothed [. . .] in the clothes of death, / And taught [. . .] to sing the notes of woe” . . . Since Wordsworth was bowled over by a little girl’s willful disavowal of death in “We Are Seven”:

“But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!”
‘Twas throwing words away: for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, “Nay, we are seven!”

Since Coleridge revealed the mutuality of life and death in his “Epitaph”: “That he who many a year with toil of breath / Found death in life, may here find life in death!” . . . Since Byron dreamily declared the world a void and “lump of death—a chaos of hard clay” in “Darkness”: “All earth was but one thought—and that was death, / Immediate and inglorious” . . . Since Shelley asserted death’s profound supremacy over the dream of living in “To a Skylark”:

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream

Since Keats affirmed his affinity with negation in “Ode to A Nightingale”: “I have been half in love with easeful Death,” the Romantic legacy has remained a fascination with death, mortality, and finitude, has tarried with death in life, immortality, and infinity beyond this worldly finitude. The terror-filled and awe-full sublime experience sensitizes the Romantic poet to death’s hollowing, yet ironically enlivening, vicissitudes. The Romantic, a melancholic prophet of death in life, feels the full force of life by traversing the threshold of absolute emptiness and penetrating loss: the Romantic poet lives life by confronting death.

As such penetrating otherworldliness crossed the ocean, it was transformed, but not altogether contained by American transcendentalism, Yankee pragmatism. ‘It,’ the other side of life, “reared its head. / In the monarch Thought’s dominion— / It stood there!” in Poe’s “The Haunted Palace,” unnameable and uncanny, destroying and hollowing the otherwise radiant and beautiful soul-house from the inside. Roderick and Beatrice form a dialectic of obsession and hysteria, of death and life, which is sublated by the return of the repressed which cannot die. Death itself is rendered visible by Beatrice walking half-past life. Although Dickinson plays faithfully with death in poem 976,
Death is a Dialogue between
The Spirit and the Dust.
“Dissolve” says Death — The Spirit “Sir
I have another Trust” —

deadth ultimately constitutes the force in dialectic that
overturns her faith in transcendence and relegates her to a
tempestuous half-life of subjectivity in poem 721: “Behind
Me — dips Eternity — / Before me — Immortality — / Myself
— the Term between —.” The poet’s sentence (her life-
term) on this mortal coil is terminal, yet undying and
interminable, fraught with the soul’s ineffable, yet always
already utterable, if not iterative, friction with death.
Even Whitman, who simultaneously sings both the body and the
soul electric, knows the limits of his populist universe as
the cold touch of death, that is knowledge of death’s
ultimate otherness. In “Song of Myself,” what bars, and
ironically motivates, the communion between the poet in
grass writing and “you” in the grass reading, the connection
that transcends both time and space, is the deadly other
in/of the poet’s soul: “I believe in you my soul, the other
I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be
abased to the other” (Section 5). Whitman transcends
history, ours but most especially his, by explicitly
tarrying between life and death, that is, between the self
that he is and the other that beckons him from within. The
American transcendentalist desires to surpass the self and
engender a sacred primal unity precisely because of the
banality and inevitability of death and otherness in the vicissitudes of the soul, the spirit, the subject. The English Romantic engages death out there in order to experience life while the American Transcendentalist feels the grip of death inside life and proceeds to surmount the moment of life–qua–death by enlisting a higher plane of existence—myth, metaphysics, and history of the soul.

American high modernists internalized Romanticism’s sublime dejection and Transcendentalism’s soulful projection. Then they revitalized it in a psyche of, that is a poetry of, fragmentation, introjection disintegrated. Pound renders the modern affect with an exsanguinated howl in “Und Drang”:

How our modernity,
Never-wrecked and broken, turns
Against time’s way and all the way of things,
Crying with weak and egoistic cries!
(Collected Early Poems 169-70)

The metahistorical poetic communion inaugurated by Whitman breaks down under Pound’s stewardship. Moreover, Eliot’s discombobulated The Waste Land proffers a consciousness that, because it “know[s] only / A heap of broken images,” “can connect / Nothing with nothing.” As the myth of life has been replaced by the infertile Fisher King, the poet no longer sublimely confronts death, he prostrates himself before it. Eliot cannot be “the Term between” life and death, for he inscribes a metaphysics of death incarnate. Even the decidedly simple spoken modernist William Carlos
Williams cannot deny the ruinous rage of arbitrary and drifting discord he seeks to root out (and in) with a new and primal language in *Paterson*, Book I, although he does attempt to cover over the howl by relegating it to a parenthetical expression:

There is no direction. Whither? I cannot say. I cannot say more than how. The how (the howl) only is at my disposal (proposal) : watching—colder than stone . (17)

*Paterson* dries up and becomes *The Waste Land*, the stagnation of spiritual knowledge and the cessation of subjectivity:

We know nothing and can know nothing but the dance, to dance to a measure contrapuntally, Satyricaly, the tragic foot. (236)

Modernist poetry danced with death so much that death became the measure of the man.

As modernism receded, the muted howl and the tragic foot did not. The Beat Generation revitalized poetry’s ongoing dialectic with death, this time by employing poetry not only as a means of expressing the death internalized from the official culture, but also by subverting the establishment that maimed it with oppression (and repression), in other words, by screaming its fractured psyche. Ginsberg’s “Howl” “saw the best minds of [his] generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked.” Ferlinghetti exposed the conflict between Eros and Civilization as he “Constantly risk[ed] absurdity / and
death” (30) performing poetic acrobatics for his audience. Modern break-down and impotence become Beat performance anxiety. A queue absorbed by Lowell, who turned from the modern, Eliotesque poetry of dead and broken images in “The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket,” a veritable The Waste Land with water, as the drowned sailor of Eliot’s poem reappears in Lowell’s:

The corpse was bloodless, a botch of reds and whites,
It’s open, staring eyes
Were lustreless dead-lights (6)

to the poetry of confession when the poet admits that his “mind’s not right” in the distressed, even dissociative, “Memories of West Street and Lepke.” Lowell, who learned much from “Howl,” mixed modernist aridity and Beat performance anxiety to create catastrophic anxiety, the dread that the psyche will fall to pieces as the supports of civilization shift and slip toward war and oblivion. So too, Stevens, one mind in the modern and another in the postmodern, as he anxiously, yet tragically, rages for a profoundly unreachable new world order (new word order) in “The Idea of Order at Key West”:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds. (130)

only to evacuate such apprehensions in “The Pure Good of Theory” by praising the pure act of language, that is
metaphor which constitutes something from nothing by connecting nothing with nothing, to install belief:

Yet to speak of the whole world as metaphor
Is still to stick to the contents of the mind

And the desire to believe in metaphor.
It is to stick to the nicer knowledge of Belief, that what it believes in is not true. (332)

Language—signification, figuration, troping—trumps the finitude of life in this world that is death. Death as generative and thematic is displaced by language as systemic and theoretical. Stevens’ poetry provides the transition between two understandings of death and two relationships with language.

On the one hand, by engaging death the Romantic poet becomes a radically contingent subject whose being is engendered by the continual confrontation with its limits, alterity, exteriority—in other words, that which is absolutely other, death. For the Romantic subject, conceptions of language are secondary to conceptions of death. Language functions as a means to an end and a vehicle of self-expression: language evinces the self’s dialectic with death. The sublime subject takes precedence over any self-conscious relationship with language. By contrast, in the postmodern age, the subject’s Romantic confrontation with the absolute limit of death has been displaced by the absolute limit of language. The radically contingent subject is formed not by the awareness of death
but by the revelation of rhetoric—language’s influence on and creation of the subject of discourse, the subject of knowledge, and the subject itself. Theorizing the Romantic places the subject ontologically prior to language.¹ According to post-structuralist theory, on the other hand, subject exists ontologically subordinate to language, which is now believed to be more than merely the means and mode and rather the end of belief, prior to all thinking and being (including one’s contemplation, confrontation, and being toward death); therefore, the subject is no longer deemed primary and irreducible to, beyond, or in excess of language. The subject is language. The subject’s final confrontation may indeed be with the absolute other of death, but the first must be with the internal other of language. Post-structuralist theories of linguistically constituted subjectivity possess the potential for the subject’s most radical self-contemplation and self-confrontation since the Romantic era. However, at the same time, those theories offer the most systematic evasion. Will the subject employ these new theories of language to delve into the inner depths of psyche and root through (and out) her inner limits, or will the subject use theory to declare her defeat in the face of a language that she can never master, thus also admitting her ontological, even existential, death? Theory engenders both the bane and the boon of subjectivity.
Forty years after Stevens wrote his notes toward the supreme figure of fiction that is the pure good of theory, and thirty years after Lowell confessed his cracked consciousness, Barrett Watten, a Language poet working within the postmodern framework, writes through his psychic dissolution with the aide of poetry’s new confessor and new therapist, theory, specifically structuralist and post-structuralist theory. Coming into poetry at the same time he came into theory, Watten learned through the spirit of the age of Continental theory that the author, the poet, was dead, killed by the codes of language use:

It is not any collective “death of the subject” that accounts for the subject’s removal from the work. Rather, it is the necessity of the very conditions of communication, without which reading or hearing cannot take place. The reader is implicated in the structure of the writer’s displacement, and the effaced intentions of the work are the reader being taken into account. (“The XYX of Reading,” Conduit 11)

The subject has not simply died, ironically the poet’s very tools of communication have erased him from the work and deprived him of creative existence. Consequently, the postmodern is necessarily post-Romantic because it can be intimate with neither death nor life, neither degeneration nor creation, neither self-abjection nor self-expression. The postmodern subject has no soul to feel either death or life’s presence: the poet cannot commingle with death or life because the creative poet is (always already) dead, murdered by the restrictive codes of his own language. The
absolute limit of death takes a backseat to the internal boundary of language. Language is now theorized to exist as a system unto itself, an apparatus that functions not simply as an instrument of human reason, but as a tool which was initially rooted in and has now summarily and systematically outgrown the reach of individual human control. Language usurped nature and reality. For the Romantics it may have mediated own’s relationship with death, but for the postmodernist, language dissolves the very presence of death. Moreover, language is now thought to not simply exist outside of subjectivity; instead it constitutes the primary force that constructed subjectivity. Language was not simply inculcated into the poetic imagination whose limit was death; this outside system constituted the birth of the psyche: one’s most private images and most creative metaphors are not and were never one’s own. The author, instead of expressing an authentic self, was theorized to merely mine and mime the codes and conventions of culture; the author became an author-function at best, a shell of subjectivity at worst. In both cases, the author is reduced to a mechanism of language: “If a poem is a machine made of words, it must take on first the entire psychology of living in a world of machines, where modes of communication are automatized” (“The World in the Work: Toward a Psychology of Form,” Total Syntax 165).
Watten’s book length poem Progress charts the mind of a man completely mediated and overdetermined by language and theory, the language of theory. The postmodern human must become an author of theory and fiction in order to cling to even the most minute possibility of self-determination. No longer is everyone a critic, rather everyone is a poet—spoken through and through by language, even to the extent that the language seizes the soul and blinds mind’s eye, causes a seizure:

Here shows an author himself,
    With the head tilted back,
    Picture unseeing,
    unaware,
    Locked in a prolonged seizure. . . .

An elevator that stops short
    Of the top,
    I am otherwise.
Capital is in short supply,
But there must be titanium. . . . (69)

Watten, incapable of transcendence, of reaching beyond the roof of theory, theorizes in the midst of an overloaded language that indicates a fractured but metacritically self-aware (and paradoxically paralyzed, “unseeing”) consciousness—“I am otherwise” (69). Does this mean that he is otherwise engaged? Or that he is an other, that is completely other even to himself? Whereas the Romantic would lament that he is death, the modernist would flail that he is fragmented, and the beat confessional would whine that he is tortured, the postmodernist abstracts all such affect and philosophizes that he is alienated, othered not
by natural-qua-divine reality (Romanticism), the ruins of civilization (modernism), or the eminent rise of a new world order (the beat confessional), but rather by his own source of creativity: language. “I am otherwise” . . . This Language poetry aphorism is a far (unfeeling) cry from Lowell’s confession, “My mind’s not right”; further still from Blake’s “clothed [. . .] in the clothes of death, / And taught [. . .] to sing the notes of woe.” Watten cannot sing abjection or melancholy, for he lives in Borges’ library of Babel and writes cacophony.

Wordsworth and Coleridge composed a manifesto regarding the function of poetry and the place of the poet, and then proceeded to put their hypothesis into practice with the Lyrical Ballads. Whitman contemplated the Democratic Vistas and accomplished them in Leaves of Grass. However, the modernists began to break down the subject: Eliot valorized the impersonal in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”; Pound prioritized the image, the music, and the word over any meaning to or relation with the subject in “How to Read, or Why;” so to the Objectivist Zukofksy in The Test of Poetry, but he went further, arguing for a poetry of found objects in Prepositions, as opposed to a poetry of self-expression. Romanticism theorizes a subject of utter self-expression; modernism theorizes a subject of unutterable objectification; postmodernism theorizes a subject of language and nothing besides.
Contemporary feminist poet Adrienne Rich writes of words overwhelming psyche. In her view, not only does the patriarchal language supercede soul, as in the poem “Like This Together,” “Our words misunderstand us” (Necessities of Life 214), but language also surpasses the personal and evinces the sociopolitical,

Go back so far there is another language
go back far enough the language
is no longer personal

these scars bear witness
but whether to repair
or to destruction
I no longer know
(“Meditations for a Savage Child,” Diving into the Wreck 58)

out there, ungraspable by any one of us. The language which creates us, and sustains the poet in particular, is so beyond us that it controls us and manipulates our very desires. Originally associated with abstract expressionism, poet John Ashbery sees language as an enigmatic system that cannot be cracked. He recognizes that language is meaningful, but simply cannot comprehend, much like Moses and the burning bush:

The dog barks, the caravan passes on.
The words had a sort of bloom on them
But were weightless, carry past what was being said.
(“Grand Galop,” Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror 15)

Like Rich, he believes that language encompasses all, but unlike Rich, he blinds himself to the consequences of the trap of language:

Yet one does know why. The covenant we entered
Bears down on us, some are ensnared, and the right way,
It turns out, is the one that goes straight through the house
And out the back. By so many systems
As we are involved in, by just so many
Are we set free on an ocean of language that comes to be
Part of us, as though we would ever get away.
("A Wave," A Wave 71)

While Ashbery rides the wave of language without caring to cover the psychological costs, another contemporary poet, Jorie Graham conceives of language as a wedge into her subjectivity. She prays to split apart grammar of language in order to allow the real of subjectivity (essentially, her ontological being) to finally burst forth from beneath the suffrage of language:

we were a motion that judged difference
and loved it
and wanted to take it
into our bodies,
a motion that wanted to splinter
all the way open yet still be,
a stirring that wanted to be expected
somewhere yet still be,
that wanted syllable by syllable to be shattered
over the whole of eternity
into the eyes into the mouths of strangers yet still be
words bones bits the whole
franchisement
glances promises

and still be.
("Eschatological Prayer," The End of Beauty 38-9)

Watten relates a further understanding of language: obsession. Rather than living apart from language, he bows to it, lives wholly within it. He sacrifices his psyche for the poem:
For the subject obsessed with theorizing the symbolic, thinking becomes circular as the imaginary, nostalgic psyche attempts to reconnect words and things, world and soul: “Circular thinking arrests emotional development, punishing time” (“Chamber Music,” Decay n.p.)

Whereas previous poets were concerned with psychic life confronting the absolute limit of death (Romanticism), or its relative limit of fragmentation and ruin in life (modernism), contemporary poets concern themselves with language.

Postmodernism inaugurates the assimilation of critical linguistic theory to literature. Structuralism and post-structuralism constitute the site of such theory. The postmodern and the contemporary diverge from, or arguably displace, modern poetic and psychic collapse, the tropic and mental implosion resulting from the taking of death and distortion inside one’s subjectivity and one’s images, by valorizing the constitutive and productive facilities of language for the individual subject at the abstract level of language’s structure. Put simply, structuralist and post-structuralist theories tend to evade the lessons of dying already internalized by focusing on generation—the assembled flow of language as pure creation. The subject is destabilized, decentered, and effectively decapitated by the systems and deconstructions of structuralist and post-structuralist thought. Lévi-Strauss codifies individual stories as part of regular mythic pattern, part of a collective whole of literature that exists outside the
bounds of individuality. Subsequently, Roland Barthes declares the author dead. Michel Foucault resuscitates the author (just barely) as an author-function. Jacques Derrida deconstructs the transcendent subject while arguing for the play of language in which everything’s a text or logocentric trace, a call which Jean Baudrillard completes by spiraling the entire world into a hyperreality constituted of pure image event and ecstatic communication. Performing the howl syntactically, confessing the torment figuratively, and believing in the metaphor transforms the constitutive trauma of the knowledge of death and otherness from an authentic psychic event to an act of language, a figure of speech, a game of belief. The language principle usurps the reality principle: the concrete relationship with reality and its irremediable pains and limitations is overwhelmed by the pleasure of textuality and its arbitrary and limited relationship with concrete reality. Subjectivity is led by a love of pure language that would deny the reality of death, not life which exists—existentially so—by traversing the knowledge that cannot be avoided, the inborn cognizance of its own doom. Theories of language-centered subjectivity not only mediate the contemporary relationship with the objective reality of death, they take death off the table, so to speak, leaving language as the final frontier. When the word controls reality, when the word takes precedence over the event, when the symbolic is severed from
the real, subjectivity becomes not only solipsistic, but also lost in a funhouse of its own making.

Such an aesthetics strives not to write through its intimacy with death in order to break through to the other side of life as in Romanticism and even Transcendentalism, or to break down to the primal “roots that clutch” at life as in modernism, but rather to write itself out of death’s way (to formally sublimate the terrifying sublime possibility that death extends the subject, so to speak) by confessing, performing, or troping away its anxiety in order to mediate, if not immediately evacuate, this side of life; and it does so by turning away from death and theorizing, philosophizing, and abstracting that structure which covers over the void, language. Such an aesthetics becomes a “language” poetics because it invests not in poetry’s paramount concerns—life and death, creation and the void—but rather in the conceits of theory—the analysis of language as apparatus, function, and system to the extent that reality is no longer considered to be a life or death situation and subjectivity is no longer deemed to be on the edge and therefore at issue, but rather reality is merely mediated through language and subjectivity (the pulsing emanation of life, the threatening radiation of death) becomes a language construct.

The poem becomes the infernal machine of another infernal machine—the poet. Safely insulated from the mere
thought of death, the poet’s subjectivity contemplates not life, but haphazardly, indeed lackadaisically, performs the calculations of language’s infinite syntax. If everything is a text, if reality and subjectivity are perceived as figurative textuality, then death, as well as the sublime anxiety death produces, fades (or is repressed) into a recess of the mind . . . yet so does the engaged life of the psyche. The life of the mind is shown to be utterly psychotic. Subjectivity is not emptied out through the touch of death as a means to fully realize the spark of life; rather, in contemporary American poetics, it is emptied of both life and death—leaving neither sublime affirmation, individual transcendence, nor psychic fragmentation, but rather subjective destitution.

However, it is my contention that the repressed (the knowledge of death and the resultant anxiety of death that charges life) struggles to return through the very portal that suppressed it. Language—metaphor, trope, figure—is at once theoretical and symbolic sublimation (the repression of death) and the (figure of) death itself. This over-determination and over-theorization of the processes and operations of language attempts to contain the anxiety produced by not truly understanding, not authentically knowing, the absolute reality of the psychic life and potential death of the subject. Intellectual theories of language displace psychic intimacy with death. The anxiety
of language at root is the anxiety of death, our elemental limitation. When theories of language usurp the themes and theses of poems and when theories of language overwhelm the intellectual life of poets, then poetry becomes a hollow shell of formalism, an abstract and theoretical application rather than an authentic subjective engagement. Consequently, theorizing language and the poet's systemic place in it has become the bane of poetry, but it also constitutes poetry's sublime possibility, albeit potential currently repressed, if only the poets would let it. The anxiety of death returns (will return) as the anxiety of language, of one's soulless, blank, and overdetermined constructedness.

1.2 POST-STRUCTURALIST THEORY ROMANCES POSTMODERN POETRY

This dissertation examines the theoretical standoff between language and death in the psyches of contemporary poets as well as in the subjectivities rendered in their poems. This dissertation analyzes a continuum of contemporary American poets' relationships with language, reality, and subjectivity in order to critique and expose the evasion of death and evacuation of life in a post-Romantic poetic consciousness colonized by the high theories of structuralist and post-structuralist language subjectivity. From the most Romantic poetry to the most
theoretical poetry, from the most intimate with death to the most anxious of language, with the varying degrees of commingling of Romanticized death and theorized subjectivity, the dissertation moves from the poetry of Adrienne Rich which uses post-structuralist theories of subjectivity and language to defeat a Romantic suffering of sociopolitical pain, specifically the affliction of being a feminist and a lesbian in a patriarchal, heterosexual world. Rich represents poets with a Romantic conception of language and subjectivity who, however, confront the political and ideological power of discourse. For her, post-structuralist theory of language is not an encroachment and evacuation; rather she uses it to engage and to expose the ideologies of power that would stifle psyches, particularly feminine subjectivities, sexually and creatively. In “When We Dead Awaken,” the plague of multifarious, patriarchal ideologies covers her soul like a net, leaving her anguished and angry; but she uses the pure good of theory to deconstruct and disillusion the loaded words which would suppress her identity in order to allow her soul to emerge from the confrontation with the deadly mire of ideology a victorious, irrepressible consciousness:

Here in the matrix of need and anger, the disproof of what we thought possible failures of medication doubts of another’s existence —tell it over and over, the words get thick with unmeaning— yet never have we been closer to the truth
of the lies we were living, listen to me:
the faithfulness I can imagine would be a weed
flowing in tar, a blue energy piercing
the massed atoms of a bedrock disbelief.
(Diving into the Wreck 6)

For her post-Romanticism, death comes not from real world
finitude, but symbolic world—that is linguistic—
repression. Rich reveals the positive power of theory, the
aspect which would help the subject break the silence and
name what sociopolitical orders institutes her anxiety by
revealing that which has been suppressed, by negating
negation. Rich is a Romantic who utilizes post-
structuralism as an instrument of critique of language, but
not of being-in-death, which remains for her dense with the
existential pain under ideology. Adrienne Rich uses
language-centered theories first to name her anxious, and
subsequently to write herself out of apprehension,
masterfully circumscribing such affect. Initially,
language-centered theory suffers Rich to cut to the quick of
her relation with others (with the deadly invasion of others
into her psyche), but it eventually allows the poet to evade
the real underlying trauma, the inevitability of death
itself.

We move from the Rich inflamation, to the poetry of
John Ashbery, who also tends toward the Romantic approach to
language and subjectivity, but one which leads to a
problematic transcendence of those terms in abstract
expressionism rather than an identity politics as in Rich.
If Rich turns discourse against itself for psychosocial gain, then Ashbery turns discourse against itself in order to reflexively ironize subjectivity out of habitual ideas of the self and into a psychic reality that exceeds conventional conceptualization. In "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," the poet meditates upon the nature of reflection and representation, concluding that language is merely a speculative structure, devoid of deep interiority, thereby constituting inwardness with similar postures, impersonations of subjectivity:

The words are only speculation
(From the Latin speculum, mirror):
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
We see only postures of the dream. (69)

Therefore, Ashbery conceptualizes subjectivity as pure gaze, sliding along the surface of language; however, because it is bereft of inwardness, becomes the paradoxical composition of the void: the abyss of language comprises the post-structuralist death of the subject . . . the dead subject . . . the Romantic subject who engages death on its own terms, in this case, surface, exteriority, the language of nothingness: “your eyes proclaim / That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there / And nothing can exist except what’s there” (70). For Ashbery’s post-Romanticism, not life, but the Babel of customary language usage internalizes death, which he seeks to rehabilitate through systematic theorization (and speculation) of
language’s effect upon subjectivity. Although Ashbery approaches the limit at which his Romantic subjectivity could be eliminated by his post-structuralist theories, he performs a difficult balancing act between the two, recognizing that his subjectivity is fractured and mediated, but never letting that subjectivity be fully evacuated. The poet nostalgically clings to a conception of subjectivity (a primary soul, an ontological fullness) which he no longer believes that he can live inside since his dalliance with theory has doomed him to always second-guessing his primary thinking and feeling with the ironic play of secondary language games. Ashbery is a post-Romantic who uses theory as a critique of being, disseminating subjectivity with the density of textuality as reflected/reflexive meaning. He means to be an authentic Romantic, uttering soulful self-expression, but his theoretical reflections on language involuntarily prohibit him from reaching his goals, a deep understanding of himself and an authentic confrontation of his inner limitations.

We now shift from the ashes of Ashbery’s poetic subjectivity to the poetry of Jorie Graham, which upon first reading appears to be a Romantic confrontation with the absolute other of death, but on a deep level hollows out the transcendent metaphysics garnered from looking death in the eye. On the one hand, Graham utilizes the post-structuralist view of language as composing subjectivity;
however, on the other, she also seems to construct a metaphysical world view, one which would appear to concur with a Romantic world view of transcendent self-expression of life over and against death. However, upon closer reading, Graham’s metaphysics are rendered false, her subjectivity empty in the face of life and hollow in the face of death. In “The Hiding Place,” a lyric depicting her nostalgic feelings of her stay in an overflowing jail after a demonstration arrest in 1968, she combats her cell-shocked claustrophobia by cutting through the overwrought stories of humanity at war with itself, the clash and contradiction of the symbolic order’s rhetoric of war and peace covering over the real of death and love, to reveal a hollow core which paradoxically explodes with density and opacity:

The open squeezed for space until the hollows spill out,
story upon story of them
starting to light up as I walked out.
How thick was the empty meant to be?
(Region of Unlikeness 20)

Graham is a post-Romantic post-structuralist because the Romantic is not internalized but rather gestured toward in a hollow poetic act, hollow because the artifice of her poetry absorbs the touch of death yet deflects it from her being by being no being at all. Graham splits open the symbolic world of language and opens her being to the void; she cannot romantically express herself if, apart from language, there exists nothing (no-thing) to express. A few poems later in Region of Unlikeness, the poet mythologizes herself
as a primal and original first woman, founded upon, constructed of nothing, collapsing in upon her-self:

The hole grew wider.
Limbs on all sides pushed away from the center.
Depth started to throb.
The hole in my head ripped a bit wider.
("Chaos (Eve)" 52)

Graham’s poetics approach the Romantic because she initially and for the most part appears to commingle with primeval death: at first she flails with this fundamental absence of subjectivity, even going so far as show her inwardness pulse with pain. However, upon more careful inspection, her Romanticism consists of no more than an ersatz idolatry as her subjectivity is no more than illusion, albeit one of transcendent proportions: she has no depth, her subjectivity is the hole itself. She is being with-in the void. She recognizes that her psyche dwells in language; however, she also realizes that beneath all that language (those constructions and conventions, those poetics and those poems), lies nothing. Therefore, her self-consciously hollow metaphysics point to a hole not only in her subjectivity but also in the symbolic world of language-centered theory.

It is this hole in theory which ironically allows death to return in the unconscious of her being even as her language refracts its systematization. While Rich and Ashbery circumscribe the language by mastering anxiety and ironizing reflection, Graham proceeds to open herself up to
authentic abjection in the face of language. She confronts the internal limits of her psychological being—the language which displaces the figurative void and replaces its real interlocutor, death. First, the theoretical produces an anxiety-ridden need for a return to Romantic ontology; second, the ensuing Romantic metaphysics, born of theory and endlessly exhausted by its suppressive evasion of death, recognizes its evacuation and a-voidance and dissolves not only itself but the symbolic which constructed it, thus leaving a space for a real of subjectivity apart from and devoid of language and theory both. Although the hole in her head constitutes Graham’s subjectivity, it engenders a more authentic and concrete relationship with reality than the relative and shifting correspondence language affords. Post-structuralism in Graham bores holes not only in her Romantic subjectivity, but also in itself, in theory, such that both her being and her conception of her being are rendered empty. Whereas Rich is full of appetent and anxious being and Ashbery replete and resonating with infinite ironic meaning, Graham, anguished and depleted, bursts with the nothing that is, the nothing that overturns the transcendental metaphysics of being—not the original dialectic of death, but a post-Romantic dialectic of death-qua-language.

The difference between the subjectivity engendered by Ashbery and Graham lies in degree; both are transitional
poets who serve as reference points on the continuum between the last vestiges of Romanticism in a poet like Rich and the dominant post-Romantic post-structuralism of the Language poet Barrett Watten. Just as Graham’s overdetermining form betrays her empty content (her empty, dead yet overbearingly real subjectivity), Watten’s theoretical conception of language and poetic rendition of subjectivity fully advocate the post-structuralist apotheosis at the surface level: he is pure exteriority, pure language, and therefore infernal machine—a script-writer who is dictated the codes of existence by an absent, empty, and even nonexistent deity (the spectre of consciousness and intentionality that is the symbolic order’s big Other), and who inscribes his fatally othered subjectivity from the outside, only to find his subjectivity cave in under the weight of the nebulous contagion that is language:

White, to each of these cancels
Shadow,
fog. Collapses self,
And invading enemy wins.
The argument itself, disassembling. . . . (Progress 1)

For a poet like Watten, death is not a possibility. Contrary to an anxiety-ridden poet like Rich, he’s given up defending himself against the invading enemy of language; and like an ironic poet like Ashbery, he accepts the constant deconstruction of knowledge (of himself); moreover, he would strike a chord with the cored Graham, who affirms only self-cancellation. Unlike Graham, however, confronting
his most inner limitations and, therefore also, evincing his inwardness (however hollow it may be) are completely out of the question. He is not oblivion and vacuum, but rather oblivious and vacant. His subjectivity is broken, dismantled, yet he continues to run on (run through) empty.

However, Watten becomes anxious at a deep (unconscious) level about the lack or loss of monadic bourgeois subjectivity and Romantic self-expression: Just as his self breaks down, so to does the argument of instrumental reason—of linguistic theory—thus allowing a space for a real of subjectivity to burst forth. It is precisely the complete systemizing of theory upon subjectivity that engenders his anxiety. Whereas Rich uses post-structuralism to confront her anxiety, Watten is used by post-structural and that very functioning creates his anxiety. He is anxious not because he is threatened with death-in-life, but because he has already internalized the death-in-life that language, pure language, institutes. Although Rich is paranoid about the invasion of the other, her paranoia is neurotic—indicative of anxiety—not psychotic. Watten, by contrast, relates to language as a world unto itself which overbears reality, and his pursuit of total textuality becomes a psychotic compulsion.  

Whereas for Ashbery the dispersal of meaning props his being-in-question, for Watten, the flood of meaning becomes an empty plague upon nonexistent being. For all of his
irony, Ashbery truly struggles to find the meaning of being. The tragedy of Ashbery’s poetry is that he can only approach and never attain an understanding of himself, his subjectivity from the inside. He lacks a concrete understanding of his most innerworldly reality. He recognizes that all he can know about himself is mediated by language, the rhetorical discourse of an-other’s making. He simply chooses to ride the wave with irony rather than give in to the melancholic lament. Watten is overwhelmingly compelled to write, not from a need for self-knowledge or self-expression, but rather from a place devoid of meaning, absolutely lacking significance and subjectivity both. He, too, writes from a lack of relationship with his desires and his dreads, his existence and his death; but his lack is more devastating: there can be no relation because nothing is there and nothing was. He cannot sublimely confront death with the multiplicitous and shifting life of language because he is plagued to death by the contagion of language before a life unmediated by language can even begin.

Whereas Graham is content to open up the space of empty being, Watten is anguished by the emptiness of being engendered beneath the cogitations of theory. Paradoxically, Graham writes to erase the language of the self, to approach a space of literature which renders herself precisely a-literary and completely literal; Watten writes to erase his being under erasure: he grasps at the
total syntax—total system—of language to give his already unstable psyche a means of support. (He may as well be grasping at straws.) The ghost of Romanticism haunts the machinations of theory. Whereas death comprises the Romantic’s other and inaugurates the composition of subjective life via self-expression in language, theory constitutes the post-Romantic’s other and institutes the hollowing out of language that simultaneously burrows into the subjective life, thereby creating a self which is expressed by language, emptied and othered at the core. Watten’s poetics—Language poetics—signifies a catastrophic-cum-psychotic anxiety of itself, of the pure language of nothingness that wholes, holes, and holds the psyche in its death-grip—language-cum-death engendered as the essential hollowed out core of subjectivity.

Consequently, even the most post-structuralist of poets in my grouping betrays his anguished Romantic roots, even as he seeks to radically uproot them. Even Language Poetry, which not only embraces but internalizes the post-structuralist critique of subjectivity and language such that it constructs poetry as materialistic obfuscation of the bourgeois monadic subject, counteracts its own nonlinear, nonnarrative, and nonrepresentational goals and yields poems that trace the alienated psyche caught in the contradictory mediations of the dual symbolic orders of
language and meta-language combined in a deadly theory of language by the language of theory.

1.3 THE BLOOMING ANXIETY OF POST-STRUCTURALIST THOUGHT

Now that we have charted the trajectory of poetry’s relationship with death and with the language (the theory of language) that would displace that prior anxiety, let us turn to the theory itself. Although structuralist and post-structuralist theory is as varied as the contemporary poets who have been influenced by its tenets, the key tendency for the purposes of this discussion is the function of language in the constitution of subjectivity.

No summary introduction of post-structuralism can be complete without first acknowledging the principles of structuralism which post-structuralism reacts to and rehabilitates. Without paying heed to subjectivity—that is, to subjects moving in time and confronting the ultimate liminal point, death—structuralism abstracts systems frozen in time and analyzes the way differential relationships create meaning within those structures. For instance, structural (or synchronic) linguistics, as advanced by Ferdinand de Saussure, is characterized by an analytical attention to abstract language system (langue) frozen in time as opposed to paying heed to either the individual speech act (parole) or diachronic linguistics which looks at
how language evolves in time. De Saussure demonstrates structuralism at the level of words: The relationship between signifiers (sound-images) and signifieds (concepts) is not natural but rather is arbitrarily constructed within a system of language. For de Saussure, linguistic value is based upon differences, differential relationships which, though arbitrary and not natural, are necessarily—from the point of view of the speech actor—conventionalized. Such theory challenges the Romantic notion of an intrinsic, one-to-one relationship between words and concepts, and in a broader sense, even the Romantic notion of subjectivity, for as Emile Benveniste’s work in “Subjectivity in Language” implicitly points out, language is not just a tool, rather people are determined by language just as much as they use it. Consequently, the category of author is revolutionized by structuralism. For instance, Roland Barthes argues in “The Death of the Author” that the Author is so distanced from the modern text, because he is a description machine, that literature becomes a collection of codes to be deciphered. The cult of personality afforded Byron or Pound or Ginsberg is emptied out and only a hollow cult of codes remains. Further, the “pleasure of the text” comes not from subjective identification with the lyric “I” but rather from deciphering language games of textual connotation. Poets immersed in this kind of theory are influenced to sacrifice lyrical subjectivity, with all of its affect and emotion,
for the valorization of a poetics of system and structure, with poet as puzzle-master, poem as puzzle, and poetic language (tropes) as decoder ring. Structuralism’s gift to poets and poetry is the evacuation of a subjectivity anxious of the limits of being; it rewards the use of language as abacus and abstraction.⁵

Post-structuralism rehabilitates structuralism’s lapse of time and subjectivity by reinstituting literature’s relationships with death and anxiety, albeit at a weak level in comparison to Romantic origins. For Foucault in “What Is an Author?”, the author is not dead, but he is still a function of language, of discourse. It is expressly this subservience to language, this being an effect of language that creates profound discord in the poet whose very existence is constituted by the act of self-expression, that composes the primary anxiety that there may be (is) no subjectivity prior to language to express in language. With this conception of the poet’s relationship to language in mind and psyche, the poet thrusts oneself into the post-Romantic scene, the mess of language, in throes of debilitating yet revolutionizing anxiety.

As this dissertation examines the continuum of poetic responses to post-structuralism, it also analyzes a range of theories and theorists that constitute post-structuralist thought—and then puts poet and theorist in dialogic, if not dialectical, conversation. The first critic to transpose
Romantic thought into the post-structuralist age is Harold Bloom. After invigorating Romantic criticism with “Blake’s Apocalypse,” in The Visionary Company, a study of the poet’s ecstatic vision of death in life, Bloom constructs a theory of reading and writing, a method of poetry and language, in a triumvirate of books commencing in the anxiety engendered by fact of poetic belatedness. The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry advances the commonsensical theory that the poet is influenced by what one reads, by predecessors; and this influence threatens to lay the self-reliant poet low as mere imitator, thus creating existential anxiety which must be defended against by unconscious misreading and misunderstanding of the prior poet’s language and themes:

Poetic Influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets,—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist. (30, author’s italics)

At the psychological level, poetry according to Bloom becomes a defense mechanism. In order to maintain the appearance of a core (Romantic) self, the poet engages in disillusional—become delusional for strong poets—readings of prior poems that crack their transcendent vision by a process of misinternalization and misidentification. The power of language is denied by a feats of utter denial. My theory of poetry, as rendered by the poetics of the four
poets in this examination, radicalizes this idea. Poets are not simply influenced by prior poets and previous poetic language; rather the dual facts of, first, language being prior to being and, second, conventionalized discourse infiltrating the ontological psyche creates the anxiety of influence. In other words, language itself threatens to extinguish subjectivity by overwhelming the psyche and overworking (overformalizing) the poetry. In order to live, to exist, the poet must radicalize and subvert the language which installs subjectivity. Bloom hits upon the tragic paradox of language: language creates us, but in order to live we must create our own language. Consequently, as the poet hollows out language in order to sever its anxiety-producing hold, the poet also evacuates the self, the language of the self.

In the second book of the triumvirate, *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom transfigures his theory to include the most basic function of language, representation, and the most fundamental element of poetry, the trope:

> Representation points to a lack, just as limitation does, but in a way that re-finds what could fill the lack. Or, more simply: tropes of limitation also represent, of course, but they tend to limit the demands placed upon language by pointing to a lack both in language and the self, so that limitation really means recognition in this context. Tropes of representation also acknowledge a limit, point to a lack, but they tend to strengthen both language and the self.

Bloom betrays linguistic theory’s flight from anxiety: figures, tropes, representation—structures,
structuralists—seek to cover over the basic lack of being installed by language, and not engage it, via theoretical abstraction and ironic play, which amount to the same thing. Creation from nothing, genesis from the void. Poetic structures erected on the abyss, but simultaneously (paradoxically) a-voiding it. This stage of Bloom’s work makes anxiety a figure, displaces it from the subject and into the field of language. However, his next step shifts from the tropological to the psychological, from the structural to the post-structural.

Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism proffers a theory of poetry as a negative theology, a Gnostic epistemology, a Counter-Sublime, that sees language as the penultimate lie and the ultimate path for negating death, in the Freudian sense of the term negation. Poetry, then, counteracts the illusion by asserting death’s rightful place, not only in but of language: “Language does not become poetry for us until we know that language is telling us lies, because the truth is ambivalence and so also already death” (30). Poetry becomes not only anxiety but also agon, an agon that confronts the otherness of itself, of language, and of death, by internalizing it as that hollow abyss which constitutes subjectivity, or, in Bloom’s terms, “the pneuma or spark-of-the-primal-Abyss” (30). He finally determines that not just a dialectic of conventional language and poetic language is at stake but more importantly a dialectic
of subjectivity and its absolute limitation as he
invigorates his theory with a return to Freud:

This is the Freud who establishes the priority of anxiety
over its stimuli, and who both imagines the origins of
consciousness as catastrophe and then relates that
catastrophe to repetition-compulsion, to the drive-towards-
death, and to the defense of life as a drive towards
agonistic achievement, an agon directed not only against
death but against the achievements of anteriority, of
others, and even of one’s own earlier self. (96-7)

Bloom is the most Romantic of the post-structuralist
theorists considered in these pages, as Adrienne Rich is the
most Romantic of the contemporary poets. Her feminist
revolutionary poetics are implicitly engendered by an
“anxiety of influence” of conventional patriarchal language
of prior and other discourses that would limit her gender
and her self via tropic representation if she did not defend
against the psychic oppression with an agon of figural
subversions of her own.

The poetry of John Ashbery is less a poetry of the
Romantic anxiety of influence, and more a poetry that
decomposition of core Romantic conceptions of language and
of subjectivity. So too the theory of Paul de Man. Whereas
Bloom cites a poetry of being-in-anxiety, de Man envisions a
poetry of being-in-aporia, a reveling in the limitless
possibilities that the decomposition of tropes into figural
uncertainties affords.

In The Rhetoric of Romanticism, particularly the essays
“Autobiography as De-Facement” and “Shelley Disfigured,” de
Man hollows out traditional conception of an Romantic subjectivity and turns that essential being into the trope of prosopopeia; in other words, he reveals the authentic self-expressive voice of Romantic poetry to be a figural illusion, the sacred autobiographical lyric to be web of lies and distortions. The real life of the soul is marred by the mark of the rhetorical system of language, which paradoxically constitutes the former’s means and threshold of understanding. De Man asserts that the deconstruction of the Romantic lyric, and Romantic subjectivity, also deconstructs death and mortality.

As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding. Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause. (81)

Just as life is open-ended and indeterminate, so too death, thus the subjective distortion that is the inevitable result (and cause) of troping is a welcome way to evade the reality and the presence of death.

However, de Man goes further and dodges death with an even greater theoretical abstraction. He reverses the hierarchical polarities of the referential and the representationational, the real and the figural. Instead of being prior to the trope—instead of trope being means and
vehicle—subjectivity is produced by the tropes; and, further still, self-consciousness is engendered by the study of tropes. Paradoxically (deconstructively), because figures of speech are open to conflicting and shifting interpretation, the study of the literature of life that is poetry constitutes an aporia, which as de Man explains in *Allegories of Reading* “designates the irrevocable occurrence of at least two mutually exclusive readings and asserts the impossibility of a true understanding, on the level of the figuration as well as of the themes” (71-2). As a result, poetry and poetic figures become prior to subjectivity and life. As poetry is textual it is not subject to death, therefore, subjectivity is not subject to death because any poetic that strives to confront death can be disregarded as an aporia. If everything is a figure of speech, then poetic speech can talk about death and perhaps even be touched by it—but not the poet because on the one hand the poet is created by the frictive distortions of language while on the other hand is self-consciously aware of such generation to the effect that death (and life) becomes an elusive/illusive abstraction on the other side of a mire of words through which the poet cannot wade. Such figural distortion and such discontinuous subjectivity comprise Ashbery’s opaque textuality as well. He applies the prosopopeai to the self-reflective act in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” As the speculum is decimated, the specular image of the self is
deconstructed into a flowing, disseminating textuality that evades death by living forever in art, in a shattering array of trope that cannot be contained by conclusive reading.

While Bloom and de Man play in the field of trope, and while Rich and Ashbery render subjectivities of such pained and wild speculation, respectively, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Lacan seek to nullify the complex content of language in order to clarify language’s structural relationship with subjectivity even as Jorie Graham and Barrett Watten engage an anguished hollow of subjective destitution, respectively. In his literary career, Blanchot composed a language of silence, the affirmation of mute negation that existed as a shadow speech behind the infinite conversation—endless because of the enervating polarity of mutual otherness. In a certain sense, Blanchot seeks to quiet the voices of otherness that persist in—that install—his psyche. He is not mad, but he is on the razor thin precipice of language between silence and death. Silencing language would hollow out the voices, hollow out himself, and he would become the void, a structure of empty being no longer tied to otherness but become death-in-life. In Death Sentence, this negation of language takes the form of the death sentence, the sentence that approaches the limits of life that is death and absolute otherness. It is the speaking void. Nothing, no-thing, nothingness speaks a smothering, dying, silence:
I have lost silence, and the regret I feel over that is immeasurable. I cannot describe the pain that invades a man once he has begun to speak. It is a motionless pan, that is itself pledged to muteness; because of it, the unbreathable is the element I breathe. I have shut myself up in a room, alone, there is no one in the house, almost no one outside, but this solitude has itself begun to speak, and I must in turn speak about this speaking solitude, not in derision, but because a greater solitude hovers above it, and above that solitude, another still greater, and each, taking the spoken word in order to smother it and silence it, instead echoes it to infinity, and infinity becomes its echo. (The Station Hill Blanchot Reader 153)

In his theoretical career, Blanchot conceptualizes literature as that self-conscious relationship with language which allows the void to not only be known but to flourish. Blanchot conceives a void that is not simply nothing, but rather mandates generation and creativity forever spring from it. In hollowing out signifiers (representation), he hollows out signifieds (reality); but unlike Bloom, who asserts that poetry is a tropological defense mechanism covering over the abyss, and de Man, who posits deconstructive aporias which displace existential anxiety from questions of being and onto allegories of reading, Blanchot composes a theory of reading and writing in which literature cuts through language to reveal the abyss. In “Literature and the Right to Death” he re-installs death into subjectivity through the vehicle of language: “When we speak, we are leaning on a tomb, and the void of that tomb is what makes language true, but at the same time void is reality and death becomes being” (The Station Hill Blanchot Reader 391-2). The poetry of Jorie Graham employs
Blanchot’s variety of metacriticism-cum-void when, as we saw earlier, she exposes the whole of being at the heart of stories, literature, and indeed all language. Her poetry, constructed of the tomb, breaks the crypt open to reveal what lies beneath, that is, what nothingness remains.

Jacques Lacan also theorizes, from a psychoanalytical position, the effect of language upon subjectivity. He posits that a person’s entry into language cuts one off from essential, albeit imaginary, unitary being and forces one into a symbolic state of shifting and differential meaning that lacks being, that desires being. Subjectivity becomes a subject position within language and the symbolic order to the effect that not only is one’s unconscious—perhaps even one’s imagination—“structured like a language” (Seminar XI 149) but also that “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other” (131). Subjectivity is an effect of signifiers and symbols, that is, the Other’s language, which is necessarily lacking, because it has usurped the real, and alienating, because it has terminated any possibility of attaining authentic Romantic selfhood. (The defining relationship of this post-structuralist subjectivity is the connection between self and language, not the polarity between self and the finite world and ultimately to death). At root, the subject is nothing, a structural illusion of language; the subject is other, alien to oneself: “The subject is nothing other than what slides in a chain of signifiers, whether he
knows which signifier he is the effect of or not” (Seminar XX 50). All the subject knows of oneself and one’s world is the chain of signifiers. As with Bloom and de Man, language becomes the bridge covering the abyss of the real and of the self, but as with Blanchot, Lacan seeks to tear through the displacement.

Lacanian psychoanalysis aims to cut through the language of the symbolic order to determine some semblance of a real remainder of the self as distinct from the Other’s language. Pared to its base composition, only the structure of desire, of returning to a state of essential and present being devoid of meaning, remains. The satisfaction of such desire is impossible, as is the comprehension of reality without the lens of the symbolic. Consequently the subject moves from desire to drive—from desiring something which is not to driving endlessly and circuitously around a central lack or nothingness which is. Also known as the drive toward death, it must be compulsively repeated because the limit can never be reached: the real object at the heart of the symbolic is impossibly present yet impertinently absent from the grasp of the subject’s symbolic cogitations. The subject at one with the drive inscribes the position of “subjective destitution” and “aphanesis,” the fading of the subject in the machine of pure language. Although language and symbols are hollowed out, emptied of signifieds, the machine still functions—infernally, heedlessly and in spite
of the subject. It drives onward, repeatedly attempting to "encounter the real" but always missing the mark because it cannot be marked—it resists symbolization. This inability to touch the real—of the world, of one’s subjectivity—constitutes the primal trauma:

The function of the tuché, of the real as encounter—the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter—first presented itself in the history of psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma. (Seminar XI 55)

The horrific flipside to conceptualizing the real as unrealizable is that the mind creates a world of its own: driven to an unattainable goal, it goes into overdrive creating something from nothing. A thin line separates subjective destitution and psychosis, and Language poetry swerves back and forth over this line.

I suggest that Barrett Watten’s Language poetry engenders such an always already missed encounter with the real: his overdetermined, procedural language decomposes itself, not in a fit of de Manian dehumanization, but rather in the drive of subjective destitution in which his subjectivity continuously fades after repeated attempts to recognize itself apart from the Other of language that slides it away from the real of finitude and death. Watten’s psyche is traumatized the face of the Other (the text of the other language) in the mirror, and it compulsively writes not to evacuate that trauma, as with
Blanchot’s silent scream of a-voidance and Graham’s metaphysical hollow, but to existentially engage that trauma, confront that limitation, touch that death. However, his desire can at times become psychotically tied to the drive for drive’s sake.

What the theory of Blanchot and the poetry of Graham lacks, in a phrase, is an anxious relationship with literature and language, with death and otherness. In exposing the void, they deaden its affect with theoretical abstraction. What the theory of de Man and the poetry of Ashbery betrays with their textual aporias and opacities, respectively, is an encounter with the real lack of language. Their play is conceptual, not traumatic. What the theory of Bloom and the poetry of Rich defends against is the abyss, death itself. By placing anxiety into the realm of influential and patriarchal representation, respectively, they evade the prior and undergirding foundation of anxiety: the traumatic kernel of the real which is the presence of limits, finitude, absence, death. I am not arguing that Watten’s poetry knows its anxiety, nor am I asserting that Watten’s poetry challenges the kind of theoretical abstraction that I have been calling post-Romanticism’s root denial of an authentic relationship with death and the absolute other. However, I am suggesting that his poetry implicitly illustrates for us, his readers, the effect of such evasions: the traumatic anxiety of one’s
relationship with language is sublimated into abstract theory and displaced into an obsessionally procedural and ultimately nonsensical repetition-compulsion that bears an ever-increasing resemblance to psychosis. The post-structuralist, post-Romantic poem does not confront the other in an authentic agon or dialectic, it endlessly circles the subject of death without grasping or internalizing its finality.
CHAPTER 2

A RICH INFLAMMATION OR A DEAD BLOOM?
THE POETRY OF ADRIENNE RICH AND
THE THEORY OF HAROLD BLOOM

The introductory chapter commenced with a brief history of death in poetry from the Romantics to the postmodernists, which is necessarily post-Romantic, not only due to the march of time but also the flight from death. This chapter on the post-Romantic poetry of Adrienne Rich and post-Romantic theory of poetry of Harold Bloom begins with a brief history of the poet’s multivalent relationship with death, or more specifically pain—the trauma of confronting the absolute other, the affliction of knowing that the absolute other lives . . . dead . . . within oneself, the pain of waking up to one’s own death. The chapter then argues how language—first literary and then conventional—constitutes the symbolic bearer of death in life which obliges death to be internalized in the language-centered psyche. As illustration, Harold Bloom’s defiant yet ultimately defensive anxiety of influence applies not only to the subject’s relationship with prior poetry but

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with language in general, language which is always absolutely other, different, and—therefore—deadly.

2.1 A HISTORY OF DEATH IN RICH

I draw the curtains as the sky goes black
And set a match to candles sheathed in glass
Against the keyhole draught, the insistent whine
Of weather through the unsealed aperture.
This is our sole defense against the season;
These are the things that we have learned to do
Who live in troubled regions.

(Adrienne Rich, “Storm Warnings,” A Change of World 3)

1. The freedom of the wholly mad
to smear & play with her madness
write with her fingers dipped in it
the length of a room

which is not, of course, the freedom
you have, walking on Broadway
to stop & turn back or go on
10 blocks; 20 blocks

but feels enviable maybe
to the compromised
curled in the placenta of the real
which was to feed & which is strangling her.

(Adrienne Rich, “The Phenomenology of Anger,”
Diving into the Wreck 27)

What sways and presses against the pane
what can’t I see beyond or through—
charred, crumpled, ever-changing human language
is that still you?

(Adrienne Rich, “A Long Conversation,”
Midnight Salvage 69)

Adrienne Rich’s career can be separated usefully into three periods, early, middle, and late; the three periods
correspond roughly with the fifties and sixties, the seventies, and the eighties and nineties. As the world out there changed, so too her inner world—her conception of poetry, her world view, her poetic self-image. At first, she was a sedate (sedated) formalist, dutiful of the patriarchal poetry world and its father figures such as W. H. Auden, indeed, perhaps also conformable to the state of the male nation and its titular head Eisenhower: her life is traditional—marriage, family, homemaker—so to her verse—extremely controlled and canonically inspired.

At the stage of “Storm Warnings,” the first poem of her first collection of poetry, Rich does not consciously comprehend any suppression or limitation of her life. She is utterly content. For Rich, death, the metaphorical sublime experience of self-confrontation discussed in the first chapter, is elemental and nameless, outside and othered; and she uses the verse style (if not thematics) of her poetic fathers to protect herself, to maintain her distance. At this point in her life, the limits of her subjectivity are buried deep—repressed—within her psyche. She realizes that something grows increasingly wrong, but she cannot articulate it. She recognizes the anarchy out there, “Anarchy of a thousand rose tangles / The fallen architecture of the mind” (“Life and Letters,” A Change of World 53); and, consequently, she seeks to keep it from coming in here. Poetry was for her therapeutic; it
constituted a way to mend and manipulate, to design and engineer, the inevitable maelstrom of existence in the real world: “That fragmentary world is mended here” (“Design in Living Colors,” A Change of World 41). Poetry reconfigures the teeming chaos of the dark night of the soul into a thing of beauty:

We are the denizens of a living wood
Where insight blooms anew on every bough,
And every flower emerges understood
Out of a pattern unperceived till now. (42)

However, poetry also constituted an analgesic that numbed and deadened a nameless pain rather than an analysis that internalized and worked through a claimed pain. She fears the catastrophic storm so much that she is more comfortable hiding in the comforting strictures of formal poetry than confronting it—than looking into the eye of the storm, the other. Structures of relief and retreat compose her poetic and psychic reality.

As the civil rights era exposed the deadly wound at the core of whitewashed Eisenhower and Beaver Cleaver fifties, Rich began to find a name for her pain: the other she dreaded was social and political: she came to know American society at large as the “troubled regions”—its enculturated prejudice and social injustice for the disenfranchised of which racism was only the tip of the iceberg of a larger beast that she would later name as patriarchy. Her poetry began to move from the comfortable confines of beautiful
silence to the necessity of speaking for the dead, both in
the world and in her mind’s eye:

You told us little, and are done.
So might the dead
Begin to speak of dying, then
Leave half unsaid.
Silence like thunder bears its own
Excuse for dread. ("Apology," The Diamond Cutters 93)

Rich began to regret her blindness; she now wanted to
articulate the hegemony that not only structured but also
repressed her inner world: she didn’t want to be confined to
the comforts of home, family, and wife. She wanted to be
herself, fully and utterly, irrespective of who or what came
before and structured her subjectivity.

The storm was no longer out there; it was in here—she
came to realize the trauma could not be defended against,
othered; rather the other marked her as it defined her
culture. As she took the storm inside, internalized it, a
caesura opened up in her poetry, a pent up rage (born of the
pain of being pent up) began to show itself in the tiny and
minuscule fractures of her, until now, ‘perfect,’
‘rational,’ and ‘male’ form. Gradually, she awakened to her
trauma and became cognizant of the tear (the terror) growing
not only inside her, but inside every child of this culture:

Child with a chip of mirror in his eye
Saw the world ugly, fled to plains of ice
Where beauty was the Snow Queen’s promises.
Under my lids a splinter sharp as his
Has made me wish you lying dead
Whose image digs the needle deeper still.

[...]
Under my ribs a diamond splinter now
Sticks, and has taken root; I know
Only this frozen spear that drives me through.
("The Snow Queen," *The Diamond Cutters* 111-2)

Does the mirror in the eye cause the child to see himself reflected in the world, or rather the world reflected in himself? The latter: the child is ugly inside, made that way by society’s monstrous traumas. He seeks to escape, but finds only the icy-hearted adult, Rich, herself constructed of another’s fatal will and fully attuned to her resentment. Moreover, she comprehends herself as Eve, created from Adam, his precious commodity, his treasured thing, and realizes herself as completely alienated, othered, a no one with no subjectivity of her own. She can know only the trauma of what he left behind, what remains of him after she fled his world—the weapon of choice. That other culture out there had wedged itself into the core of her existence so much that her own language could no longer suture her-self back into a flower:

Not my words nor your visions mend
Such infamous knowledge. We are split.
Done into bits, undone, pale friend
As ecstasy begets its end;
As we are spun of rawest thread—
The flaw is in us; we will break.
O dare you of this fracture make
Hosannas plain and tragical.
("The Insomniacs," *The Diamond Cutters* 110)

Rich recognizes that language offers neither relief nor absolution. She realizes that she has been made and unmade,
sewed up and split asunder by the tragic wound of the other. She has internalized the weapon and made it her fatal flaw. Although the bleeding would be controlled throughout the sixties with such elegiac lines as the above, Rich’s pain—Rich’s rage—cracked her reserved control in the seventies. In the sixties, she understood the conventions of the culture that first petrified women’s creativity and sexuality. In one of the “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” the poet likens the convention of women shaving their legs to objectification:

_Dulce ridens, dulce loquens,_  
she shaves her legs until they gleam  
like petrified mammoth-tusk. (147)

The women who conform to such a norm murder their subjectivities; their overall psyches become dead things:

“You all die at fifteen,” said Diderot,  
and turn part legend, part convention.  
Still, eyes inaccurately dream  
behind closed windows blankening with steam. (147)

In the sixties, Rich questions convention and the consciousness created by such enculturation. In “Antinoüs: The Diaries,” the poet miscarries not just a child, but the storied codes of the culture that she have impregnated her psyche:

The old, needless story. For if I’m here  
it is by choice and when at last  
I smell my own rising nausea, feel the air  
tighten around my stomach like a surgical bandage,  
I can’t pretend surprise. What is it I so miscarry?  
If what I spew on the tiles at last,  
helpless, disgraced, alone,  
is in part what I’ve swallowed from glasses, eyes,
She vomits up the death, the lack of free will, that resides inside her. The script she’s been following for years is now making the poet nauseous; even more it radicalizes every aspect of her identity—her psyche, her sexuality, her politics.

In the seventies, her lines stormed and split as her psyche was radicalized—become not only feminist but also lesbian—and politicized—intentionally separated from the traditional patriarchal order. Becoming politically active in the spirit of the revolutionary sixties, she split herself open and freed herself from the scripts and strictures of her previous relationship with the other (the language of the other, the other of language): “Stripped / you’re beginning to float free” (“November 1968,” The Will to Change 359). Rich studied her pain (the cancer that resides inside), named it as politically induced, and claimed it as patriarchal. The language of the patriarchal other became her focus. Her anxiety regarding language is not only personal but political.³ In “The Burning of Paper instead of Children,” Rich describes the gradual realization of the populace that the establishment seeks to control the flow of ideas through conventional language. The poem’s epigraph quotes Father Daniel Berrigan, Catholic priest and
activist driven underground for months by a conviction for burning draft cards, who fears that the established language would supercede his inner morality, “I was in danger of verbalizing my moral impulses out of existence” (363). The poem proceeds to search for a literary language that will not bow to external pressures of the state, that will be adequate to the inner experience of pain caused by the state of society:

words of a man
in pain
a naked word
entering the clot
a hand grasping
through bars (The Will to Change 365)

Rich realizes that we are prisoners of another’s language:

knowledge of the oppressor
this is the oppressor’s language

yet I need to talk to you (364)

The paradox of the situation is that we must use the other’s language, the same discourse that stifles us, to work through the pain and build bonds outside the established structures of society:

(the fracture of order
the repair of speech
to overcome this suffering) (365)

This paradox becomes Rich’s tragic recognition. She cannot touch (commune with) another because language (communication) ironically feeds the flames of pain and forecloses intimacy.
I am composing on the typewriter late at night, thinking of today. How well we all spoke. A language is a map of our failures. Frederick Douglass wrote an English purer than Milton’s. People suffer highly in poverty. There are methods but we do not use them. Joan, who could not read, spoke some peasant form of French. Some of the suffering are: it is hard to tell the truth; this is America; I cannot touch you now. In America we have only the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger. The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor’s language. (366)

“A language is a map of our failures” . . . and the other’s triumph inside of us. As conduit of communication, conventional language murders our individuality by hardwiring us into the matrix of society—through speech we are plugged into ideology of the time. Poetry subverts conventional language, cutting through the death mask and allowing the uncovered ideas of life flow burst forth. The task of the poet is to wrestle with language as one would wrestle with the angel of death.

In so realizing language’s deadly effect on the psyche, the poet undertakes to at least stall the process of language’s infection. Realizing the language was the mean, medium, and mode of her pain, she struggled to create a self-reflexive poetic that was fully cognizant of language’s potential for psychic domination. She understood the primary paradox of language usage: the language of the other built me and for a large part of my life controlled me, but
it is only through that language that I may liberate myself. Therefore, Rich begins to seek first a theoretical control,

Language as city:: Wittgenstein
Driving to the limits
of the city of words
("Images for Goddard," The Will to Change 396)

and then a revolution of language: “the moment of change is the only poem” (399). However, these are no Passaic Falls; Rich cannot accept the flow of such speech in her consciousness. She revels in the signification of the body over the signification of language: “The will to change beings in the body not in the mind / My politics is in my body, accruing and expanding with every act of resistance and each of my failures” (“Tear Gas,” Collected Early Poems 420). She protests against it; and, like many a demonstrator is gassed for her effort. Language engenders the life—and death—of the psyche, of the soul, and of the body:

I need a language to hear myself with
to see myself in
a language like pigment released on the board
blood-black, sexual green, reds
veined with contradictions
bursting under pressure from the tube (420)

Language is an instrument: a weapon of repression and a tool for personal and cultural change. Rich strived to reverse the process of suppression and indoctrination: she sought to redirect outward the pain inflicted inward her whole life. She claimed her corporeal, bodily pain (the nameless, ineffable pain that exists beyond our capacity for marked
reference) as a call for change. In “Our Whole Life” the poet cuts through the ideological deceptions maneuvered by society’s conventional language systems in order to expose a real of subjectivity rendered by bodily pain:

Our whole life a translation
the permissible fibs

and now a knot of lies
eating at itself to get undone

Words bitten thru words

meanings burnt-off like paint
under the blowtorch

All those dead letters
rendered into the oppressor’s language

Trying to tell the doctor where it hurts
like the Algerian
who has walked from his village, burning

his whole body a cloud of pain
and there are no words for this

except himself (The Will to Change 385)

Her study of pain became a “phenomenology of anger.” She was no longer content to accept the now unrepressed trauma of existence, and so she determined to fight against it. Rage means to free the soul from the patriarchal society’s limits, its dealings in and of death. Rage turns personal pain into political action: “My heart doesn’t ache; sometimes though it rages” (“One Life,” Time’s Power 44).

However, to fight an opponent whose power is stitched into the fabric of society is madness, particularly when that power redoubles itself by strangling your efforts and
feeding off your pain. (Think of the mainstream culture whose sexism necessitated the work of feminism, but has pigeonholed it with sarcastic insults ever since its birth.) The eighties and nineties saw conservative power politics return with a vengeance, now systemic, global, and hyperbolized with an increasingly massive media; consequently, Rich’s verse, if not her mind, a burning rage against the machine in the seventies, needed to conserve itself in order to mount a sustained critique. Because she raged too close to the edge, if not fully tarried with the negative, she almost lost herself in the void at the core of the storm of the societal other. Paradoxically, such absolute freedom, politically speaking, is ineffectual as the empowered center marginalizes the rage as mere ranting and raving. Consequently, as an act of psychic preservation and political maneuvering, the poet moved from sublime rage to subtle rumination on the nature of the beast which she names language. The storm of society is still inside, and it’s blinding. The rain (reign) of rhetoric sustains social injustice by mutating its terms: The acts persist, but the (mis)deeds of a discourse in spectacular flux distract and deceive. Whereas in the seventies, she fully entered and engaged language in order to show her decisive rage, she now steps outside both her rage and her critique in order to contemplate not the end but the means to the end. She moves from engaged social criticism to abstract metacriticism.
A life hauls itself uphill
    through hoar-mist steaming
the sun’s tongue licking
    leaf upon leaf into stricken liquid
When? When? cry the soothseekers
but time is a bloodshot eye
seeing its last of beauty its own
foreclosure
    a bloodshot mind
finding itself unspeakable
What is the last thought?
("Shattered Head," Midnight Salvage 21)

In the seventies, Rich composed biting social critique; she now writes a poetry that passes off allegories of life. Her tone is no longer of the moment, but rather distant and reflective. In “Shattered Head, she discusses not her personal existence, but the experience of life in general. Furthermore, where once she would call for direct agency, she now subsists in thinking about the problem. Indeed, she becomes increasingly articulate about the issue of the unspeakable deadness that resides inside the mind, but she is less inclined to do anything about it. Action recedes into thought. And because she realizes what she has lost—what she has given up—her tone and her themes assume an elegiac tone. Although she does not flee, she does not fight either. She is not alive, but she is not dead either. She is dying, as “Shattered Head” memorializes not with a bang but a whimper:

And the shattered head answers back
    I believed I was loved, I believed I loved,
    who did this to us? (22)
She has become one with the other that is death: she is death-in-life, a poet of inquiry without intent.

To summarize, Adrienne Rich’s psychic economy moves from a defensive position in the fifties to an offensive one in the seventies. Burning itself out (or in fear of totally discharging and neutralizing her rage), she withdraws into an intellectualized, rather than affective, critique in the eighties (her ever-cutting mind is in it, but her wearied heart is not). As Reaganomics trickles wealth from the upper echelons down to the lowest impoverished, damming the bulk of capital at the summit, Adrienne Rich’s psychic economy at this stage in her career continues to mount a critique of the patriarchal and heterosexual world, but what once was a deluge of rage and pain from the height of her life is now stoppered by a cerebral verse that allows only a trickle of tears to fall on the page.

In the course of five decades, Rich’s subjectivity flows from compressed and blocked versification, to unstopped manic assault, and finally to depressive and elegiac reflection. The transformation reveals at once an evolving awareness of the world and an oscillating relationship with the pain inflicted by that world. At her best she is wholly confrontational and richly engaged in the pain of existence; at her worst, she is either naively defensive and poorly engaged in the struggle of existence or she is knowingly detached and dissolves existence’s barbs.
with the maturity of reason. The course of her poetry follows a trajectory from eyes wide shut defensive withdrawal to absolute confrontational engagement, finally arresting itself in a nebulous mire of contemplative negation. In other words, her career begins in defense, then bursts with a bang of praxis, but ends with a whimper—a return to repression: her negation, following Freud, finds her intellectually cognizant of her traumatized existence, yet emotionally devoid of pain’s affect. She becomes mind sans soul, sans subjectivity, sans psyche. After defending herself against death, after looking into its hollow face, she turns into it; she is the living dead.

In “Storm Warnings,” the first poem from her first book of poetry, *A Change of Life* (1951) approved by the old boys network in the figure of W. H. Auden who gave her the award for the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition, Rich recognizes that she lives in a “troubled region,” but as yet has not the presence nor power of mind to name it—as she will later—patriarchy:

I draw the curtains as the sky goes black
And set a match to candles sheathed in glass
Against the keyhole draught, the insistent whine
Of weather through the unsealed aperture.
This is our sole defense against the season;
These are the things that we have learned to do
Who live in troubled regions. (3)

At this point in her life, she is attuned to the pain inflicted by the outer world; however, she can neither name it nor truly confront it—she “can only close the shutters”
(3). True, Rich versifies it into the trope of a storm, and in the next, more popular poem of the collection, “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” she begins to see the weight of the world in the figure of the marital vows:

The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band 
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie 
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by. 
The tigers in the panel that she made 
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. (4)

However, the storm is an intangible, some ineffable thing that is warned against but not taken in, and the weight of the ring is displaced by the creative threads of dancing tigers such that the tragedy cannot be truly in-visioned. Instead, she flees—she closes herself off, shuts herself in, shutters the window so she will not confront the thing, so the thing will not mark her vision.

Martin Heidegger gave a lecture in 1951 entitled “. . . Poetically Man Dwells . . .” in which he suggested that dwelling in the language of poetry such that one can really hear and genuinely respond to its appeal constitutes authentic (existentialist) human subjectivity. Rather than thinking in language and art, Rich cowers in language and art (the shutters, the prancing tigers). At this point in her life Rich dwells not poetically but defensively. Real poetry is not a defense mechanism. Poetry, authentic poetry written by strong poets, engages the other, the world. At this point Rich has yet to write poetry. Rich’s fifties
verse acts as a blockade, a barricade built of no less than the other’s language and not her own. But because it is not authentic poetry, it is not strong: the whining wind—the storm of the other—continues to whip through her house, her house of cards, her psyche. Only when the storm breaks through the covered aperture of her vision, only when the storm cracks the glass and either unleashes the raging flame of her psyche or attempts to blow it out will Rich become a true poet. Rich stands at a crossroads: The painful truth of the other is out there, but she cannot keep it at bay forever. She must choose between rage and the cage, between unsheathing the soul candle flame, thereby turning it into a sublime conflagration of engaged creativity capable of battling the societal storm of the century that lies outside, or cloaking herself in a lonely withdrawal from the elemental world, thereby containing her vision and retreating from the pain and existential risk that the world engenders. Fight or flight. Do or die.

1. The freedom of the wholly mad
to smear & play with her madness
write with her fingers dipped in it
the length of a room

which is not, of course, the freedom
you have, walking on Broadway
to stop & turn back or go on
10 blocks; 20 blocks

but feels enviable maybe

to the compromised

curled in the placenta of the real
which was to feed & which is strangling her. (27)

In “The Phenomenology of Anger” and the rest of *Diving into the Wreck* (if not the bulk of her poems from the seventies), the poet inaugurates a realm of action which encompasses death, takes it on and in. She furiously forecloses on the conventional, reserved (if not wholly shuttered and repressed) consciousness of “Storm Warnings” and *A Change of World* and surges into the interstices of authentic creative being. Moreover, she enters the space of fighting which is flight, the flight of Deleuze and Guatari’s rhizomatic abstract machine in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) published eight years after “The Phenomenology of Anger” was written: “Write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency” (11). The poet of madness steps outside the stifling ideological system and the poem of madness is free to review the symbolic order from a different register of being. Just as Deleuze and Guatari’s schizoanalysis fractures normative discourse and typical ideology by turning off orderly mental reason, Rich’s phenomenology of anger situates the poet outside and beyond the chains of rational discourse communities, the ideal place for cultural critique. Like Gilbert and Gubar’s interpretive efforts from the same time period, regarding nineteenth-century woman writers, the poet transvalues the
status of the twentieth-century madwoman in the attic from the margins of society to the most central of its critics. The poet comments on the culture from a position which is simultaneously inside and outside its logical boundaries. She approaches madness, or more specifically the language of madness, suggesting both rage and psychosis, that dissolves the socially inscribed territories that have marked—scarred—her body with the death of the other and thereby composed the pain of the self: sexism, heterosexism, and all the other limits imposed and inflicted by the patriarchal order. She erases, if not annihilates, her pent up form of the fifties and effaces herself in the play of madness—“The freedom of the wholly mad / to smear & play with her madness.” Not only the rhythm but the psyche repressed by the rhythm of an other’s dead language masquerading as well-formed verse is sprung. . . . Adrienne Rich’s psyche not only blossoms, it bursts forth uncontainable—consistency without constraint, critique without co-optation—and writes through death in order to give birth to her real self, the real of subjectivity that has lived a life of mute desperation beneath the layers of the other’s language and order. In the present poem, she lives existentially, she exists “curled in the placenta of the real,” ready to strike out because she is already stricken. She intentionally becomes an exile from the current world order, “I huddled fugitive” (27). Though the social order used to strangle
her (stifle her voice with the gag of its own language), she has transformed the death it deals into a rage that fuels her critique:

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7. I suddenly see the world
    as no longer viable:
    you are out there burning the crops
    with some new sublimate
    This morning you left the bed
    we still share
    and went out to spread impotence
    upon the world

    I hate you
    I hate the mask you wear, your eyes
    assuming a depth
    they do not possess, drawing me
    into the grotto of your skull
    the landscape of bone
    I hate your words
    they make me think of fake
    revolutionary bills
    crisp imitation parchment
    they sell at battlefields. (29)
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Rich is finally able to articulate a critique of the patriarchy, here represented by her narrator’s lover whose actions are suffused with sterility, whose speech is satiated with war, and whose eyes are replete with depthless death. By standing up to his conventions (“Madness. Suicide. Murder. / Is there no way out but these?” [28]), she commutes his conviction of her and turns a supposed madness (insanity) into a critical rage (passion). Psychoanalytic critic Slavoj Žižek explains the definitive freedom of the mad:

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It is against this background that one has to grasp Lacan’s thesis that “a madman is the only free man”: the “madman” (the psychotic) is the subject who has refused to walk into the forced choice and to accept that he has “always already
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chosen”; he took the choice “seriously” and chose the impossible opposite of the Name of the Father, i.e., of the symbolic identification which confers us a place in the intersubjective space. (Enjoy Your Symptom! 76-7)

Rich’s rage (her psycho-critical anger) thrusts her outside the symbolic order and into her own moment of subjectivity that will be neither limited nor regulated by patriarchal codes. Rich becomes the madwoman who knows the score but simply refuses to participate—thus, in a sense, she is not really mad, but rather the most subversive of critics.6 Emancipated of the overarching male point of view which condemns women to self-hatred, the poet also begins to free herself from the heterosexual mandate:

9. “The only real love I have ever felt was for children and other women. Everything else was lust, pity, self-hatred, pity, lust.” This is a woman’s confession. (30)

The heterosexual patriarchal order convicted her subjectivity to the void of traumatic emotions; the phenomological poetry of anger will liberate the psyche and institute a new orientation toward life and love.

Once Rich faces the storm rather than hides from it, she is able to define the inner void (of affect, of sexuality, of subjectivity itself) around which the frenzy fluctuates. If the social-symbolic order (the patriarchal polis) deals out death, then she determines the pain caused by that death to be political: the death in pain is political, politicized. She dives into the wreck of herself
that the culture’s storm has made of her . . . not to salvage and heal, rather to merge it with an oceanic self that first floods her fragmented self with a congealing flow of rage and then rusts the barbs of discourse which pierce, tangle, and slay her.7

Inevitably, however, the deluge of life overflows itself and the oceanic self unfortunately dries up to a trickle. Her rage recedes and she becomes inaffectional. Detached and in a state of negation, she no longer confronts the storm, rather she reflects upon it, and in so doing reflects it—her verse turns into a surface which mirrors the pain of death but no longer truly internalizes it. In “A Long Conversation,” of her, now next to last book of poetry, *Midnight Salvage, Poems 1995–1998*, she suppresses what was her critical and assaultive tone and opts instead for contemplative dialogue.

What sways and presses against the pane what can’t I see beyond or through— charred, crumpled, ever-changing human language is that still you? (69)

Her dive into the wreck is coming to an end in the midnight hour and crossing over into the impossible and negative space between days—the undead time zone. She swerves from her impassioned intent and derails her poetry into a ditch of abstract reflection on the nature of self:

In the dark windowglass a blurred face —is it still mine? (69)
She loses touch with the personally politicized pain she signified so well in the seventies and meanders into meditation. Criticizing the patriarchal order is replaced by self-reflection in the windowpane. The trope of trauma is replaced by the rhetoric of opacity. The indictment of society for its oppressions and tortures is replaced by the quiet contemplation of personal subjectivity. Her caesuras are alternatively open yet empty or closed yet prefabricated. What once was formally fractured and psychologically fracturing verse that overwhelmed linear narrative and conventional discourse has turned into an ultra-normal and fatally cogent versification. What once was a volcanic eruption of poetry has turned into a subdued verse essay.

It’s as if the poet now debates the social order on its own terms and in its own language; it’s as if she has returned to the verse of the old boy network and the voice of Auden. What used to stand and scream has fallen prostrate and mute. She is the hollow poet whose career has ended “Not with a bang but a whimper” (T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”). The storm, her storm, is no longer a violent fury, but a gentle breeze that “sways and presses against the pane.” Admittedly, she continues to critique the ruling language, but her charge of its deadliness (“charred, crumpled”) applies equally to her own verse. In confronting its death, she has internalized its void—she has hollowed
herself out, negated her affective (effective) rage against order. She “can’t [. . .] see beyond or through” it; she gives up and allows it to overrun her. Admittedly, the poet still questions (she still maintains her quest), but her drastic shift in tone—from rage to rumination—constitutes a self-silencing. She has lost her impassioned voice. Rather than evoking, she is simply going through the motions of poetry. Her psyche is now secondary to itself; the poet-critic has become a critic only, a shallow deconstructor of language who, like Eliot in The Waste Land “can connect / Nothing with nothing,” who can not reconstruct the outer world that language composed, let alone her inwardness that language invaded.

To summarize succinctly, first Rich defends herself against the pain of death; second, she politicizes the pain, finally, she reflects (upon) the pain. The history of death in the poetry of Adrienne Rich is a history of pain . . . is a history of the sociopolitical . . . is a history of language, more specifically her relationship with the death throes of language which she first takes great pains to defend herself against, but eventually internalizes until her own language, voice, subjectivity dies. Adrienne Rich becomes a political, feminist poet-activist precisely because she personally feels the anxiety that results from our society’s conventional patriarchal languages’s
influence. We now turn to this devolving and deteriorating relationship with poetry, with language.

2.2 BLOOMING WITH LANGUAGE / DYING IN LANGUAGE

While Adrienne Rich spent the fifties and sixties defending herself against the sublime, Harold Bloom read it, interpreted it. The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry, completed in 1961 and expanded in 1971, charts Blake’s apocalypse, Wordsworth’s intimations, Coleridge’s dejection, Byron’s anti-heroics, Shelley’s Promethean flame, and Keats’ melancholy. While Rich hides her eyes, Bloom envisions a poetry, specifically a Romanticism, that uses the imagination to liberate the human psyche from the limits of nature, particularly mortal time, by propelling the subject beyond the real. Nature, by its very nature, generates death because the animate is subject to the march of time which de-animates the vital present into the entombed past. Life lives only for death. However, the Romantics, as Bloom suggests, reverse the process: “The womb of nature is an abyss of death, and yet it brings life into being” (28). Death is compressed (or, alternatively, pressed back) into life by the deliberately transcendent act of psyche called imagination. Consequently, Blake’s vision of “the world in a grain of sand” ironically represents both the condensation of life
and the erosion of life that is death, in other words, the
traditional reading of life’s bursting vitality in even the
smallest of natural particles as well as the subversive
reading of death’s wearing annihilation of nature into the
smallest of fragments.

The Romantics walk the line between life and death.
Further, they advance it: just as death naturally cuts into
life, they purposively cut life into death in order to force
a sublime confrontation with the threshold between the two
that will irrevocably transform their subjectivity. In such
engagement, there is literally no turning back. Whereas
Orpheus died looking backward, that is by second-guessing
what he had learned during his descent into the underworld
he killed his love Eurydice, thereby gaining the tragic
self-consciousness of death in life, these poets die looking
forward into the abyss, that is, with melancholic action
they surpass the mortal coil by uncoiling their
subjectivities across the plane of existence and non-
existence alike thereby inhabiting—thereby bridging—life
and death alike.

The arc of the tragic subject concludes when the
subject becomes aware of inner death; the arc of the
melancholic subject continues beyond a realization of inner
death: melancholy not only recognizes inward loss and
limitation as tragedy, but also reconstitutes those deadly
elements into outward action in a movement of self-
overcoming. For the melancholic, self-expression is forever engaged in an epic battle (a dialectic really) with the void. Therefore, of Keats’ “Hyperion” Bloom can contend, “Apollo’s pangs are those of death and birth, of dying into godhood, as he half seems to know” (397). Rather than tragic self-recognition, the Romantics gain transcendent action and metaphysical engagement when they look into the void. The gods lives without or beyond death; but the human hooded by the gods constitutes a god living with death inside the self. The form death takes is anxiety and fear, the “pangs” of not simply self-annihilation, but self-transcendence—the act that exposes the subject to destruction and the act that mediates such destruction by first internalizing and then surpassing it.

Paradoxically, the moment of birth is the moment of life which transcends another life (literally, the mother’s; metaphorically, one’s prior self), and the moment of birth is the moment of death wrought of difference (literally, the child is severed from the mother; metaphorically, the new self murders the old). For Bloom, self-annihilation yields self-transcendence. However, I want to make a slight critique of Bloom by way of another Romantic, the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who, in the Introduction to The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807), wrote of “tarrying with the negative” which resembles but notably
alters the spirit of Apollonian birth “pangs” of which Bloom speaks:

But the Life of the Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject [...]. (19)

Life internalizes the other and in so doing others it-self out of an essential and cohesive identity, and into real subjective existence, one that is metaphorically negative, dead. For instance, when I write that Rich confronts death, it is not necessarily literal; rather she confronts the idea, the figure, the metaphor of death. The poet wrestles with otherness that limits, if not wholly negates the self. It is to the poet’s credit that such a psyche can confront and evolve from the sublime moment of self-difference. Whereas in Bloom’s reading of Romanticism, the subject dies into godhood, in Hegel’s (and I think Keats’ as well) creation of Romanticism, the (essentialistic) identity dies into (existentialist) subjectivity through the act of art, of poetry. Bloom correctly argues for the interconnectedness of life and death in Romantic poetry, but he too quickly jumps to the conclusion that one must outweigh the other, that death is transcended by life,
specifically the life of the mind which sutures the wound of death (the trauma of self-limitation rendered by the other’s weapon of choice, language).

Although I disagree with Bloom regarding the underlying function of poetry as a transcendent act, a covering over or displacement of death, my own views coincide with his on the other effect of the imagination. For Bloom, the imagination, through the act of poetry, enacts life and battles death; for him, one must write in order to live. To his credit, he does not view dying into godhood as the last step of the birth process; paradoxically, although transcendent, the now poet-god must complete an act (must continually repeat an act) in order to sustain his creative omnipotence. The act of writing engenders the poet-god’s first breath, and every breath the poet-god takes—every poem he writes—continues the labor. Concluding a discussion comparing Coleridge’s writing (and rewriting) of his own epitaphs with the “poet’s” primary obsession—German Idealism, Bloom asserts, “The poems live; the theology and philosophy have only a life in death” (237). Extending this idea beyond Coleridge’s excursions into philosophy and applying it to Bloom’s conception of Romanticism—of poetry—in general, the Romantic critic sets up a binary opposition between life and poetry on the one hand and death and theory on the other. To his credit, Bloom valorizes poetry over theory; however, paradoxically,
his theory of poetry founds the act of writing in death and self-difference, for as we shall see directly, when anxiety attacks the psyche (or, stated another way, when the psyche breaks down into a state of anxiety), verse forms the unhealable wound’s always half-bleeding scab: the poem balances on (or better yet, the poem is) the razor-thin red rivulet of blood between life and death. Bloom recognizes that life and death are at stake in a Romantic poem, if not in all authentic poetry:

However, what Bloom cannot yet articulate in *The Visionary Company* is the conception that (poetic) language bridges psyche and reality. He understands that nature and reality, especially the sublime and the catastrophic, inspire poets to speak, but it is not until his books of the seventies that he makes the connection between language and inspiration, between language and reality, between language and subjectivity. In a precise sense, Bloom transforms his reading of Romanticism into a theory of poetry and poetic subjectivity; in order to do so, he leaps from an understanding of the specifically Romantic poets’ direct confrontations with the reality of death to an understanding of how poetry in general symbolizes death. In other words, he jumps from individually and existentially situated concrete conflict to abstract representations and symbolic formulas that take the concrete conflict as their basis. For example, Bloom reads Keats as having fears that he may
cease to be, while Bloom theorizes poetry to be founded on anxiety of influence, which he denotes as the anxiety of being overwhelming spoken by an-other rather than for one-self, but which to me also necessarily connotes an underlying and fundamental anxiety of the nothingness which flows into life, according to my reading of the subjective situation of not only poets but speaking beings. For Bloom, the anxiety of influence is particularly poetic. Applying his methodology to Adrienne Rich for instance, Bloom would note how she wrestles with precursors like Emily Dickinson and Muriel Rukeyser both in her poetry and in her prose (the former poets provide strong presences in “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” collected in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* and *What Is Found There*, respectively). My theory expands Bloom’s from one of poetic anxiety to linguistic anxiety in general. I don’t look at how Dickinson or Rukeyser influence Rich or how she overcomes any one precursor’s determinations, but rather I examine how patriarchal discourse as a whole affects her. To me, it is not a particular person, but rather language itself that gives the poet as subject of language anxiety. Rich would, I think, concur: “Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language” (“Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman,” *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 248). The poet subverts that which gives her pain.
Bloom begins *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* with an image of the Romantic wrestling with the angel of death, self-limitation and self-annihilation, which grounds the poet and poetry in the melancholic position:

For every poet begins (however “unconsciously”) by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death’s necessity than all other men and women do. The young citizens of poetry, or ephebe as Athens would have called him, is already the anti-natural or antithetical man, and from his start as a poet he quests for an impossible object, as his precursor quested before him. (10)

However, he quickly displaces (or sublimates, if one would prefer a less critical reading of his primary defense mechanism) this fundamental anxiety and this basic depressive stance into an argument that poetry constitutes a war of tropes, not, as in his previous reading of Romanticism, which I want to preserve in these pages, a matter of life and death. He even goes so far as to admonish readers (like me) who misinterpret his stance on anxiety in the preface to the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence*:

Any adequate reader of this book, which means anyone of some literary sensibility who is not a commissar or an ideologue, Left or Right, will see that influence-anxiety does not so much concern the forerunner but rather is an anxiety achieved in and by the story, novel, play, poem, or essay. The anxiety may or may not be internalized by the later writer, depending upon temperament and circumstances, yet that hardly matters: the strong poem is the achieved anxiety. (xxiii)

Perhaps I am guilty of misreading Bloom for my own creative/critical purposes here, but nonetheless, 1) the anxiety exists not in the psyche of the poet but rather in
the poem itself. Here, language—the other—is anxious, not the poet! What becomes of the function of the poet if the human psyche is not in conflict but the language of the other is? Are poets passive vessels of some unknown others' tempestuous inspirations? And 2) the topic of death falls away as misprision and misinterpretation take center stage in Bloom's new line of thought. What's deadly about misinterpretation? Bloom does not ask the question; however, as we saw earlier with Rich's "Storm Warnings," defending oneself against the vision of death, closing one's eyes, serves only to generate meek and weak poems in the present and ferment the fear into strong and raging poems in the future, until the poetic flame burns itself out as the hollow vacuum consumes her career (her psyche) in a rote throes of intellectual negation. Worse yet, poetry as misprision could devolve into a house of mirrors, a postmodern labyrinth in the vein of John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" which mires the narrator in the misprision house of language of second-guessing, unable to detach himself from literary convention—from the act of writing literature itself—and infinitely distracted from the business of real life until he becomes one with the text, a ghost in the machine doomed to haunt this existence forever because he could not (did not) take action. Psyches of poets and readers alike under this system fall into the traps of tropes rather than employing tropes, as Rich does
in her period of critique, to sub-versively break through the constraints of conventional and literary language, encounter the real of death, and enact an existential contingency of life.

Eventually, poetry under Bloom’s theory becomes a rivalry of who trumped whom either first or best. The only Romanticism left in Bloom’s theory is not a melancholic sublime, but the “Family Romance” (95) which transfers the confrontation with self-death into an inter-generational rivalry of which only one party, the latter, is aware, albeit unconsciously. Significantly, Bloom utilizes the metaphor of vision from *The Visionary Company*, but he inverts it, if not altogether destroys it, into re-vision and misprision.

Poetic Influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist. (30)

Poetry is the anxiety of influence, is misprision, is a disciplined perverseness. Poetry is misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misalliance. (95)

Sight is always already secondary; apparently, the visionary company merely re-sees Milton, who re-sees Homer, who re-sees some cave man with a charred stick . . . Consequently, all that Rich is capable of is a re-seeing first of Auden’s generation, then Dickinson’s, and so forth . . . The
problem, as Bloom sees it, is one of origins and origination. However, it is also a riddle that can never be solved (or re-solved as the case may be), because the critic and the poet alike become caught up in an ever-receding game of leap-frog into the literary past. They swerve from the present confrontation with reality into the tropic past.

As application of literary criticism, Bloom’s theory of poetry constitutes nothing more than traditional literary scholarship, the tracing of lines of influence, in a word: history. But unlike William Kohler in The Tunnel, Bloom did not give up Poetry for History in his youth, at least not completely: the historian-critic possesses the heart of the poet. Although on one level The Anxiety of Influence in practice operates as an historiography of Romantic poetry, on another, the level I’m striving to preserve in these pages, it functions as the method and movement of Romantic thought itself, if not all primal psychological conflicts.

As existential discipline, Bloom’s theory constitutes nothing—transforms the no-thing at the original heart of life that can never be known into the prime mover of all subsequent language, albeit more abuse than use. I wish to extrapolate from Bloom’s thought the inverse of origination, the primary big bang that inspires every poet, if not every subject, to speak—the collision with the other, which is at root rootless void.
Solipsism is impossible for poets because they ineluctably read other poets; therefore, their language, their thoughts and feelings, and most importantly, their very poems are replete with the discourse of the other. Rich is tied to Auden and the old boys’ network of influence (both personally and politically, poetically and subjectively) until she frees herself, at the expense of a happy albeit repressive consciousness no less, in “The Phenomenology of Anger.” If, as Bloom writes, “Poetic Influence is not a separation but a victimization—it is a destruction of desire” (38), then the supersession of said influence (in Rich’s case, the heterosexist, patriarchal order) unleashes the subject from trauma and allows her to find herself, her innermost desire. When Rich recognizes her sexual and poetic sovereignty is an illusion, she stops eluding her
confrontation with the other and simply breaks free, creating her own individual form and independent psyche.

Bloom theorizes poetry as a struggle between strong poetic voices, one’s own and another’s; but the true conflict resides at a deeper, primal level for all psyches who have entered into the realm of language—at that plane of existence where the subject realizes itself spoken through and through by a fundamental absence covered over by symbol, re-presentation, and language, in other words, where self is embattled by an omnipresent other unconsciously recognized as the real of death but consciously employed through the medium of language. Bloom argues in the later work *Poetry and Repression* that all poetry defends against a fundamental emptiness at the core of our supposedly meaningful existence:

In the dialectic of rhetorical irony or of defensive reaction-formation, absence tends to dominate over presence, yet this is more a pointing to an absence or a lack, in language or the self, than it is itself a state of absence. Similarly, in the metonymic reductiveness from images of fullness to those of emptiness, these defensive undoings, regressions, and isolation indicate more a recognition of emptiness, whether of the empty word or the empty self, than they actually mean an emptiness itself. (118-9)

Poets create tropes of fullness that distract us from the void, but which when confronted directly break down and allow oblivion to bloom right before our eyes. All language is composed as a way to explain (away), the unspeakable, unsymbolizable reality of absence and presence, thereby containing or at least warning against the storm of the real
that would subsume all literary and linguistic convention in
its western winds as well as deny all habitual living in its
eerily calm eye. Language provides an ideology that always
misrepresents the real. Paradoxically, such linguistic
detours allow the real of death an alternate route into the
subject’s psychological existence: death is carried into the
psychic economy on the underside of language. Bloom also
writes that the poetic impulse toward transcendence
engenders the compulsion to repress the knowledge of death:
“Life is the conqueror of poets, the death-in-life that they
sought to fend off by divination” (104). The language of
the other (1) invades the subject, for instance,
ubiquitously through practical conversation or intensely
through literature, (2) grounds the subject’s thought and
hollows the subject out with its ever-present syntax or
strong poetry, and (3) finally replaces the subject’s psyche
with itself, that is, with language, otherness, death.9
However, poets and other subjects aware of the power of
language recognize the invasion and the re-constitution of
the self through the vehicle of the other. Poets realize
that death—understood figuratively as the negation of their
own life’s creativity—has infiltrated their souls; strong
poets, if I may borrow an epithet from Bloom, swerve from
the point of attack, if not compose their own counter-
attack. Hence, Rich counters the deadly storm of language
with the only tools afforded her: her own raging tempest of
language: “Poetry is above all a concentration of the power of language” (“Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman,” On Lies, Secrets, and Silence 248). She subverts the mother tongue, which is always already the other’s language, in frenzied speech that will not be contained, that mirrors the uncontainability of death. Her subversion of language is the key to her existential freedom. In fairness to Bloom, this sub-version is the underside of misprision, but it is also the side which his theory sublimates.

Influence, as Bloom explains, etymologically means “having power over another” and “inflow” (The Anxiety of Influence 26). The upper level of the anxiety of influence (the level at which Bloom conceptualizes) fears being secondary—to write after the fact of the first idea and the first poem—and saying nothing either of import or difference; the lower level (my level) fears being constructed by language—overpowered and invaded such that neither one’s writing nor one’s psyche is one’s own—and, consequently, being dead-in-life. Bloom localizes influence in the discipline of poetry; I argue that the influence is language itself—language which has transfigured the real of death into symbol and trope. The language which flows within is not one’s own—it is the voice of the dead . . . it is not merely deadly . . . it is death itself.

This deadly inwardness is what I meant when I stated earlier in the chapter that Adrienne Rich rages against the
beast, the storm, the machine made of words—language.
Adrienne Rich’s poetry at first defends against the language of the other (which is, paradoxically, the other of language), but, realizing it has already infiltrated her existence, she breaks down and out in order to free her-self from its grasp. Although the rage will eventually be repealed, if not altogether reversed into negative rumination, the moment of liberation is not merely psychotic, but sublime. The poetic transfiguration of language that is death constitutes the transformation of life in death. Language—poetic language—here not only exists as the new sublime, in the terrifying sense of the word ‘sublime,’ but language also sublimates death, in the psychoanalytic sense of the word ‘sublimate.’ In other words, poetic language raises the fundamental psychotic anxiety of self-annihilation by an unknown but always already internalized otherness into the act of creation, more specifically the art of self-generation. In so doing, poetry denies that the other language within the self is indeed other; and it displaces self-difference into an appearance of self-identity. Poetry converts the sublime confrontation with the deadliness of self-difference into the sublime life of poetic creativity, which, in encountering the real of self-limitation, ironically uses the language of the other’s internalized limits as the means of self-supersession and overcoming of otherness. Bloom
seems to understand this paradox, even if most of his work attempts to sublimate it: "The central argument of this book, as of *The Anxiety of Influence*, is that sublimation is a defense of limitation even as metaphor is a self-contradictory trope of limitation" (99). Bloom tries to peel back language in order to realize the inner limitation that it affords, but even he is thrust back into the game of tropes. Supersession is tentative at best due to the vastness, appeal, and familiarity of the dead language outside, let alone assimilated inside, the moment of action—of writing, transfiguring, traversing the real, tarrying with the negative—exists as the moment of life, sublime yet authentic.

While Rich’s vision is blocked in the fifties and sixties, only to emerge in a decade-long period of rage that critically surpasses the limits of conventional and constraining language use, Bloom’s critique is locked into a depiction of vision in the sixties, only to emerge in a decade-long period of psychoanalytic period of criticism that dissects the generation of poetry according to the influence of prior literary language use. In the next stage of his thought, he unfortunately changes terms: What once was a matter of confronting the abyss of nature becomes in his middle period an anxiety of literary origins. Whereas death was most prior, now forefathers are (or, more precisely, the forefathers’ literature). Bloom disperses
the void into literature itself, much like Freud’s little Hans does with the *fort/da* game of here/gone, presence/absence. When Hans’ mother disappears, her discontinued presence leaves a gaping hole in his psyche, or, using the language offered in this analysis, the other inside him is dead. The bobbin game—the language game—not only symbolizes his anxiety but also fills the void causing the anxiety. I am here building on the structuralist conception of language that representation and symbol (language) are grounded in absence of that which they signify and consequently function to make the absent present; and yet I’m also subverting the structuralist into a post-structuralist view that language is grounded in lack, a general discontinuity between signifier and signified, and is thus motivated to displace said lack. Finally, I’m even suggesting to move beyond the post-structuralist and to an existentialist conception of language: words express . . . an inner death. Or, altering Auden, language makes nothing happen. If the psyche were not in turmoil, there would be no need for language . . . there would be no language because language is that which allows the dead, the absolute hollow other of this hyper-mediated, post-Romantic age, access to the psyche. Where Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence of an-other’s poetry leaves off, my theory of the anxiety of the other-language itself commences.
According to Bloom’s theory, the poet initially swerves away from the dead other, the forefather of language:

When the latecomer initially swerves (clinamen) from his poetic father, he brings about a contraction or withdrawal of meaning from the father, and makes/breaks his own false creation (fresh wandering or error-about-poetry). [. . .] Concluding the poem is an even more strenuous patter of contraction —> catastrophe —> restitution, a dialectical alternation of a severer self-curtailment (askesis) and an answering return of lost voices and almost-abandoned meanings (apophrades). (97)

By poem’s end, the swerve away turns into a return of the repressed voice of the dead. Closely analyzing Bloom’s attitude reveals this return as nostalgic reinstatement of the greater other called poetry. In other words, according to Bloom’s theory, the poet reverts back to, if always already indulges in, the very voice of the other that gives her anxiety in the first place. By contrast, I conceptualize a poetry, a literature, that always swerves into the dead other, that utilizes the poetry of Adrienne Rich at her most engaged and confrontational period, but a poetry that does not in the final analysis install the other’s deadly ideology, but instead enacts a limitless self-difference, and an unending existential process from the underside of Bloom’s theory of misprision. Bloom would read Rich as initially swerving away from the voice of her predecessors but eventually swerving back into the greater canon of poetry. And in a certain sense, this is true: over the years, Rich has been canonized and rightly so. However, I want to offer a subtly different theory from Bloom’s: Rich
uses the trauma and pain caused by the other’s language to murder her repressive self, thereby opening her psyche to a possibility outside comprehension of the other’s knowledge.

Bloom’s practical criticism follows a trail of tropes that recede into unknown origins; similarly, my theory enters the heart of darkness. However, Bloom’s plays in the fields of the almighty trope, using language as an infinitely regressive displacement of the subject’s final limit—death:

Death is therefore a kind of literal meaning, or from the standpoint of poetry, literal meaning is a kind of death. Defenses can be said to trope against death, rather in the same sense that tropes can be said to defend against literal meaning, which is the antithetical formula for which we have been questing. (A Map of Misreading 91)

For Bloom, poetry tropes against death, for me, and I think for Rich as well (at least in her middle period of authentic confrontation with the other’s language), poetry cuts through language to find the death—the trauma of arbitrariness and the pain of absence—that resides at the hollow core of language. My theory attempts to create a dialectic of the poet’s relationship with language, the other, death—the language of the other’s death. This dialectical quest constitutes not only a descent into the hell of subjectivity but also vicious circle from which there is, as in Sartre’s play, no exit:

1. The writing of literature engenders the always failing yet ever-questing attempt to poeticize the external,
real limit of the human world drifting astray in the backwash of the other which is death.

2. The pursuit of a language adequate to such self-differential experience produces an inwardness which recognizes its own imagination—its own psychic subjectivity—as lacking due to its being produced by another’s always already miscarried creation.

3. When the writer’s mind joins (1) the newly construed lack at the core of the imagination with (2) the original lack in the real world, the fusion of two layers of lack doubles death in a psychic economy that lays the writer low before the altar of the othered other, of dead death. Death is not only doubled outside the writer, but duplicated inside: the subject, not a melancholic mourning loss but loss it-self, writes from the position of death which has the unique ability to put in question and lay bare all that human imagination has erected.

The subject writes through death.

Take Rich’s career as a specific example of this theoretical process. (1) The fifties and sixties: Her poetry’s initial tarry with death is one of defense, but as such recognizes death’s imminent danger, symbolized by the unseen tempest in “Storm Warnings.” Her poetry strives to represent the other, but fails in a fit of willed blindness. (2) The seventies: As the years go by and she continues her poetic quest, which is really a flight, she realizes that the storm
is no longer outside but inside. It has become her in “The Phenomenology of Anger”; and yet she possesses full awareness that she has internalized the real of death and that it is feeding her nothing, i.e., ironically hollowing her out: “curled in the placenta of the real / which was to feed & which is strangling her.” (3) The seventies, continued: In assuming the third-person stance—regarding herself as “her”—she is wholly othered. And yet she is strangely free in her madness, free to pursue a critique of the patriarchal symbolic world of canonical literature and conventional language which has traditionally suppressed women’s writing and alienated female subjectivity.

I hesitate to assert that Rich’s next stage constitutes a fourth step in the dialectic I constructed above, for that would mean that all authentic writers must necessarily deteriorate into a rut of bad faith and all existential writing devolve into self-parody;¹² however, I am nonetheless forced to note her next stage here because it serves as a possible consequence of diving into the wreck of oneself. (4) The eighties and nineties: Writing from and through death evacuates life from the psychic economy. In Rich’s case, submerging herself too long—tarrying with the negative too long—causes not only a self-cancellation which is paradoxically liberating, as in “The Phenomenology of Anger” but also an inner deadening. As the hollow that fueled her poetry, as the grain of sand that produces the
pearl, is transformed from a conflict and an obstacle to a habit and a necessity, she relies on nothing as the source of her pain. Influence no longer creates anxiety but rather ennui. Going through the motions of emotion replaces authentic and thoughtful engagement with the limits of one’s psyche. The subject who writes from the position of death and through the internalization of death in order to engage the real of life may experience death re-cycled back into the psyche at the deep level of structure rather than mere content. Rather than existentially experiencing life at the limits of death, such a subject experiences nothing other than the shadows of former engagements. Living with the knowledge of death and existing as the undead or walking dead constitutes the difference between the melancholic and the obsessional positions. The former writes in search of something to dialectically heal the hole that has infiltrated the soul from the outside while the latter writes in order to disrupt the numbness that has become a way of life. For the melancholic, the inner life struggles against its outer limit—externality, death—particularly through acts of self-expression which cut across the void but which also cut back inside.¹³ For the obsessional, death is no longer the limit of life and reality, a contentless void that must be traversed; instead, death is the innate structure of psychological existence. Thus, the poetry of Rich’s middle period is characterized by a
melancholic rage against ever-present and ever-pressing death while the poetry of her later period is defined by an obsessional dissolution of the former melancholic rage into routinized intellectual curiosities about the subject of death. Real writing dies into blank rote. Because it begs the question “Am I alive or dead?” (Lacan, *Seminar 3* 179-80), it constitutes death itself. This conversation has gone on too long, like a lover’s quarrel which proceeds ad infinitum because neither party wants to admit the relationship is dead, not ad nauseum because both parties tragically recognize the impossibility of sustaining their connection. Significantly, the storm has dissipated—it’s a mere breeze—and her tone is trance-like, outside herself:

What sways and presses against the pane
what can’t I see beyond or through—
charred, crumpled, ever-changing human language
is that still you? (*Midnight Salvage* 69)

Her former clarity of critique has become a myopic vision; she can’t believe she’s still writing through this long-dead issue, but she must for it is all she knows. She has no fight left in her, and why should she: numbness and nothingness do not incite her to act, they structure her subjectivity.

As with Bloom, poetry acts against influence from the outside. Contra Bloom, however, the mark of the “strong” poet—or in my estimation, the authentic poet—is not to defend against, but to confront the pain, the anxiety (Rich
in “The Phenomenology of Anger”). In Being and Nothingness, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that the pain of death comprises a possibility for life in the preset, if one authentically confronts it. On the one hand, he describes the authentic relationship toward death:

Authenticity and individuality have to be earned: I shall be my own authenticity only if under the influence of the call of conscience I launch out toward death with a resolute decision as toward my most peculiar possibility. At this moment I reveal myself to myself in authenticity [...]. (332)

And on the other, he explains how one achieves freedom through pain, in much the same way we have observed Rich achieve it in “The Phenomenology of Anger”: “What we should note at present is that freedom, which manifests itself through anguish, is characterized by a constantly renewed obligation to remake the Self which designates the free being” (72). However, pain projected and re-introjected becomes trope, intellect without affect: the mark of a waning poet is engagement rationalized, routinized (Rich in “A Long Conversation”). Bloom’s thought sublimes death into creativity, into self-expression. As Rich is inflamed, so too Bloom is generative. However, as Rich confronts and criticizes language itself, Bloom evades a deeper conflict with language by compartmentalizing the struggle into the limited subcategory of prior poetry, of poetic infighting. My efforts in this chapter thus far have striven first and foremost to illustrate the two fundamental vectors of
poetry—on the one hand, confrontation with the abyss and, on the other, defense mechanisms against oblivion—through a dual reading of Rich’s oscillating psychic economy of defense and rage and Bloom’s theoretical sublimation of poetry which traverses the abyss into a defensive swerve away into tropic a-voidance. Bloom’s Romantic vision of death is but a prelude to his rhetorical, theoretical evasion of death, as Rich’s evasion of death is but a prelude to her impassioned, psychological confrontation. As we have seen with Rich’s rage and Bloom’s early vision, both poetry and theory possess the potential to come to (existential) grips with death, self-difference, and self-limitation, but they also have the ability to fall into a state of intellectual negation, as we have seen with Rich’s early aversions and late ruminations and middle Bloom’s valorization of misprision, misreading, misinterpretation, mis-vision. Putting aside Rich and Bloom’s defenses as well as Rich’s late dissipations and Bloom’s middle swerves, let us now enter the heart of darkness and examine what happens when subjectivity truly encounters the real that has been internalized within the psyche. Let us dive into the wreck of language that constitutes our unconscious and maps an inwardness which we can only misread because such cartographies are of necessity silent and repressed.
Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck” (22-4) comes just before “The Phenomenology of Anger” in the volume *Diving into the Wreck*; in a sense, it exhibits the rigorous inward movement that Rich must conduct in order to attain the transcendent break down—break out—in the “Phenomenology.” Although “Phenomenology” arguably constitutes a great leap forward in the effort to “break the silence” of her authentic female voice, the quiet “Diving” brings her to the brink, or rather the innermost limit, from which she can break out of the old patriarchal conventions, the dead language. Most critics agree that the poem is one of self-exploration, a journey into femininity that has been repressed and silenced by patriarchal culture, language, and literature. However, I’d like to throw a monkey wrench into this heroic quest by reading the poem through the lens of Bloom’s *A Map of Misreading*, which comes directly after *The Anxiety of Influence*. (Afterward, I’ll throw another monkey wrench into the mix by “misreading,” that is, interrogating, both Rich and Bloom’s texts.) Bloom’s thesis is much influenced by his previous book: strong poets must rewrite and misread their literary fathers in order to write poetry; or, in my estimation of the deeper anxiety motivating all beings subjected to language, all psyches must protect themselves from the invasive language of the
other in order to be—at all. The poet contends with the
dead and eventually falls into a state of solipsism: “Poetic
strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the
greatest of the dead, and from an even more triumphant
solipsism” (A Map of Misreading 9).

Rich’s poem commences after the fall into the other’s
language. If the poem is interpreted autobiographical, the
speaker-self here would be the female subject and the other
would be the patriarchy, not only the old boys network but
every facet of the society that erases feminine free will
and sociopolitical voice—in effect female existence. The
poem commences in a state of self-preservational violent
opposition:

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask. (22)

Upon dismissing the prior book—the poetry that has
overwhelmed her subjectivity and the language that has over-
written her—as myth—ideological misinformation in service
of male subjectivity and propagandistic invective aimed at
suppressing female subjectivity, she embarks upon her own
fact-finding mission of taking pictures of the gone world.14
Symbolized here as a shipwreck, the real world, the deadly
and dead world, exists at the limit of human capability and
exploration, and necessitates the descent downward (and
inward) into the realm of human imagination that has not seen the light of day for years because it has been submerged under—covered over by—the sea of language. She will not find facts, only layer upon layer of interpretation; and she knows it. The storm of “Storm Warnings” was not a mere tempest that could be shuttered out; rather, it was a deluge which flooded the world and her psyche. Her original ark proved a false and limited covenant—it was overwhelmed and sunk. Ironically, defending against the storm repressed it: the act of defense with eyes wide open, anxiously darting around a shuttered room, took the raging storm that was pressing in upon her from outside and transfigured it . . . inside. The outside is the inside, according to Derrida. What he asserts in terms of the relationship between representation and representer, signifier and signified, that “The thing itself is a sign” (OfGrammatology 49), I argue as the first stage of the dialectic between language and psyche, and combine it with Bloom via Lacan: “Representation points to a lack, just as limitation does, but in a way that re-finds what could fill the lack” (A Map of Misreading 104). In other words, Rich’s inwardness has been usurped by external language which references a reality that is hollow, devoid of signified meaning. Unbeknownst to her she has been colonized against her will and outside the scope of her conscious mind; and that unconscious fact has been cemented
as the founding trauma of her poetic psyche. Rich’s subjectivity is a sign, she is the empty set. Such a recognition transforms the poet’s following statement from the ironic to the tragic: “I feel signified by pain” (“Contradictions: Tracking Poems,” Your Native Land, Your Life 89). It is precisely the pain, the lack and the loss and the internalization of the threshold of death, that speaks through the poet, that compels the poet to speak her living death. Her realization of this existential fact constitutes her anxiety of influence, not simply the superficial Bloomian level that she has been written by her precursors.

I suggested that this melancholic recognition constituted only the first step in a dialectic. Derrida also attests that the outside is the inside (Of Grammatology 44-64), meaning it is and, paradoxically, it is not. Derrida uses this statement to deconstruct the binary opposition between signifier and signified, between writing and meaning. And Lacan formulates his own neologisms, extimacy (Seminar VII 139) and ex-centricity (Écrits 171), to suggest the confounding conflation of internal psyche and the external world of discourse. I employ them all here to offer the possibility of tentatively overcoming the infiltration of otherness within the self, if only for a brief moment. Pure, uncontaminated inwardness is obviously a pipedream. However, at different points in time—at
different points in self-awareness and self-action—the psyche may rear up against the other and question the foundation of its (linguistic) being.

According to Bloom and Lacan, the influence of the language of the other founds the poetic psyche, thrusting it into a state of anxiety and alienation from its very conception. The other remains forever grounded as the traumatic kernel inside the self remains forever scabrous, but one’s relationship with the inner other oscillates between unconsciousness and consciousness, complacency and conflict, passive defense and active resistance. It is appropriate to passively accept the discourse of the other when assimilating and using language in general or literary conventions in particular, otherwise, pragmatically speaking, nothing much would be learned or expressed. However, when breaking literary ground in particular or searching for the origins of one’s being in general, blind acceptance (i.e., blind defense) engenders a sign of bad faith; only active and engaged questioning will do. Adrienne Rich knows that she lives in the world after the deluge, that her subjectivity exists after the fall. Whereas before she faded into blindness, she now bears arms—the knife—in order to cut through the other language’s many layers of obfuscation that hinder her descent into herself, and, if necessary, to battle the submerged beasts of stereotyped (othered) selfhood as well.
The poet’s imagination is water-logged, riven through and through by language. She has not only read the book of myths, she is the book of myths. She does not merely don a mask, she is already nothing more than a persona composed of pain. She wears her mask on the inside as well as on the outside. If masks disguise and deceive, then inward masks betray, and perhaps even delude, the self, on the one hand spinning a web of bad faith and on the other annihilating any chance of self-consistency. The former forces the subject into a world of misfired and misdirected actions (an existential void) while the latter plunges the subject into a world of fragmented and meaningless actions (a psychotic void). But Rich is not a poet of the void—existential or psychotic—as Jorie Graham and Barrett Watten are (see below, Chapters 4 and 5, respectively). Instead, she is a poet who will do anything to cover it over or fill it up. As we have seen, she transforms the pain created by the penetration of the abyssal other into poetry and politics, self-action and social action, rage and rumination. She employs poetic language to combat the deleterious effect of conventional language, the language of the other that is the external limit of human reality—death. She is a Romantic who will fight to the death . . . and beyond it.

Bloom, originally a purveyor of Romantic vision, puts Romanticism in question in The Anxiety of Influence by suggesting that the imagination is not purely creative but
highly reactive and violently anxious about its otherworldly origins. He completely hollows out both Romanticism and the imagination in *A Map of Misreading*:

> At the center of the Romantic vision is the beautiful lie of the Imagination, the only god. There is phantasmagoria and there is disciplined invention, and perhaps a third mode, hovering between the two, which makes us love poetry because we can find this middle mode nowhere else, but what is the Imagination unless it is the rhetorician’s greatest triumph of self-deception? (66)

Bloom asserts that the imagination is a lie and a rhetorical trope. One’s innermost being is not only untrue but it’s also a flourish of language. The language of the other constitutes the subject’s false unconsciousness. Ironically, however, the imagination has the ability to produce a language that supercedes its alienating otherness; for Bloom also implies that poetry constitutes the middle path, or one might argue mediates, between the psychotic anxiety of complete invasion by the other and the obsessional routinization of inner life via a stereotyped and hackneyed existence. The act of writing poetry allows the subject to take control of language, consequently subverting the domain of the other within oneself. The lyric expresses the self over and against the other’s rhetoric. (Of course, there the paradox that the subject’s sense of self is already engendered by the discourse of the other still persists, but that is another story, one which Rich contemplates in her more ruminative mode.) Moreover, this operational mastery applies just as much to the act of reading poetry because,
when authentically and actively reading poetry, the subject engages the undermining of conventional language usage: the subject participates in loosening the grip of our habitual ways of sealing over loss and limitation with dead, cliched language. Bloom hollows out the imagination, but he quickly refills (or, as argued in the previous section, sublimates) what has been lost with poetic action, with poetry that arises from no-where and no-thing beyond the threshold of human knowledge.¹⁶

If Adrienne Rich’s imagination is a facade, then donning a mask renders facade upon facade, a double-negation that allows the real of subjectivity to burst forth, perhaps even to bloom. An “awkward” friction ensues as the two hollowed out personas—the top mask of poetic creation and the underlying mask of the internalized book of myths taken into the unconscious imagination—rub away against each other, not as self versus other, but as other vs other. This friction is another name for the anxiety of influence; navigating their rough relationship becomes the map of misreading. Perhaps the outer mask feels “grave” because the inner mask is beginning to collapse under the additional, cutting weight of authentic self-recognition that the psyche, even the poetic psyche, is nothing more than dueling layers of void. So begins Rich’s quest for the tomb of self-consciousness, the other inside herself. It
must necessarily be a journey of dark solitude, sans the aide of others—

I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone. (22)

—because the other is established and the other would protect her from herself, that is, paradoxically, protect her from itself. Cousteau’s explorations are mythic and they create new myths that illuminate the lower world. Such myths blind and bind the questor who comes after to roads less traveled. Frost despairs not at having chosen the road less traveled but rather at being able to see the difference, ultimately, at being forced to choose. Myths blind us to our inwardness by displacing our inner psychic decisions with their prefabricated methods of order; myths bind us to their external locus of control. Any map we read misleads us with the crowning wisdom of the other. For her journey to be true, the poet must struggle alone in the dark of her soul.

Ironically, however, Rich does not for she cannot:

There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently close
to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
We have used it.
Otherwise
it’s a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment. (22)
She must use the instrument of the other to descend even into the depths. The ladder—language—is always there. Although traditionally conceived of merely as an “innocent” vehicle, a pure, unbiased tool, Rich recognizes the power from which it came as well as the power it affords her. Language constitutes the primary way human beings negotiate their external world, and language engenders the bridge across which that other, outside, becomes ingrained in human beings’ psyches. It is the bane and boon of existence. Bane because it introduces difference and otherness into essential and integral identity. Hence, the Cartesian subject of “I am” becomes the post-structuralist subject of “I am otherwise”.17 Boon because it offers a vehicle for touring the world . . . of oneself. Since the ladder-cum-bridge of language extends in both directions, it may be climbed in both directions. When employed in the service of self-questioning poetry, as Rich does here, the language carries Rich into herself in spite of itself. Such differential existentialism is a welcome change to substantial essentialism.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
As she descends into darkness, the anxiety of disorientation jostles her free from the anxiety of influence. When panic seizes her mind, the rush of oxygen which she gasps in transports her into a state of visionary clarity as well as unspeakable humanity. She transforms the pain of her defense mechanisms, the flippers, into a rigorous methodology: there is no map to misread, no pre-imposed boundaries to which she must adhere; and so she slowly yet meticulously charts the ocean by herself, for her-self. Subjects in general transform anxiety of the other’s infiltration into self-expression; Adrienne Rich in particular transforms pain into poetry. She is forced to be free; she is forced to be herself within her-self. She swims (writes) through psychological disorientation and intense pain.

As Rich descends into the ocean and into her-self, she pushes the limits of her constitution—physical and psychical. However, she does not surpass those limits: they break her. The sea of language mixed with her heightened anxiety crushes her. Until now we’ve looked at language as the parasitic puppet-master of the host-writer (it bores in the psyche and takes dominion). But in this poem, the language of the other utterly destroys: it extinguishes her subjectivity. Her unlit path leads her to the act of “writing degree zero.” In Roland Barthes’ view, modern
poetry’s relationship with the Word is one of objectivity. Since language is always already out there, it comes before the poet as a “terrible and inhuman” Pandora’s box (A Barthes Reader 58) which cannot be closed. Whereas classical literary thought believed the author had the power to choose and to create the meaning of the Word, modern literary thought concedes,

Nobody chooses for them a privileged meaning, or a particular use, or some service; nobody imposes a hierarchy on them, nobody reduces them to the manifestation of a mental behavior, or of an intention, of some evidence of tenderness, in short. The bursting upon us of the poetic word then institutes an absolute object; Nature becomes a succession of verticalities, of objects, suddenly standing erect, and filled with all their possibilities: one of these can be only a landmark in an unfulfilled, and thereby terrible, world. (59)

Individual subjectivity—the writer—is of no consequence; the poem—the words—live irregardless of psyche, in fact reversing the traditional polarity of power: language is our master and we are its servants. Moreover, Language becomes Nature, or, in the terms we’ve been using for our discussion, language becomes the only reality of the world—the external, otherworldly limit of interior subjectivity. It bursts, we die. Consequently, for Rich (and Bloom), the ultimate task is to take back the dark night of the soul into which language thrust them. Darkness was the only option afforded them where language’s grip was slack. Thus they turn to poetry, the mask that covers and protects:

First the air is blue and then it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power (23)

Although aware that she invests in a facade, Rich does so because a radical evacuation is the only means left to empty out her already emptied inwardness. The negation of negation is a supersession . . . of death, by death. She writes not between two deaths, but beyond all death. Once doubly extinguished, she traverses language not as her other but as her self. She transvalues language from the harbinger of the fatally painful other—the conventional patriarchal discourse that stifled her existence and condemned her to silence—to the medium of transcendent selfhood, which translates to Barthes’ terms as “absolute object.” She has become pure language and pure power, paradoxically employing her newfound reign to refind what the language of the other wrecked in herself—and then rebuild it.

But first she must learn to discipline her recent outflux of power. She must not forget that she is on a purposive journey, lest the new mask return to its previous mold with its predecessor—the patriarchal other which uses its power for invasion rather than exploration. She must learn restraint, otherwise 1) her pain will turn into rage that attacks others not unlike her-self or 2) the sea of language will react with equal but more than opposite force to her outward pressure, thereby crushing her:

110
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element. (23)

She must tarry, carefully, with the negative, the language of the sea, which, as Kate Chopin knows, is seductive—not a femme fatale but fatal for femininity: “The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (The Awakening 109). However, unlike Edna Pontellier who awakens only to commit suicide, Rich accrues two awakenings: first to witness her psychic death at the invading linguistic tentacles of the patriarchal order, and second to attest a life of sociopolitical politics after that first psyche has been murdered. Pontellier’s death is conclusive and final; Rich blooms after death—Rich writes through death, on the other side of anxiety.

However, although the poet lives through death, her memory does not survive intact. She forgets the purpose of her quest as she descends into the depths. She exists on the underside of reality, on the underside of language, with neither a sense of direction to guide her nor a faculty for distinction to separate out the voices with which she is (sub-)merging.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
More significantly, one is different down there—pure self-difference, the inverse of essentialistic identity. Not only is it easy to forget, it is also easy to become lost in the language that has always inhabited her, but which she is inhabiting now for the first time with eyes wide open.

Susan Howe put it best in “Speeches at the Barriers,” the poem that recognizes the self-alienating limits of language: “For we are language     Lost / in language” (Defenestration of Prague 99). One might recognize a deep relationship between (her description of) her present state of being lost and the archetypal travel through the wilderness. One might further interpret that these submerged voices constitute the temptation of the (satanic) other to her (messianic) self.

If this is the case, then Rich’s dive has become allegorical: either myth has so pervaded her psyche that she cannot transcend such a structure of thought even after death or language at root is built on the heart of myth. Either way, the poet is thrust back into the trap of the other that she was trying to escape, the only difference being that now she swims knowingly and tragically on its underside rather than sliding superficially and unconsciously on its top level. Rich may breathe differently, but she writes the same—with/in the language of the other. Her quest resembles that of the Romantics
(and all heroic quests for self-knowledge) because there is no other quest. The obstacles change—for instance, poststructuralist language theory replaces the Romantic sublime external world and the discourse of the other replaces threat of death of the imagination—but the failed song remains the same. After a biting critique of the book of myths, the poet invests in its power. Rich brooks a new essentialism of language and of pain, and so can no long engage the dialectic with the other: her language will be the one that does not exclude, her language will be the one that not only covers over the difference, but that also heals. She fails to look death squarely in the face, however, tragically so: at least she recognized what she was up against—the language of the other—and confronted it for a period of time. Perhaps all strong poetry must necessarily extinguish itself, and perhaps all poets must burn themselves out because they must of necessity use the conventional language as the basis of their generative confrontation. Words create and words slay. In mastering the language of the other, it masters us by compelling us to invest in it even as we recognize the damage it does us. Such is the paradox and the tragedy of language.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed (23)

After criticizing the function of language, emptying it of its power, so to speak, Rich employs that same language, refills it with a new intent. She approaches language with a transformative vigor; she rigorously strives to turn words toward her healing (reconstructive, redemptive) “purposes” rather than the deadly goals of the other. She proposes to rebuild the wreck of her-self with the language of the other, this time re-internalized within her-self on her own terms as opposed to being invaded—and smote—by foreign terms. Such action is not without paradox. As we saw with her deep-seated allegory in the last stanza, re-internalization produces the same end in the psyche as invasion: her journey, although superficially her own, may be reduced at the deep level to the conventional through-line of the other’s language. Earlier in her journey, she deliberately sought solitude and darkness in order to prevent herself from falling prey to the aide of others and their mythic Apollinian light that would blind her to her authentic inwardness and bind her to their psychological processes. Conversely, she now employs illumination. Although she calls it her personal lamp, it nevertheless lights the way of the other; and she may now read the map, which necessarily means that she will misread herself and fall into the rut run into the real by the other’s
ubiquitous operations. Her primary misreading, her primary act of bad faith: to essentialize pain. The wreck bursts forth treasures. She seeks to not only preserve but also conserve the traumatic cut into her psyche by the razor-sharp language of the other. Pain is essential, for it is what signifies and speaks her, as we saw earlier. The pain that instigated her critique and her quest must be rescued from rotting away with the rest of the wreck, lest she lose her only impetus for writing—that is, paradoxically, the motivation that is hers and hers alone, and not written with the express consent/intent of the other. If the storm dies, what would influence her poetry? If language dissipated, what would be her poetry? What poetry could exist? What is poetry without the anxiety of influence, the battle against the other within the self?

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative hauntes. (23-4)

Rich desires the pain, needs the other, and demands that death bear down on her for she recognizes that she would be less than nothing without a constantly renewing trauma against which to react. Language is the scab she neurotically picks and hysterically eats.
Her-self, her wreck becomes a thing, the absolute Word, the pure object of language to which Barthes referred. It is drowned, but it is transcendent; and so it must be salvaged, brought to the surface and not simply traversed. Consequently, Rich essentializes pain in the same way as Bloom’s theory sublimates loss and void into creativity and language: she boxes it up and puts it on display as a beautiful work of art for herself as much as for others. This transfiguring method from self-difference to self-identity looks forward to her ruminative negation of language’s alienating power in “A Long Conversation.” Adrienne Rich starts off on the defensive, but becomes a Romantic when she recognizes that the language out there yields a sublime effect on her inner world. Ultimately, however, she deteriorates into a post-Romantic post-structuralist when she theorizes pain out of existence and into a structuring principle for poetry.

This I—must she, must she lie scabbed with rust crammed with memory in a place of little anecdotes no one left to go around gathering the full dissident story? (“Rusted Legacy,” Midnight Salvage 52)

In her later career, the poet distances herself from her own subjectivity and poses ruminative questions of how identity is structured rather than challenging those very storied structures, thereby implicitly assenting to the post-structuralist theory of language-centered subjectivity.
Ironically, she cuts the individual, existential search for the wreck itself back into the story of the wreck when she gives the disaster body and ceases striving to sustain the traumatic self-difference. The quest for the redemption of identity replaces the question for the real of subjectivity. This methodological regression is what haunts her in the final analysis, not the language of the other.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair streams black, the merman in his armored body
We circle silently about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he (24)

Rather than nourishing the suffering that could lead to a more authentic form of psychological action that recognizes the limitations of otherworldliness within oneself yet struggles to supercede them, she participates in the very metaphor- and myth-making (mermaids and mermen) she once railed against. This woman does not exist, but because she is a poet, she doesn’t slide under the radar of the patriarchal language order; instead, she trumps it by troping it. The self-different becomes the all-inclusive. The anxiety of language becomes the propaganda of language. She negates the existence of the other by becoming both self and other: “I am she: I am he.”

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass (24)

Yes, her eyes are now open wide, but they have closed
to the possibility of impossible sustenance—the
drowned bursting with life, the instrumental tool of
language breaking apart to reveal an unconscious core, the
subjective supplanting subjected. They can no longer read
her own silent screams, her mute howl; they now misread the
map of existence and follow the legend of the other (“the
fouled compass”) down the well-worn path to a humanized
essence which usurps the power of a dialectically
subjectivized psyche.

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which our names do not appear. (24)

Her recognition that she has sold out, so to speak,
makes this poem tragic. She is a coward—more so because
she lost her-self at the height of a courageous
confrontation with the other that occurred in the impossible
realm beyond her second death. As the last twenty-five
years have shown, her name now appears in the book of myths,
the literary canon (scores upon scores of anthologies, for
instance) welcomes her with open arms because she has
assimilated its primary method: the bowing down of
subjectivity before the altar of post-structuralist language theory. Although she outlived the other in the raging throes of death that lasted the better part of a decade, ultimately she was not able to beat the other at ‘his’ own game. Thus she joined ‘him’ and degraded her once bursting critique to a mode of quiet rumination.

Adrienne Rich’s and Harold Bloom’s brand of post-Romanticism strives to re-find and re-install what was lost: the ab-original psyche. However, their good intentions become lost in the process. Bloom’s authentically sublime anxiety of influence is transfigured into a war of words, a trumping of tropes, a map of misreading as the subject’s authentic anxieties of self-dissolution and void are projected onto the outer world of language, specifically literary influence. True anxiety, true subjectivity, is avoided and evacuated into tropes of language. He is a de Manian structural ironist wolf in Romantic critic’s clothing. Rich fills in and covers over the void of the absolute other by locating it in tangible yet terrible language of other flesh and blood people, i.e., patriarchal society. The sociopolitical is a weigh-station to the void, but is not the void itself. Political redemption of the pain one experiences at the linguistic oppression of the other distracts Rich from the motion of self-othering. Born of anxiety, political activism sublimate’s the trauma of the fractured psyche. In identity politics Rich calls for a new
essentialism and a new self-identity, not radical self-difference and the sustenance of self-othering. I am not arguing that Rich should withdrawal into a philosophical vacuum of pure, abstract dialectics, but I am suggesting that her subsequent methods distract her from truly following through with a direct confrontation of the primal void of the world . . . within her psyche. Her inflammation under the traumatizing language of the other affords her a rich rage of sociopolitical and existential self-critique, but she sublimates that primary, ab-original anxiety into a dead bloom of conventional poetry in her late career.
CHAPTER 3

JOHN ASHBERY’S DEMAND FOR SELF-REFLECTION

your eyes proclaim
That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there
And nothing can exist except what’s there
(John Ashbery, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” 70)

To create a work of art that the critic cannot even talk
about ought to be the artist’s chief concern.
(John Ashbery, Art News, May 1972)\textsuperscript{1}

3.1 THE RICHES AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

It is impossible to dive into John Ashbery’s poetry for
it resists the most rigorous of close readings. The casual
reader and the most invested of critics alike are compelled
to slide across its slippery surface much like the
vigilantly dazed—yet significantly not confused—inhabitant
of his famous long poem “The Skaters” from Rivers and
Mountains (1966). When “the water surface ripples, the
whole light changes” (194) and the narrator drifts to the
next experience, as if ever caught in the flow of things
without being able to internalize anything except the
glimmer of life’s light. In “The Skaters” the speaker attempts to ascertain his location in life, his place in existence, because his life is a blur and his existence a dreamscape. He eventually succumbs to the drift of life and the flow of existence.

[. . .] Where was I? The balloons
Drift thoughtfully over the land, not exactly commenting on it;
These are the range of the poet’s experience. He can hide in trees
Like a hamadryad, but wisely prefers not to, letting the balloons
Idle him out of existence, as a car idles. (200)

He is idling, ready to go but going nowhere, or nowhere in particular, letting his sight follow drifting balloons which symbolize his own drifting mind. He is potency and process without an identifiable product and beyond a recognizable program. In a phrase, all he can manage to do is tread water at worst or skate in circles at best, albeit beautiful arcs and sublime figure eights. His (psychic) existence is perpetual motion which infinitely recedes as his (self-)consciousness approaches it.

Sigmund Freud’s distinction between primary process and secondary process thought affords us a possible structural comprehension of Ashbery’s poems, i.e., of the often unbridgeable, abyssal difference between the outer surface structure, the level of language, and the inner meanings, the level of signification. Secondary process thought, also known as consciousness, is marked by a clear relationship
with the reality principle which institutes reason and logical comprehension. Secondary process thought occurs in the waking, conscious mind; it processes everyday experience orderly and rationally. Under control of the ego, the arbiter of external reality and our innermost desires, secondary process thinking is subject to logic, time, and above all objective reality. Therefore, the type of writing that comes from such cerebrating is by necessity not only highly reflective but highly referential. It breaks things down so nothing will be left open to interpretation; everything is what it says it is. Moreover it uses language one-dimensionally and instrumentally. The signifier, be it image or word, not only equates with but also re-presents the signified thing from outer reality into the conscious, conceptual mind. There exists a typically one-to-one relationship at such a conceptual level: a cat is a cat and a dog is a dog (and a cigar is just a cigar, pure and simple, thank you). This is the language of observation, vision which neither invests nor internalizes. In terms of the poem, secondary process thought reflects (on) the narrative events, irregardless of any deep, existential or psychological meaning. The secondary processes at work in the opening of “The Skaters” locate the narrator on a skating rink full of noisy skaters:

These decibels
Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound
Into which being enters, and is apart.

123
There colors on a warm February day
Make for masses of inertia, and hips
Prod out of the violet-seeming into a new kind
Of demand that stumps the absolute because not new
In the sense of the next one in an infinite series
But, as it were, pre-existing or pre-seeming in
Such a way as to contrast funnily with the unexpectedness
And somehow push us all into perdition. (194)

As soon becomes apparent, Ashbery readily ignores secondary process thought and strives for primary process thought.

*Primary process thought* originates in the unconscious, the vexed world of id-iosyncratic desire and its traumatized, confused, ultimately repressed relationship with reality, and is *not* subject to the laws of logic because logic would force the conscious to confront the contents of the unconscious. It processes everyday experience through irrational vicissitudes of the psyche, which is to say that experience is opened up to the rules of an entirely different register from the ego’s oppressive reality principle. Here is where the real (existential and authentic) thinking about subjectivity occurs, not the subject of reality but the subject of psyche and its plethora of needs, demands, and desires, its myriad of pains, anxieties, and traumas. Consequently, primary process thought is most often associated with dreams. (Notably, Ashbery’s collection in which “The Skaters” appears is entitled *The Double Dream of Spring.*) However, Freud believed it could be approached through language. To write according to the realm of primary process thought
divests language of conventionally learned and rational reference and invests language with a host of connotations—the free play of association. Primary process thought is thinking beneath (some say prior to) the conceptual level of consciousness; language is not conventionalized but rather poetic: as reality is internalized into the psyche, it is condensed and displaced into metaphoric and metonymic signifiers, that is signifiers which stand for substitutive and ever-changing psychological affects.

The opening of “The Skaters” sets the stage for a shifting psychological lyric. Everything is intensely affective, but nothing is certain: the violets are “seeming,” the absolute is “stump[ed],” everything moves in “an infinite series.” Ashbery’s narrator cannot ascertain what came before the shift and drift, i.e., the “pre-existing or pre-seeming” reality of psyche. And thus, he is condemned to a “perdition” of shifting signification. What is found there, “down there,” in contrast to Adrienne Rich’s invasive pain, can only elude us in Ashbery’s poetic world because his visible/conscious psyche (the writer of the poem) is constantly on the move, knowing only that an underlying, triggering mechanism exists but never being able to wholly reflect on the apparatus for the psycho-logicalized reality is unseeable/unconscious, abstracted from the conscious mind with its conventional discourse’s
rules of what constitutes knowledge and how. In a sense, Ashbery has become caught between two minds (much like Rich was caught between two deaths), the secondary which commands him to rationalize his psychological self-reflection and the primary which urges him into the irrational space that cannot be mediated by referential language.

When Ashbery states, “To create a work of art that the critic cannot even talk about ought to be the artist’s chief concern,” he means that the poet-artist should wholly and entirely eschew conventional language and engage primary process thought: the artist should make art that speaks toward and of the psyche; he should not make art-talk that patronizes the discourse of the other. Even further, rather than striving for objective meaning or critical/theoretical discourse, the poet should make subjective, lyrical, and Romantic poetry that confronts the inner limit of the conscious mind and attempts to cut into the unconscious crypt of the psyche. The poet should not reproduce the culture in his work (that’s what conventional language is for); instead, he should engage primary process thought that slides beneath the established register and into the real realm of the psyche. Ashbery’s quest is like Rich’s: both poets seek to move outside the bounds of conventional language use—Rich because the language of the other murders her soul, Ashbery because such discourse keeps him from corresponding with his real self. In his recent Harvard
lectures, Ashbery played coy with the academics who came to see if he would give up the goods, so to speak, on his poetry. In his opening remarks of his first lecture, he contemplated why he, a creator and poet and neither an interpreter nor critic, would be asked to deliver an analytical address:

The first one that came to mind was that, since I am known as a writer of hermetic poetry, in the course of lecturing I might “spill the beans,” so to speak: that is, I might inadvertently or not let slip the key to my poetry, resolving this vexed question once and for all. There seems to be a feeling in the academic world that there’s something interesting about my poetry, though little agreement as to its ultimate worth and considerable confusion about what, if anything, it means. (Other Traditions 1)

Criticism seeks to provide explanation that unlocks the enigmatic treasures of the text for the reader. However, by reading against the grain of Ashbery’s comments, it might be suggested that he believes the true pleasure of the text to exist in tarrying with the text, sustaining the confusion, and affirming the hermetic yet “deep” possibilities such (ir)rational discombobulation opens up without dissolving away into disciplinary discourse.4 If the critic, reader, or poet himself understands the poem, then the poem has failed: it has lost sight of the primal scene and sacrificed bliss for banality, being for meaning.

The primal scene of the subject’s psychological existence is that subject’s prime motivator; in other words, it is the kernel memory that structures the subject’s psyche.
and all subsequent thought. It recedes from our grasp like a leaf caught in the wind:

There is that sound like the wind
Forgetting in the branches that means something
Nobody can translate.
("Summer," The Double Dream of Spring 234)

We are unable to translate what is most natural and inherent in us: our psychological core. Ironically, the primal scene is also that which must be repressed and often forms the nucleus of what has been repressed by the conscious, secondary process thought into the unconscious. It comprises the issues about which polite society does not talk. Usually the scene is the child’s initial witnessing of (parental) coitus but it can also be any scene atypical of his experience and emotionally charged, a terrifying experience for the subject who does not (cannot) comprehend the meaning of the actions one is seeing for the first time and which are coded as taboo by society’s representatives. Ashbery’s “The Skaters” begins with such questions of sexuality, but expands into the question of subjectivity itself:

We children are ashamed of our bodies
But we laugh and, demanded, talk of sex again
And all is well. The waves of morning harshness
Float away like coal-gas into the sky.
But how much survives? How much of any one of us survives?
(194)

The question of being is put at issue. Who am I if my memories drift away into the unconscious? The primal scene constitutes the subject’s prime question, the question
(notably not an answer) that undergirds his psychological life and thereby how he treats existence: What is the meaning of this? this action? this life? Why can’t I look away? Why does it make me feel this way? What am I feeling? Why can’t I understand it? Why can’t I understand myself? It is the nexus of incomprehension which forms first the unconscious core of the subject’s psyche and second the disciplined and habituated ways of conscious thinking that seek to quash the threatening feelings associated with the unknown and unknowable—out there, in reality, and in here, in the psyche. In other words, the conscious mind with its secondary process thought practices conventional referential language because it is safe and secure: it apprehends (not fears) that to which what it refers. For example, when Ashbery’s children confront their bodily realities, they become anxious and turn from tough questions to distracting talk. The primal scene is that scene to which the conscious mind never has full access, on the one hand, and can never accurately represent for a rational mind set, on the other. It is that which survives in us but is absolutely beyond us. Furthermore, it alienates us from ourselves:

“I am yesterday,” and my fault is eternal.
I do not expect constant attendance, knowing myself insufficient for your present demands
And I have a dim intuition that I am that other “I” with which we began. (195)
The primal scene composes the subject. Therefore, the primal scene is the stuff and subject of poetry.

As we have seen, “The Skaters” quickly moves from specific narrative event to dreamy contemplation of subjectivity. As means of radical reaction to this drifting subjectivity of questions, the conscious mind of the speaker of “The Skaters” wishes to detail the world in an effort to nail down the erasures, the crack in his consciousness. But that which has been repressed always returns: the unconscious rises through the crack and colors his depiction of daily reality. The skaters cannot just skate, their gates open a portal to a dark undergrowth of spirit:

Lengthening arches. The intensity of minor acts. As skaters elaborate their distances, Taking a separate line to its end. Returning to the mass, they join each other Blotted in an incredible mess of dark colors, and again reappearing to take the theme Some little distance, like fishing boats developing for the land different parabolas, Taking the exquisite theme far, into farness, to Land’s End, to the ends of the earth! (197-8)

The crisp, clear reality of the day deteriorates into the dense opacity of a theme that can never be translated. Ashbery’s lines denote nothing—figure nothing—but the absence of representation:

[. . .] Except to say that the carnivorous Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we know involves presence, but still. Nevertheless these are fundamental absences, struggling to get up and be off themselves. (199)
Later, Ashbery describes the familiar typical and clichéd life of his neighborhood street: a postman, a dog, lamps, sky, cars, lovers strolling; however, an enigmatic quality lurks beneath the idyllic scene: “the lamp-parts / Are lost in feathery bloom, in which hidden faces can be spotted, for this is a puzzle scene” (210-1). The idyllic-turned-puzzling scene sparks the speaker’s disillusionment with conventional reality and with any myth he may have had about a unified, positive self at the deep level: it externalizes his subjectivity and puts it in the place of language.

The scene’s casual commonality is haunted by the uncanny, that fundamental unknowable some-thing at the root of it all but which we do not have regular access, in other words, that some-thing which hides from our contemplative gaze within the overwhelming blooms of the real. This thing is Das Ding, which Jacques Lacan defines as being outside the symbolic (what I’ve been calling the conventional) and thereby raises a relationship that will not be repressed. (Seminar VII 54)

Das Ding is that which I will call the beyond-of-the-signified. It is as a function of this beyond-of-the-signified and of an emotional relationship to it that the subject keeps its distance and is constituted in a kind of relationship characterized by primary affect, prior to any repression.

This thing is a real of primary affect (what I’ve been calling primary process thought) which exists prior to language. But what I’m calling the thing is also Heideggerian: “In the naming, the things named are called
into their thinging. Thinging, they unfold world, in which things abide and so are the abiding ones. By thinging, things carry out world” (Poetry, Language, Thought 199-200). As such, the thing straddles innerworldly being and existence in the world. The thing suffers and bears the world; the thing stands apart from and in the language of the world. Critic Richard Howard, in reviewing Some Trees, submits that Ashbery’s poetry portrays the external reality which exists beyond the grasp of comprehension: “The proposition of a reality that may be identifiable and even beautiful, though it outstrips understanding, is certainly what we shall need in exposing ourselves to Ashbery’s first book [. . .]” (“John Ashbery” 21). It puts the subject (poet and reader alike) off kilter and throws him into a state of constant questioning, an inquiry all the more animated because it reflects the poet’s own puzzled musings regarding his shifting place in this ephemeral world. (If reality is an enigma, then the subjectivity that springs from that reality must be an enigma wrapped in an enigma.) Such a conception of reality and identity mandates that poet write poems which transgress conventional meaning-making: “A poem should not mean / But be.” The poet should not be indicted, as many critics do, for creating a resistant poetry, but praised for capturing, albeit tentatively, the thing, that flux of life’s being, as Charles Berger asserts:
For too long Ashbery has seemed to readers—especially professional readers—a poet more often casual than relentless about establishing meaning. His mask of insouciance has managed to remain intact, despite the writing of poem after difficult poem, and the evidence is that each new effort has been aimed hard at getting his subject right—not fixing it forever, but bringing the moment’s wisdom and the moment’s ephemerality together (“Vision in the Form of a Task: ‘The Double Dream of Spring’” 157)

Conventional reality and conventional meaning—the reality and the meaning that consciousness wishes were completely fixed, rational, and thereby explainable—are undercut not only by an unknowable core but also by the subject’s questioning and, ultimately, poeticizing of it. Poetry breaks open reality and unsticks the mind, releasing unidentifiable identifications, unsung songs, and unsymbolizable symbols.

Such subjective instability is evident in Ashbery’s tour de force of self-mediation and disorientation, “Daffy Duck in Hollywood,” a strange caricature in an even stranger land of dreamspace that borrows from the Loony Toon in which Daffy breaks the frame of his storied existence and interacts with his maker, eventually to be erased. The poem grinds to a halt even before it begins when the speaker realizes that “Something strange is creeping across me” (Houseboat Days 30). The lyric becomes a quest to free oneself of the scripted life, to break free from the symbolic order and really and truly exist: “He promised he’d get me out of this one, / That mean old cartoonist, but just
look what he’s / Done to me now!” (30). The subject oscillates wildly between the self-pity of existing merely at the other’s intent and the utter subversion of all storied lives:

[. . .] The allegory comes unsnarled
Too soon; a shower of pecky acajou harpoons is
About all there is to be noted between tornadoes. I have
Only my intermittent life in your thoughts to live
Which is like thinking in another language. Everything Depends on whether somebody reminds you of me.
That this is a fabulation, and that those “other times” Are in fact the silences of the soul, picked out in Diamonds on stygian velvet, matters less than it should.

(31)

On the one hand, the poet un-ensnares himself from the symbolic representation of his existence, much like Adrienne Rich does when she opens the shutters and invokes the raging storm. This is primary process thought—the psyche swirling tempestuously underneath the parables that construct our waking lives. On the other hand, the poet realizes that it doesn’t really matter whether he be fabulation or authentic being. The other’s language trumps the self, and we go through the motions of life. This is secondary process thought—the language of the other sapping us of our will to live, thereby condemning us to unending creativity of the mind but silence of the soul. However, beneath the play of secondary process thought, which is by definition entangled in practical language, lies the thing, which is by definition beyond rational and referential definition. The subject seeks to apprehend this uncanny thing that flees
before his eyes. . . . this thing which is really him-self, his self-questioning projected outwards. The best mode of subjectivity the poet can hope for is one that lies between the secondary and the primary, one that tries to connect with the thing.

[. . . ] Life, our
Life anyway, is between. We don’t mind
Or notice any more that the sky is green, a parrot
One, but have our earnest where it chances on us,
Disingenuous, intrigued, inviting more,
Always invoking the echo, a summer’s day. (33)

The poet exists between two minds. Incapable of casting off convention, incapable of advancing into the aboriginal realm, the poet laments the thing of which he and his poem are merely an echo. The poet attempts to invoke the thing itself, his most inward psyche, but fails in a fit of beautiful tragedy.

Let us now return to Ashbery’s alienation in “The Skaters.” The poet sees the primal scene, but he cannot control it because it is not really his: “It is a scene worthy of the poet’s pen, yet it is the fire demon / Who has created it, throwing it up on the dubious surface of a / phosphorescent fountain” (211). The poet should be the one writing it, and, in one sense, he is; but in a more primary sense, he is not. The poet returns to the realm of Romantic Prometheanism, but with a twist that subverts internal agency: Bloomian daemonization, an anxiety of influence. The fluency here catapults the poet outside of himself: he,
as bearer of language (the other’s discourse, as we learned in discussing Rich and Bloom), can only skate the surface of reality and of his self. And so the poem plays in the shallows of the fountain, unable to dive to the depths of subjective reality. However, although the poet cannot visibly and consciously access the underworld he can open up its unconscious possibility through unconventional, poetic language which disillusions referentiality and representation and creates new mythic structures that will never be explained, only (psycho-) analyzed forever.

The only thing that will suffice this new psychological edifice is a fundamental receptivity to unutterable, unknown (perhaps unconscious) questioning, as Ashbery suggests in the late poem “The Improvement”:

I wake up, my face pressed in the dewy mess of a dream. It mattered, because of the dream, and because dreams are by nature sad even when there’s a lot of exclaiming and beating as there was in this one. I want the openness of the dream turned inside out, exploded into pieces of meaning by its own unasked questions, beyond the calculations of heaven. (And the Stars Were Shining 23)

Rather than seeking some divine answer to his queries about the meaning of life, the poet desires a continuously contemplative life of self-questioning, an interminable existence rather than a terminal essence. The poet’s quest consists of thinking—thinking in open-ended dream questions, not closed-down metaphysical solutions. If he cannot touch the thing with conventional speech, he will at
least broach the thing’s possibility with surreal conviction. In poetry, unconscious primary process thought usurps control of language from the domain of conscious secondary process thought and radicalizes it, explodes it:

[...]

Then the larkspur would don its own disproportionate weight,
and trees return to the starting gate.
See, our lips bend. (23)

See the poet’s speech subvert.

What constitutes prime ground undergirding the superstructure of the poem is precisely that from which Ashbery (and thereby we readers) are cut off. Returning to where we began in “The Skaters”—where we can never really leave for we are as lost and idling as the poet—we conceive a better, although certainly not absolute, understanding of the balloons:

As balloons are to the poet, so to the ground
Its varied assortment of trees. The more assorted they are,
the
Vaster his experience. (200)

The poet encompasses a fertility of being. The unconscious psyche nurtures the language of poetry. Ashbery works from the inside out: He roots into the underground of his experience in order to grow a poem that transcends himself and the world. However, at the same time, the poet works from the top down: He writes a variety of poems in order to, hopefully, comprehend his inner world. In other words, the poet presents to the outer world his innermost thing of
being by ascribing to underworldly procedures over against practical discourse.

Secondary process thinking approaches poetry when it circumscribes primary process thinging. Secondary process thinking, the conscious voice of the reasonable and rational “I”, gives way to primary process thinging, the unconscious voice of the questionable and questioning “I”:

[. . .] Where was I? The balloons Drift thoughtfully over the land, not exactly commenting on it;
These are the range of the poet’s experience. (200)

The balloons of Ashbery’s poem represent language, the subject’s capacity for thoughtful reflection on human experience; however, the balloons are severed from a concrete (referential and practical) relation with reality. The poet’s understanding of his essential, innate being exists only in the translational and transitional shift of poetic language. Instead of referencing the ground, the basis of life, words defy gravity and drift just beyond referential consciousness, always acting, always making some sort of (unconscious) meaning, yet never attaining the fundamental reference that would afford the speaker the ability to chart his identity in the grand map of existence, as Adrienne Rich seeks to make words do in “Diving into the Wreck.” David Kalstone has successfully—paradoxically—mapped Ashbery’s unmappable mind. Referential reality is skated over, rendered indistinct as the poet seeks to break
with the conventional lyric and the standard conception of essential subjectivity:

Yet it is critique from within, in a poem open to the vagaries of mind—and from a writer deeply committed to describing the struggles we undergo in describing our lives. This is his unique and special place among contemporary poets. The blurring of personal pronouns, their often indeterminate references, the clouding of landscapes and crystal balls, are all ways of trying to be true not only to the mind’s confusions but also to the resistance of stiffening formulations. (“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” Five Temperaments 183)

If the mind refuses to be codified, how does it comprehend itself? The psyche which uses language in a poem like “The Skaters” feels but ethereally so, figuratively so; it cannot stop the ever-translational flow of the rationally referencing mind that is constantly in the process of converting the reality conceived in the invisible inward psyche into publicly conventional and referential language.

The act of verse is the act of conversion from one state of being to another, yet something is always lost in the process (just as the “end” result is always more real than real). The nexus of conventional language, poetic language, and the real of the psyche converge in a fluctuating psychological feeling albeit one whose overall drift is necessarily melancholic because it feels it has lost something (or lost access to something) which undergirds its very being: “The human mind / Cannot retain anything except perhaps the dismal two-note theme / Of some sodden ‘dump’ or ‘lament’” (“The Skaters” 194). As Freud
taught us, mourning grieves over a particular lost object (a person, a place, some real thing); by contrast, melancholia mourns for some obscure, unconscious thing which we can’t consciously determine. What is shrouded from us is our very psychological being. Waking reason and practical, everyday thinking shields us from our primal conflicts. But the poet feels that some-thing is missing from such banal concerns. Melancholy, that lament which results from a constant refrain of a consistent lack of contact with our primordial innerworldly existence, constitutes poetic subjectivity.

All we know and all we learn are variations of the primal theme instituted by our entry into secondary process thought, into language. For the poet, language is the lament whose cause remains forever just beyond our conscious grasp and inside the realm of a nebulous inwardness. Conscious thought is secondary, or as Bloom taught us, belated. Poetry is belated but it opens the possibility for primacy because it is melancholic in its belatedness; its realization of the fact of unrealizable psychological existence spurns an anxiety not of influence but of inadequacy. Ashbery, ever the post-structuralist of linguistically constituted subjectivity, suffers over the Romantic ideal of full being. Therefore, he creates a poetry which exists on the liminal point between secondary process thought and primary process thought because it reflects upon its own conscious faculties in relation to
those invisible and inherent unconscious conflicts of being which exist beyond reflection and self-reflection both. Ashbery confronts the unknowable configurations of the psyche with his own aporias—lyrical structures that subsist on the surface of self-reflection while opening black holes of subjective unreadability, as our opening epigraph from “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” attests:

your eyes proclaim
That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there
And nothing can exist except what’s there (80)

On the one hand, Ashbery admits that all one can know is the surface language, the superficial psyche of the waking day; on the other, he suffers to envision the no-thing that lies repressed beneath the facade of subjectivity. Primary psychological subjectivity is an aporia of secondary meaning. Having slipped through the cracks of language and resisted referential representation, psyche is a thing which opens itself to being known only through the melancholic play of language.

One might argue that the melancholy I’ve been referencing, or more precisely attempting to circumscribe, in the poetry of John Ashbery is nonexistent. His poems are exuberant and animated, full of paradox and irony, and I would not disagree for I find myself in love with his playfulness. Yet I would also contend that this melancholy is subtle and subdued. Perhaps, paradoxically, it is only noticeable when he himself explicitly points it out. It’s
the dull, unspeakable feeling in the back of your mind as you’re reading poems like “The Skaters” that comes to the forefront only when the half-blind speaker obsessed with finding his place in the universe by apparent happenstance clearly identifies the problem:

All this must go into a letter.
Also the feeling of being lived, looking for people,
And gradual peace and relaxation.

But there’s no personal involvement:
These sudden bursts of hot and cold
Are wreathed in shadowless intensity
Whose moment saps them of all characteristics.
Thus beginning to rest you at once know. (201)

Ashbery wants to put the entire world of emotion into the word, but he fails because language is not adequate to such primal intensity. Consequently, he distances himself from fully invested utterance and contents himself to playing with language in the chance that a moment of irony will reveal the innate knowledge he seeks. The melancholic mourns his loss to language through language; the melancholic suffers language as he suffers himself.

This insufferable quest through language for the ineffable, ungraspable thought beyond language persists throughout Ashbery’s entire opus. Twenty-nine years after The Double Dream of Spring, in the volume Can You Hear, Bird, the poet and his readers remain lost in the funhouse of shifting, infinitely reflexive subjectivity:

[. . .] Ok,
worry, I’ll catch up to you in a minute, once I’ve dusted off my shoes and finished adulating myself,
adoring my stretched reflection in the funhouse mirror,
and stopped handing out tracts that look like Chinese
takeout menus. I’m both bogus
and bold. Not to put too fine a point on it.
(“Eternity Sings the Blues” 44)

Indeed, three decades later, the poet is still playing catch
up with himself and we readers are still playing catch up
with his poetry—he’s attempting to understand his innermost
psyche and we’re simply trying to comprehend him. We
readers are eternally lost in the riffs of his language. 7

Ashbery’s hall of mirrors yields a multitude of
surfaces to playfully reflect upon, but reflexivity is
fundamentally relative. His poetry is not inhabited by
positive objects; rather the real realm of his poetry is
essentially negative: “Nevertheless these are fundamental
absences, struggling to get up and be off themselves” (“The
Skaters” 199). Ashbery transforms his inherent melancholy
into an animated but basically serious play of presences.
He converts what can be neither seen nor comprehended—the
unconscious real—into a self-conscious poetry rich in
rhetorical enigmas which challenge the conscious mind to
overcome its conventional and secondary discourse and enter
the realm of primary thinking, which is really being in flux
of becoming. He transfigures his absences into energetic
and swift tropes comprising an often inchoate, if not
incoherent lyrics that serve as gateways between a state of
codified thinking and a state of fluent being, between
conventional discourse and experimental poetry: “Lively and
intact in a recurring wave / Of arrival. The soul establishes itself” (“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” 68).

Let us compare and contrast Ashbery’s poetry with that of Adrienne Rich as a way to further acclimate ourselves to his version of the psyche’s relationship with language. Whereas Adrienne Rich dives into the wreck of her self in order to root out the parasitic language of the other that murders her politically, existentially, and daily, John Ashbery chooses to skim the rippled surface of a shifting and polymorphous language that he figures is configured coextensively with his own wavy and fluctuating soul . . . and vice versa. As we have seen, Rich’s poetry conceives the other as a storm on the outside of a shuttered hearth threatening to sweep inward; her prime anxiety is a male-dominated political order with its phallically penetrating discourse that would thrust inward, hollow out her inwardness, and replace it with its own diseased rages. Ashbery, on the other hand, has no such anxiety. He accepts the non-substantial hollow of existence configured by mere figures and, consequently, is more than content to exist in language as pure language without transfiguring it (and his inwardness) into something other than itself. Ashbery’s long prose poem, “The New Spirit,” engages the system of discourse that would bind one’s subjectivity; but he is not driven to defeatism or defensiveness. Instead, he cherishes the void at the core of one’s subjectivity for the
deconstruction of discourse allows a new spirit to arise; he opens himself up to infinite possibilities of identity construction that the writ of language affords the poet: “To formulate oneself around this hollow, empty sphere . . . To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out” (Three Poems 310). The mutability of the inside-outside hierarchy sustains him. While the psyche is a blank slate, reality is not. Therefore, he revels (not rivals) in the play of language that could contain the answer of the real, albeit invisible signification, he has been seeking in poems like “The Skaters.”

Ashbery takes as a matter of faith, arguably a romantic trust, that there exists something beneath the surface of language and, therefore, some-thing that is meaningful and significant beneath the words that construct and control us. Some thing, some always already internalized relationship with otherness that is forever one’s own exists beyond the reach of language, but not beyond its sight, albeit distant, nebulous, translucent. Contemplating of the “tributaries” of the unknown universe—cosmology, being—that “Refuse to surround us and still the only / thing we see,” Ashbery realizes the impossibility of clear apprehension, “that these empty themselves into a vague / Sense of something that can never be known (“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” 77). Although these things cannot be known, he strives to touch them with non(re)presentative language poetry.
Whereas Adrienne Rich fights language with language, transfiguring symbolic threats to her real existence into a sublime verse; Ashbery is played by language’s coy taunting of essential, ontological meaning and in turn plays with language, transfiguring the illusion of referential convention into a subversive verse that mirrors the underlying pulse of reality and the invisible flux of subjectivity.

Language and poetry each constitute an apprehension, but of completely different orders. On the one hand, apprehension is fear, on the other it is comprehension. Similarly, on the one hand, language bears the discourse of the other; on the other hand it offers the expression of the self. Rich struggles with her fearful apprehensions of conventional language’s introjection of a parasitic, death-dealing other and therefore engages a poetic language which defends her self by enacting an aggressively existential position. Conversely, Ashbery struggles with apprehension— with comprehension—of the signified being beneath representative language and therefore engages a poetic language which is simultaneously knowing and unknowing, representative and nonrepresentative, figural and nonfigural. His poetry, as this chapter’s opening epigraph from his tour-de-force “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” implies, enacts a psyche that shifts in and out of awareness of the thing, not only his reader’s cognizance of it, but
his own self-reflection. His self-recognition bounces around language, language that is itself a hall of mirrors; consequently, his subjectivity is speculative, in the most anxiously brimming sense of the word:

The words are only speculation
(From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
We see only postures of the dream
(“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” 69)

Language is in posture . . . is imposture . . . is artifice, a dream of a dream of reality, two degrees removed from the core reality of one’s psyche—again, emulating Freud’s differentiation between primary and secondary process thought. Ashbery’s present self (his presence of self) is realized in absentia; his sentience and his sense is based in contradiction and negation. His poetry circumscribes a reality that can never be fully apprehended, but it does pose the question of being, precisely through a self-conscious poetry riddled with aporias.

As Ashbery does not perceive language as a threat but rather poetically conceives a rhetorical game of alternating presence and absence, he resolves to play in it—language—as a child would a sandbox, hoping that his powers of pretend and artifice will intuitively yield whatever is in the sand (the sublime castles of his invisible and unconscious imaginative being, perhaps?), will help it—whatever it is—rise to the surface . . . that “whatever will be will be” . . . that some thing or some one
will, following Wallace Stevens’ emperor of ice-cream, “Let be be finale of seem.” Although snow seems solid, appearances are deceiving: its state is always on the verge of transition, melting into water and condensing into vapor. Its essence is mutability; and for those searching for this unperceivable “it” beneath (or within) the ever-blown sands of language, their only conclusion is an awareness of the flux of appearances, of artifice, encompassing its ontology.

“The Skaters,” for example, commences in the inaccessible abstraction of almost pure figuration: “These decibels / Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound / Into which being enters, and is apart” (194). These decibels mean the structures of language, the poetry being written by Ashbery in the present. But this poem also constitutes a flagellation—a beating, a thrashing, a flailing of 1) conventional language by the poet and 2) the poet’s subjectivity by poetic language. Being enters the poem, but it is immediately alienated by the poem’s very language—it is mediated into incomprehensible opacity and repressed into inaccessible invisibility. Yet the being still exists, “apart” from the language that suppresses it. It is the daunting, if not impossible, task of the poet to afford a space for being within the medium of language that by definition suppresses being. And this poet in particular does so by composing a poetic language whose very structure is apparent, with the hope that the reader will see the
sutures and unknot them. Certainly, the poem will collapse—the language will fail—but the being will be rendered. At least that is Ashbery’s melancholic, ironic hope.

3.2 FROM BLOOMIAN ANXIETY TO DE MANIAN IRONY

As Harold Bloom taught us in the previous chapter, poets feel secondary and belated in relation to their forefathers—and as I interpolated—to language itself. Another prominent post-structuralist critic disagrees. Paul de Man understands the anxiety of influence to really be an ironic play of intertextuality and reading:

Similarly, the main interest of The Anxiety of Influence is not the literal theory of influence it contains but the structural interplay between the six types of misreading, the six “intricate evasions” that govern the relationships between texts. (“Review of Harold Bloom’s Anxiety of Influence,” Blindness and Insight 276)

For example, in Ashbery’s case, the problem is not the poet’s anxiety over language (i.e., as we indicated with Adrienne Rich that language is the other that bears death), but rather the recognition that linguistic representation is always misread because it is inadequate to representing both objective and psychic reality (i.e., language is insufficient of being and, thereby, negation itself). In other words, (poetic) language is always struggling against the strong sea of (conventional) language’s own signifiers
to reveal 1) what simply is and 2) what psychically is. While Rich and Bloom are anxious over the invasion of the other’s text into the self, Ashbery and de Man ironically play with all texts in a (futile) effort to allow evasive being to come meaningfully to the surface. Although the task of the lyric poet is to represent the reality of one’s innermost subjectivity, the poet will always fail. Language is not simply a mirror; it is irrevocably conscious and convex. Language is never pure and can never achieve a one-to-one correlation with that to which it refers; consequently, poets who strive to represent reality must radically experiment with language and resolve themselves to a lifetime of intriguing failures, sublime failures which would terrify the poet of representational identity politics such as Rich who is interested in clearly and conclusively referencing the injustices imposed by the very real and very threatening conventional heterosexist patriarchal discourse, but which would awe the abstract expressionist poet such as Ashbery who is not interested in clarifying his position for a social cause but rather savors playing in the subjective mires of poetic language, convention and critics be damned. Ashbery chooses not to re-present psychic reality but to present language itself, with the implicit, intuitive hope that the primary reality of psychological experience and subjectivity subverted by and sublimated into language will be apprehended, albeit loosely, blearily, and in spite of
the very language the poetry uses. Although we started the chapter using Freud as a lens with which to view Ashbery’s poetry, we shall employ Paul de Man to understand how the poet’s use of language, by necessity and in spite of his best intent, blinds him to his inner reality.

We mentioned earlier that Ashbery mourns the loss of Romantic subjectivity to the play of language. De Man, arguably the most acute post-structuralist critic of Romanticism, helps us further define this insight:

The major poets that come after romanticism are mostly impressive as negative figures, by the subtlety of the strategies they devised to avoid confronting the self-insight achieved by their predecessors. Some of them, however, came closer to this insight, though none, it seems, has recognized the romantic ancestors as clearly as the romantics were able to recognize their own precursors in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Their relationship to the truth of romanticism is, at best, highly oblique and ironic. ("Allegory and Irony in Baudelaire," Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism 103)

Ashbery’s primary poetic language engenders a discourse of ironic negation. The poet has internalized the ideal of sublime Romantic being, but he theoretically recognizes that he can never really touch Romanticism due to his overall post-structuralist world view. The post-structuralist is necessarily a post-Romantic because he has an ironic relationship with Romanticism. He is both inside and outside Romanticism; he is both incredibly invested and irremediably distanced. He has insight into Romanticism, and yet he is also blind to it.
The blindness here is not caused by an absence of natural light but by the absolute ambivalence of a language. It is a self-willed rather than a natural blindness, not the blindness of the soothsayer but rather that of Oedipus at Colonus, who has learned that it is not in his power to solve the enigma of language. One of the ways in which lyrical poetry encounters this enigma is in the ambivalence of a language that is representational and nonrepresentational at the same time. All representational poetry is always also allegorical, whether it be aware of it or not, and the allegorical power of the language undermines and obscures the specific literal meaning of a representation open to understanding. But all allegorical poetry must contain a representational element that invites and allows for understanding, only to discover that the understanding it reaches is necessarily in error. (“Lyric and Modernity,” Blindness and Insight 185)

The difference between primary and secondary process thought can now be graphed onto language: reference and representation constitutes the motive for secondary thinking while the ineffable and nonrepresentational constitutes the intent of primary thinking. The poem exists in both modes of thought and employs both types of language. Ashbery initiates a poem like “The Skaters” with comprehensible, narrative reference but soon hits a wall with opaque language. This opacity is unconscious being’s resistance to conscious meaning. The poem is ambivalent, ambiguous, and ironic. Language, because it cannot adequately represent psyche, ironizes being into a plethora of meanings. You think you have an understanding of the poet’s psyche, but then the poem offers a variety of other interpretations. *Within the poem, the psyche can be found only in the aporia of analysis.*
According to de Man’s thought, one’s poetic language, however powerful the metaphorical correspondences or assertive the metonymical connections, can only constitute an approach, never an arrival. Take for instance, the modernist Objectivists of the beginning of the century (Williams, Niedecker, Oppen, Stein, Zukosky), as well as to a certain extent Pound and his Imagists. These poets all sought to make a poetry of pure essences by minimizing language; however, they still required language—and they therefore still failed to arrive at their final destination: language illuminated the path to the thing itself, but it also barred them with blindness. The constant refrain of Williams’ Paterson, “Say it, no ideas but in things,” while traditionally read as a precise poetic return to simple and essential objects in stern reaction to the rhetorical/connotative flourishes of the previous era’s transcendentally abstract Symbolism and the modern era’s explosively fragmented consciousness, paradoxically betrays its mandate for the minimalistic constitution of ideational thinghood in that it pleads for the language to speak the thing. “Say it” is an order, certainly, but desperate and begging—neither the ideas nor the things can be spoken—they can only be encompassed by multifarious documentary artifacts of language (historical archives, letters, lists) and fluctuating correspondences between the mind of the poet, the flow of the Passaic Falls, and the
town of Paterson. I see the thing in my mind’s eye, but the very language I use to represent it eventually blinds me to it. De Man’s argument in an essay on Hölderlin can be applied to all poetry: “For the poet the anguishing question—and it is indeed the subject of the poem—is: how can one not only speak of Being, but say Being itself. Poetry is the experience of this question” (“Heidegger’s Exegeses of Hölderlin,” Blindness and Insight 256). Being in any poem is always already irrevocably rhetoricized.

Other experimental Objectivists purport to pare down the language, but merely open up reality to infinite fluctuation: Stein’s Tender Buttons three sections, Objects, Food, Rooms present just what their titles suggest, but from a radically subjective and impressionistic perspective that plays with the connotation and denotation of words; Zukofsky’s “A” presents reality as simultaneously a nounless indefinite article and ethereal, seemingly contentless “Clear music” (6) that obliterates the difference between music and language, signifier and signified (Stanley, Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics 3). Language cannot represent the feelings that inhabit the psyche, nor can it clarify subjectivity for a rational, conscious mind. What language can do, however, is present absences which the self-conscious reader-poet can circumscribe in order to apprehend one-self at the unconscious level. Put another way, language represents its
own failure to represent the self. Language is the sublime failure to systematize unconscious being into conscious meaning. However, the limit of language ironically constitutes the only point at which language might work to represent the inner world:

The desired articulation of the sublime takes place, with suitable reservations and restrictions, within such a purely formal system. It follows, however, that it is conceivable only within the limits of such a system, that is, as pure discourse rather than as faculty of the mind. When the sublime is translated back, so to speak, from language into cognition, from formal description into philosophical argument, it loses all inherent coherence and dissolves in the aporias of intellectual and sensory appearance. ("Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," Aesthetic Ideology 78)

When the psyche is described via secondary process thought, it falls into irrational meaninglessness. However, when the psyche is imagined as pure language, the play of surfaces, it at least begins to approach the point of being. In de Manian theory, philosophical inquiry into the nature of subjectivity gives way to the poetic/rhetorical enactment of subjectivity.

A few pages ago, we spoke of the Objectivists' search for language and used de Man to explain their paradoxical dilemma. Now let us briefly look at the other side, the postmodern quest for psychological confessionalism and the so-called "naked poetry" practiced by the likes of Galway Kinnell, W. S. Merwin, James Wright, and Adrienne Rich and again use de Man to analyze their particular relationship with language. We’ve seen Rich’s version and her
political/discursive motivations: she seeks to limit language, strip it to its bare essentials in order to thrust her point into the discourse of the other before it returns home and destroys her. Someone like Robert Lowell practices identity politics of a far different order: the postmodern lyricist freely and consciously admits that “my mind’s not right” and “I myself am hell,” but must engage a fleet of fleeting poetic language, that is, must utilize “eyesore” imagery, personification of seasons as being “ill” and symbols of scavenging skunks in order to even approach an adequate signification of the collapse of his mind (“Skunk Hour,” *Life Studies* 89-90). In his epic existential lullaby, *The Book of Nightmares*, Galway Kinnell speaks as plainly as possible his howl of love to his children (4), but he also recognizes that his meaning will be lost and nullified because his children’s perception of him, though powerful, is ultimately transitory:

When I sleepwalk into your room, and pick you up, and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard, as if clinging could save us. I think you think I will never die, I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars, even as my broken arms heal themselves around you. (49)

More importantly, the father and child’s intimacy is ephemeral . . . because they each are souls living, and changing, and dying in time. Neither has an essential being which will remain accessible for the other (let alone for
the self) forever. Consequently, Kinnell moves beyond conscious referential language—the oft repeated “I love you”—and attempts to find the figurative language—the poetry—that will capture and present, however momentarily, the potency (the “permanence”) of their feelings in the immediate present, not to be preserved and conserved but to be felt and lived before the psyche of the feeling subject changes into someone else and “The still undanced cadence of vanishing” (52) disappears without being transfigured into song. Because the voice of the poet can never quite speak an ever-mutable reality and can never quite speak the ever-flowing mind, the poet subsists on a paradoxical and neverending quest for pure language, for a metaphor, a trope, a language adequate to reality and to psyche.

All the poet can accomplish is an acute image, an astute metaphor, a representative figure, a rhetorical trope. Words, words, words. These recognitions do not make the poet of Kinnell or Ashbery’s ilk howl in rage, as they do Rich; rather they compel him to seek words—more words, more potent words. De Manian theory will once again prove useful. In his seminal essay “Tropes” on Rilke, de Man hollows out language and shows that the only meaning of poetry is not topical, but tropological, i.e., the structural relationship between tropes themselves rather than the semantic relationship between signifiers and
signifieds or even the referential relationship between words and things.\textsuperscript{10}

The figure stripped of any seduction besides that of its rhetorical elasticity can form, together with other figures, constellations of figures that are inaccessible to meaning and to the senses, located far beyond any concern for life or for death in the hollow space of an unreal sky.  
\textit{(Allegories of Reading 48)}

This “rhetorical elasticity” is precisely the sliding of signification I’ve been striving to define in Ashbery’s “The Skaters.”

“The Skaters” constitutes an inventory of words, however lyrical, that approximate and gesture towards the speaker’s state of mind, but neither touch nor truly reference it. Like a bungee jumper falling to ground only to be recoiled from death, Ashbery’s de Manian employment of tropes enters the depths of the primary psyche only to be catapulted back up to the surface of secondary discourse. When the poet looks at himself in the mirror, he seeks to break through his vast accumulated hoard of habituated self-reference and common self-image and open himself up existentially to the authentic possibility of the present day, that present which cannot be captured and limited by re-presentative language:

\begin{quote}
I mean this. Through the years  
You have approached an inventory  
And it is now that tomorrow  
Is going to be the climax of your casual  
Statement about yourself, begun  
So long ago in humility and false quietude.
\end{quote}

The sands are frantic
In the hourglass. But there is time
To change, to utterly destroy
That too-familiar image
Lurking in the glass
Each morning, at the edge of the mirror. (220-1)

In destroying his self-image, he must annihilate the language he customarily uses to reference himself and the world. In hollowing out himself before he buries himself in the sands of habit, he evacuates his ideal self-image; in hollowing out conventional language before it buries reality in casualness, he evacuates the ideal of reference. In the end, he stands adrift in a sea of signifiers that have the potential to make poetry and re-make his self. In “Tropes” de Man discusses how the core which such self-deconstructive figures of speech reference must of necessity be absent, negative, hollow: “However, these experiences, like the figural objects, must contain a void or a lack if they are to be converted into figures. It follows that only negative experiences can be poetically useful” (50). As we have seen, Ashbery’s experience of his primary unconscious psyche is always already negated by his conscious, narrative-seeking mind. What is built on that lack of self-understanding is a house of cards, a melancholic poetry that dips precariously close to a tragic irony that would erase the subject of being once and for all. Paradoxically, the more potent, real, and authentic the poetry, the less comprehensible it is to the conscious mind because it approaches an-other realm of thinking, one that is
unfamiliar, irrational, unknowable, and impossible. Poetry accesses not rational and positivistic ontology but an altogether different realm of being: an unconscious existential epistemology.

The unconscious is that which relates not to outer, conventionally agreed upon, reality but to the conflicts and contradictions of one’s own psyche that cannot be voiced through the discourse of reality, i.e., the conventional referential language. Existence is that which abides not philosophically and transcendentally but rather temporally and subjectively. Epistemology is that study of ever-thinking, always turning, becoming self-conscious thought as opposed to the ontology of permanence, unity, and being. As such, poetry opens up much to be debated, to be desired. De Man defines the literary text as one which transcends any system of meaning that attempts to contain it:

We call text any entity that can be considered from such a double perspective: as a generative, open-ended, non-referential grammatical system and as a figural system closed off by a transcendental signification that subverts the grammatical code to which the text owes its existence. The “definition” of the text also states the impossibility of its existence and prefigures the allegorical narratives of this impossibility. (“Promises,” Allegories of Reading 270)

Put in terms of poetry, the poem must be read as courting two worlds: the outward realm of meaning, and the inward realm in which such meaning is impossible. Ashbery’s poetry in particular circumscribes a paradoxically significant void that must be filled by poet and reader alike. We readers of
contemporary poetry have learned to fill in the blanks. Ashbery furthers the process: he teaches us to (perhaps even necessitates that we) pour our own subjectivity into the gap, to dissect the carnivalistic absences as we would psychoanalyze ourselves. The poems open up his subjectivity; but they do not stop there: we are subject to the written word as well. In other words, we are subject to believe and live the pre-fabricated scripts that the conventional language of the symbolic order predetermines for us. Conventional language’s references have become so routine that we often forget they are actually a constructed closure—a deliberate, mediated choice now hypostatized. However, by attuning oneself to one’s unconscious, unvoicable indigestion of the typical scripts of existence, one rails against forgetting and engages the primal past processes of thought in the present. In other words, one enters the realm of the poetic when one re-cognizes that conventional language was originally just a tropological, specifically metaphorical, attempt to describe life and reality. Such a revelation further opens the mind to the possibility of poetry, of changing one’s relationship with the world by changing one’s relationship with conventional language . . . invigorating it with poetry that appreciates the quest for meaning over the amassed production of monolithic discourse and its rote existence. By connecting this dis-closure with our previous asseveration that
language gestures toward but does not touch that certain some-thing underlying conscious reality, the written word, especially the poetic word, clears a space in the thinking psyche for the multitudinous openings within existence that conventional narrative storytelling would seek to explain away and shut down. Therefore, we are subject to language (as in Rich) but also subject to free will, that is, to write our own scripts. We transcend ourselves by reading and rereading texts whose tropes call for deconstruction. As Ashbery suggests in “Gorboduc,” by blowing away the scripts that came before us, we open ourselves to the infinite: “Tackle the infinite, basing our strategem / On knowledge of one inch of it. But then the story blows away, / And what can you do, howling without a script?” (April Galleons 70) What can you do? Plenty . . . anything and everything. Not just in life in the world, but the life of the mind.

As Ashbery and de Man eschew representative and narrative context, the poet and the theorist enter the realm of pure writerly and textual performance which sublates psychical and real substance alike, much like the musicality of Zukofsky’s “A”, and implicates the reader in the process. I offer two long passages in order to illustrate the convergence of a number of issues from this section. Ashbery’s comes from the beginning sequence of “The
Skaters”; de Man’s comes from “Excuses,” another essay on Rousseau in *Allegories of Reading*.

[. . .] And up the swollen sands
Staggers the darkness fiend, with the storm fiend
close behind him
True, melodious rolling does go on in that awful pandemonium,
Certain resonances are not utterly displeasing to the terrified eardrum.
Some paroxysms are dinning of tambourine, others suggest piano room or organ loft
For the most dissonant night charms us, even after death.
This, after all, may be happiness: tub notes awash on the great flood, ruptures of xylophone, violins, limpets, grace-notes, the musical instrument called serpent, viola da gambas, aeolian harps, clavicles, pinball machines, electric drills que sais-je encore!
The performance has rapidly reached your ear; silent and tear-stained, in the post-mortem shock, you stand listening, awash
With memories of hair in particular, part of the welling that is you,
The gurgling of harp, cymbal, glockenspiel, triangle, temple block, English horn and metronome! And still no presentiment, no feeling of pain before or after.
The passage sustains us, does not give. And you have come far indeed. (195)

Barely concealed by its peripheral function, the text here stages the textual machine of its own constitution and performance, its own textual allegory. The threatening element in these incidents then becomes more apparent. The text as body, with all its implications of substitutive tropes ultimately always traceable to metaphor, is displaced by the text as machine and, in the process, it suffers the loss of the illusion of meaning. The deconstruction of the figural dimension is a process that takes place independently of any desire; as such it is not unconscious but mechanical, systematic in its performance but arbitrary in its principle, like a grammar. This threatens the autobiographical subject not as the loss of something that once was present and that it once possessed, but as a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text.

In order to come into being as text, the referential function had to be radically suspended. (298)
In order for the primary process of Ashbery’s mind to come into being in words, the poet must enact a sub-rational performance of sliding textuality in “The Skaters.” Neither psychical reality nor external reality can be delimited by figural, representative language for both are grander (more sublime) than any signification can yield. But a literary, poetic language which opens up a space for the unseen and unbearable can attempt to circumscribe such realms. Ashbery renders the reality of subjectivity and the subjectivity of reality as “rolling” states of “resonating” becoming. These convulsive tempests of being are certainly ominous and foreboding, but they are not to be feared, as in Rich’s defense of storms; conversely, figuring out such reverberating, feeling beings constitutes the greatest of pleasures. The unconscious and invisible fluctuations of reality are neither consonant nor harmonious with reality, hence Ashbery’s conscious choice of using language that is beyond conscious interpretation.

His poetry envisions then enacts a dark night of the soul which exists beyond death. It both is and is not a melancholic lament: the objects pulsate in and out of existence; poetry calls them forth yet they simultaneously vanish in its mediations. They are found and lost in the same breath. Thus the nonlinear, nonnarrative presentation of lists, of episodes, of half-understood feelings transforms the Romantic lyric into pure performance of an
unknowable knowledge within subjective, psychical existence. The meaning is there, but it is neither contained within nor refereed behind the words; employing de Man, it exists in the performance—the play—of the words. Ashbery realizes that he’s always playing catch up to, always playing at presentation of, the present state of being; consequently, he purposively decides to play with, in, and within language. And that play primarily takes the form of self-reflective (often reflexive as well) “pretentious” writing. Not writing that is gaudy and garish, crass and campy, but rather poetry that pretends to be: it pretends to be about something because it cannot really be something for it can only circumscribe the “real” subject which recedes from the purview whenever pen touches paper. The act of writing and of reading poetry, composing and witnessing language as pure performance, offers psychic nourishment: “The passage sustains us, does not give. And you have come far indeed.” His poetry sustains us because it defies our consciousness’ habitual attempts at rote, and conventional containment and motivates us up to the possibility of a knowledge just beyond our grasp. It keeps us questing, questioning; it keeps us alive in the very core of our psyches, where we are not simply given, but perpetually made and making. Sands shift, snow melts, and language flows. Language in Ashbery’s opus does not engender a metaphorical-cum-existential death as in Rich’s world, but rather it
constitutes a potential rhetorical-cum-essential animation: it is the tool that gives birth to the pulsing, unframeable reality of the mind, if not, as we shall eventually argue, the psyche.

His poetry consists of a world of appearances, a carnival of smoke and mirrors. The mirrors, which are his poetic language, reflect the smoke from an unseen but always trusted, Promethean fire that inhabits the Romantic soul.

Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and, like Rousseau’s longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature. In the same manner that the poetic lyric originates in moments of tranquility, in the absence of actual emotions, and then proceeds to invent fictional emotions to create the illusion of recollection, the work of fictional invents fictional subjects to create the illusion of the reality of others. But the fiction is not myth, for it knows and names itself as fiction. [. . .] The human mind will go through amazing feats of distortion to avoid facing “the nothingness of human matters.” (De Man, “Criticism and Crisis,” Blindness and Insight 18)

Rich is paranoically anxious over language’s influence, but Ashbery is utterly playful and ironic. He engages in constant fiction-making. Ashbery cannot have anxiety, neither of death nor of the fatality of language for he is always bouncing around the upper eidólons of a transcendental poetry. While the romantic Whitman’s world view moves from concrete leaves of grass to abstract ideas—

Ever the mutable,
Ever materials, changing, crumbling, re-cohering,
Ever the ateliers, the factories divine,
Issuing eidólons.

Lo, I or you,
Or woman, man, or state, known or unknown,
We seeming solid wealth, strength, beauty build,
But really build eidolons.

Ashbery, who has already internalized Whitman, commences his poetry in the always already ephemeral wind and clouds, as we have seen with the drifting balloons. But whereas Whitman transcends time and life with a philosophical abstraction, Ashbery, in our now exemplary poem “The Skaters,” transcends nothing and rather pursues the unconscious unknown that underscores the present life and time:

Yet I shall never return to the past, that attic,
Its sailboats are perhaps more beautiful than these, these I am leaning against,
Spangled with diamonds and orange and purple stains,
Bearing me once again in quest of the unknown. These sails are life itself to me. (204)

Because he recognizes the past as nostalgic, mythic, idealized, he seeks to exist fully in the present moment, the moment of force and motion, sailing into the heart of life without knowing his trajectory or final destination. He is question and inquiry. He is pure trope and pure movement. In this, his poetry differs from the first transcendentalists such as Whitman in that it transcends nothing: it is always ethereal and shifting, is already a cloud of pure discursive-qua-psychological motion, a nebula of language yet an omen of subjectivity. Ashbery’s “By Forced Marches” offers a vision of this language that fluctuates in and out of visibility. He reflects on himself and a typical, familiar scene which we have previously in
“The Skaters” become uncanny. The primal scene regresses him to a state of childhood innocence (read transcendence):

I kiss myself in the mirror. And children are kind, the boardwalk serves as a colorful backdrop to the caprices acted out, the pavanes and chaconnes that greet the ear in fragments, melodious ones it must be said. And the old sense of a fullness is here, though only lightly sketched in. (Hotel Lautréamont 32)

He begins to grasp himself as he once was, but not definitively; he begins to comprehend the whole being that once was, but only figuratively . . . only in rendered reflection and only in bare immediacy. The mediation brings him to the edge of apprehension of being but does not let him truly see, let alone experience, the thing.

If signifiers are balloons and the signified they connote is the clown that holds them, then his poetry is a field of balloons rising into the heavens, purposively released by the clown-poet in order to give a sense of wondrous joy to the audience (readers) watching them carelessly float away. The words of his poetic language do indeed refer to reality and the reality of the self; however, they do so abstractly, from distances too great to be cogitated, from psychological depths too complex to be comprehended. . . . or rather, surfaces. As we have suggested, John Ashbery’s paramount paradox consists of making the ever-expanding hall of mirrored surfaces that is the performance of poetic language reflect an invisible, inconstant, and unconscious psyche; he reflects inward.
Skating the glossy, glassy ice in circles at first circumscribes subjectivity, then it cuts into the flow. The question arises: how do we as readers (and critics) follow the reflecting surfaces, the mirrored language? How do we cut into these purposively impenetrable poems? Freud’s psychoanalysis reveals the distinction between two types of thinking, and even some reasonable tools, such as condensation and displacement, to decipher the primary enigmas; however it is Romanticist Paul de Man’s critical theory of rhetoric that teaches us how to rigorously read the language of poetry. His method of reading always straddles the division between outer surface and inner meaning, more often than not determining the mutuality of the two without compromising their radical disjunction.

3.3 THE DEMANDS OF READING AND WRITING

This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level. Look at it talking to you. You look out a window Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don’t have it. You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.

The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot be. What’s a plain level? It is that and other things, Bringing a system of them into play. Play? Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be

A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern, As in the division of grace these long August days Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know it It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.

It has been played once more. I think you exist only To tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you
aren’t there
Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem
Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you.

(John Ashbery, “Paradoxes and Oxymorons,”
Shadow Train 89)

The text goes beyond this, however, for as it accounts for
its own mode of writing, it states at the same time the
necessity of making this statement itself in an indirect,
figural way that knows it will be misunderstood by being
taken literally. Accounting for the “rhetoricity” of its
own mode, the text also postulates the necessity of its own
misreading. It knows and asserts that it will be
misunderstood. It tells the story, the allegory of its
misunderstanding: the necessary degradation of melody into
harmony, of language into painting, of the language of
passion into the language of need, of metaphor into literal
meaning. In accordance with its own language, it can only
tell this story as a fiction, knowing full well that the
fiction will be taken for fact and the fact for fiction;
such is the necessarily ambivalent nature of literary
language.

(Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Blindness:
Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau,”
Blindness and Insight 136)

“Paradoxes and Oxymorons” constitutes John Ashbery’s
most self-reflexive poem on the relationship between
language and reader, poem and critic. In one sense, it
commences from Bloomian misprision—“You miss it, it misses
you. You miss each other”—and reveals the fundamental
disconnection between the poet’s thought and language’s
ability to represent that thought as anything other than
otherness and negation. A deeper displacement occurs when
one considers the place of the poet within this particular
poem: The contemplative, lyrical “I” of first-person
subjectivity—the poet who we saw in the last section
recognize his inability to ever fully grasp the unconscious
being undergirding his own language—cedes significant
position to the “You,” the second-person, the reader. The reader is the one who has the relationship with this paradoxical poem, not the poet. The poet is not one but two degrees removed from making meaning and understanding being. Moreover, the act of writing poetry demands that the poet deprive himself of controlling subjectivity.

As the poem and its would-be reader reign supreme, the poet is relegated outside his own poem in a state of melancholic belatedness, the romantic’s eternal lament that the subjectivity of the poet has lost something in (to) language, some-thing which it cannot make up but paradoxically invests the whole of one’s psyche and imagination striving to create, again, from the outside. Moreover, just as “the poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot be”; the poet is melancholic because he wants to invent but 1) “plain”—i.e., conventional—language got there first and stole his inventive flame, replacing it with a system of institutional discourse that de-authorizes the poet and 2) the task of practical interpretation of (plain) language falls to the reader, not the poet, who is now doubly de-manned of his creative authority. In other words, convention stalling creativity and the inability to read the core of one’s own poetry—one’s own self—forces the poet to create a poem in which the poet places himself firmly outside the poem as the only way in which he can, paradoxically, attempt to reach back inside the poem and
ultimately inside himself. The poem demands that the poet eliminate himself in order that the reader discover the void of being into which the poet can reinsert himself. The poet’s Promethean flame must necessarily be unconscious and invisible as the only subject capable of making its meaning is the respondent reader. Thus, another way to understand this poem is that the poet splits himself into poet and critic—language-maker and language-reader—as a means to approach his unconscious being.

It becomes clear upon closer inspection that both the poem and the reader-poet are trying to grasp each other and both are failing. Both are secondary and both are playing a losing game of catch up to the other as one’s current train of thought can never reach the Shadow Train traveling at an unknown, impossible speed outside one’s field of perception and measurement. Both are thrust outside of themselves with inadequacy. Their respective essences are emptied out as they play at creating meaning and being . . . as they play at being itself. The poem swerves away from anxiety and into purposive, subjective play, which, as we have learned for Ashbery, is a play of surfaces. The poet may not wear his heart on his sleeve, but he wears his underwear inside out: subjective depth exists in the play of surfaces. Play, the poem asserts, is

A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,
As in the division of grace these long August days
Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know it
It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters. (89) The “hopeless dream of being”\textsuperscript{11} is patterned from outside—and here Rich and Ashbery coincide—from the roles and the positions that language affords the subject. But whereas Rich believes this process to end in fatal predestination, Ashbery deems it “open-ended,” the first rung on a ladder not to the wreck of the self, but the mirrored carnival of the unconscious psyche. The subject is written, to be sure, but he is also lost—lost in the diachrony of a linguistic discourse that is constantly in use and “being” re-written. He is lost in a sea of signifiers, an ocean of tropes. Further, as we’ve argued before, this lostness erases (even, as we shall soon present, defaces) melancholy and replaces it with sublimity, simultaneously terrifying and awesome because though composed of language it surpasses language’s ability to be adequate to it.

It falls to the poet, already split off if not emptied outside himself (de-manned, as it were), to clear a space for that lost being to be presented in all its shifting and sublime grandeur. However, the poet cannot simply and explicitly call forth an opening; rather, he must coax it out from within the undergrowth of language. In the brain-teasing “Paradoxes and Oxymorons” Ashbery re-enters his poem to note the reader’s (or is it the poem’s?) power to tantalize meaning-making (psyche-making) into existence:
It has been played once more. I think you exist only to tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren’t there or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you. (89)

A return of the repressed, ineffable Promethean flame of creativity constitutes the act of writing the poem while the key to unlocking the shifting being inspiring and undergirding the poem exists “inside” the poem itself, in the act of reading it. “The poem is you” . . . you are the invisible subject of the poem; and the poem is your psyche, the reader’s psyche, the writer’s psyche: Paradox is psyche. The act of writing or reading the poem is a coy play of being, a tantalizing offer of subjectivity.

Enter the theory of Paul de Man to help us adequately take our external reading of John Ashbery’s mirrored poetry inside poetic language’s reflexive surfaces. De Man has successfully broken the hermetic seal of sublimely glossy rhetorical surfaces of nineteenth century Romantic texts and rigorously thrust himself and his readers inside the shifting, paradoxical (and not necessarily authorial) consciousness behind the poems and prose. In our opening epigraph, he follows Derrida through the looking glass of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Essay on the Origin of Language and explains Derrida’s series of deconstructions. We are not going to fall into our own play of secondariness and surfaces by engaging an absurd third-degree removed reflection on De Man’s reflection on Derrida’s reflection on
Rousseau’s reflection on language. Instead, we’ll use de Man’s meditations on the rhetorical operations of language strictly as a guide for our reading of Ashbery’s poetry. In the terms we’ve so far employed in this chapter, the writerly reflections of poetry resist rational interpretation and conventional criticism of the type afforded secondary process thought yet paradoxically penetrate inside the text to reveal a fluctuating unconscious being and a becoming indeterminacy. De Man’s deconstructive criticism illustrates how writing reflects such inner instabilities of being, but it does so with a far different version of reading:

The text goes beyond this, however, for as it accounts for its own mode of writing, it states at the same time the necessity of making this statement itself in an indirect, figural way that knows it will be misunderstood by being taken literally. (136)

As stated in the last section, what we’ve been calling the distinction between secondary process thought, with its penchant for reference, and primary process thought, with its necessarily irrational language, correlates with de Man’s differentiation between the literal and the figural. As he argues in the seminal “Rhetoric and Semiology,”

Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. And although it would perhaps be somewhat more remote from common usage, I would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself. (Allegories of Reading 10)
On one side of de Man’s cardinal dichotomy stands the literal and grammatical-cum-semiological, or what I’ve been classifying as conventional language use; on the other stands the figural and the rhetorical, what I’ve been calling poetic language. As rhetoric becomes codified, it falls prey to the rules of grammar. When a rhetorical figure, originally just a newly created signifier, becomes conventionalized for the typical and practical user of language, that trope loses its shifting, indefinite, and obviously material status and becomes a block of transparent cement, a referential pointer and an ideological anchor whose material condition has been pushed to the background in order to make language work efficiently, frictionlessly, and—ultimately—invisibly to refer to rational content, positivistic signifieds. Put simply, users of conventional language assume language is nothing more than the logical equation between words and things. According to such exercise, those poetic figures which once burned brightly (sublimely) are now steeped in so much commonsensical grammatical practice that their vibrant flame has not only gone out but their position has been worn through to the point that it’s threadbare, if not wholly invisible—a reified ideology. The cumulative effect of such conventional, referential use of language leaves the user a fully rationalized instrument of discourse, unless that user reinvents both the language with new forms, i.e.,
poetry and reinvent the self with new reflections, again poetry. Another of de Man’s reading of self-deconstruction (this time in Baudelaire’s ironic distancing and dédoublement) will demonstrate for us how the poet can step outside instrumental language use by means of self-reflection on one’s relationship with language:

[Baudelaire’s] emphasis on a professional vocabulary, on “se faire un métier,” stresses the technicality of their action, the fact that language is their material, just as leather is the material of the cobbler or wood is that of the carpenter. In everyday, common existence, this is not how language usually operates; there it functions much more as does the cobbler’s or the carpenter’s hammer, not as the material itself, but as a tool by means of which the heterogeneous material of experience is more-or-less adequately made to fit. The reflective disjunction not only occurs by means of language as a privileged category, but it transfers the self out of the empirical world into a world constituted out of, and in, language—a language that it finds in the world like one entity among others, but that remains unique in being the only entity by means of which it can differentiate itself from the world. Language thus conceived divided the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition. (“The Rhetoric of Temporality,” Blindness and Insight 213)

By reflecting upon the materiality of language, conventional language loses its referential, nearly metaphysical, hold and becomes a site of teeming self-difference that cites the subject not with positivistic essence as conventional language does, but instead with sublime, flowing existence that cannot be contained by mere reference because, as de Man asserts again and again in the essay, the process of reading and writing literature yanks one back and forth in time, in past, present, and future states of being. The
poet’s self-reflexive, as opposed to instrumental, relationship with language thrusts him into an eminent identity quest, which, moreover, is never-ending because—as we’ve witnessed again and again in Ashbery—the lyrical subjectivity vacillates with being. “[T]hat fretful vacillating around the central / Question that brings us closer” (“Introduction,” A Wave 34) to unconscious, poetic knowledge while never allowing us to cross the crucial liminal point into clear apprehension, i.e., conscious, critical thought.

One of the most ancient battles has been between poetry and philosophy; and certainly this examination undertakes to circumnavigate the current version of that continuous conflict in the contemporary struggle between poetry and critical theory. But poetry’s very medium, language, threatens to destroy it from the inside out if it continues on its path to the conventional, the instrumental, the referential, the metaphysical. Only a self-reflexive theory of language can deconstruct the enculturated illusion of transcendental reference and open language up to the potential of poetry:

By linguistic terminology is meant a terminology that designates reference prior to designating the referent and takes into account, in the consideration of the world, the referential function of language or, to be somewhat more specific, that considers reference as a function of language and not necessarily as an intuition. (“The Resistance to Theory” 8)
De Man’s rigorous theory seeks to save poetry from the rigor mortis of the literal and conventional grammar by deconstructing the dead shell of language and reflecting upon (and in) the pool of buoyant subjective consciousness that lies . . . lies . . . lies . . . at the heart of poetry. De Man even asserts in “Rhetoric and Semiology” that poetry ruptures grammar: “Poetic writing is the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction; it may differ from critical or discursive writing in the economy of its articulation, but not in kind” (17). Put in our terms, the consciously codified grammar of conventional metaphysical being is im-ploded by an unconscious poetry of becoming-subjectivity. Because the common language constitutes our oceanic self, it is precisely that language which simultaneously and paradoxically bars us from comprehending our primary ways of being and offers the possibility of total knowledge. Ashbery rides the wave of language into himself, but he also rides it outside:

Yet one does know why. The covenant we entered
Bears down on us, some are ensnared, and the right way,
It turns out, is the one that goes straight through the house
And out the back. By so many systems
As we are involved in, by just so many
Are we set free on an ocean of language that comes to be
Part of us, as though we would ever get away.
(“A Wave,” A Wave 71)

We can never escape the language which veers us toward both being-inside and being-outside at the same time. We exist in two radically opposing worlds of experience: “We see this
moment from outside as within” (“The New Spirit,” Three Poems 310). Subjectivity loses its metaphysical guarantees as a self-reflective-cum-self-reflexive poet such as Ashbery commits pen to paper in the Romantic, Wordsworthian tradition: “The difficulty with that is / I no longer have any metaphysical reasons / For doing the things I do” (“The Preludes,” As We Know 91). Once subjectivity is put in question, the covenant with language is broken and the inside and outside proportional balance. By subverting the outward system of language with ironic play of tropes, the poet gains temporary access to his inward center, expressed via an explosion of the core to the linguistic extremity.

The system was breaking down. The one who had wandered alone past so many happenings and events began to feel, backing up along the primal vein that led to his center, the beginning of a hiccup that would, if left to gather, explode the center to the extremities of life, the suburbs through which one makes one’s way to where the country is. (“The System,” Three Poems 341)

Whereas language yields in Rich catastrophic anxiety, Ashbery deconstructs the language in him in order to ironically know himself. Whereas Bloom argues a theory of poetry in which the poet purposively and defensively misinterprets his precursor’s prior poems in order to write through his anxiety of influence and belatedness, de Man argues a theory of poetry in which the poet creates poetical/rhetorical figures that cannot be normalized into conventional (and metaphysical) discourse, thereby keeping the reader befuddled at the rhetorical surface level of the
poem while simultaneously opening up the inner text to an im-plosion of subjectively meaningful possibilities. We have fully entered the realm of rhetorical analysis, a method of reading that demands that we recognize the rhetorical trope is the tentative, malleable yet always tough cloth that covers the amorphous shifting subjectivity created of the literary (un)consciousness.

Let us employ de Manian rhetorical criticism to try to grasp the meaning inherent yet invisible in another short yet paradoxical poem by Ashbery, “Forties Flick” from Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (5). The title places us in film, already the most imaginary dreamspace allowed in our symbolic world; moreover, it is a movie from a past era at that—black and white, probably noir with its low-key lighting rendering the silver screen mostly black with shades of ambiguous gray. The first line commences in surface and trope:

The shadow of the Venetian blind on the painted wall,
The poem begins in negation for we first see not the thing itself, but its shadowy wake, its signifier, its trope. Moreover, that shadow is cast upon another artificial surface, “the painted wall.” We are in Plato’s cave par excellance; we the living readers of this screen-poem have our work cut out for us for this is no traditional lyric with conventional grammar and syntax . . . this is pure poetry, pure rhetoric.
Shadows of the snake-plant and cacti, the plaster animals,
The inhabitants of this world beyond consciousness exist in
darklight and drought and will not be confined to logical
semiology. Instead, they stand for themselves only, and we
are forever removed not only from the organic but the
referential in this abstract negative space of the plastic
arts realm.

Focus the tragic melancholy of the bright stare
Ironically, it is precisely these apparitional signifiers
which control our gaze, our mind’s eye, the train of our
thought, which is melancholic because it has lost reference
and which, moreover, is tragic because it has become lost in
its own—supposedly—illuminating ruminations (recall what
Adrienne Rich has become in her ruminative stage). Logical
interpretation breaks down and so we stare blankly, blindly:

Into nowhere, a hole like the black holes in space.
In the midst of all this pure negation, absolute artifice,
and rage of rhetorical tropes, we lose consciousness and
enter the oblivion that constitutes the kernel of our
subjectivity, that unconscious and invisible thing around
which our psyche hovers. However, just as Ashbery takes us
there, no-where, and allows us to touch our absolute
negation, he shifts and pulls us back to the surface. He
throws a monkey wrench into the nonexistent narrative by
giving what we don’t expect—narrative:

In bra and panties she sidles to the window:
Zip! Up with the blind. A fragile street scene offers itself, with wafer-thin pedestrians who know where they are going. The blind comes down slowly, the slats are slowly tilted up.

The poet said let there be light and the trip to the center of the universe dissolves in an instant. Or does it. Could this “fragile street scene” be of the same uncanny ontology as that experienced in “The Skaters”? There exists a radical juxtaposition between the “pedestrians who know where they are going” and the lost poetic consciousness of “The Skaters” (not to mention we readers of both poems) who know not where we are. We readers are ravaged by trope. Is the fragility of (psychological) reality what causes her to close the blind so quickly, to turn off illumination, to turn off consciousness because it simply cannot comprehend what is really going on out there which paradoxically pierces in here, in the mind’s blind eye?

The poet wears blinders when he writes; and we, his readers, wears blinders when we attempt to read his work, attempt to read him. As we determined in the last chapter on Rich and Bloom, the poet is overrun by the language that has come before, be it conventional patriarchal discourse or prior poetry. What harries Ashbery, however, is not an infestation of language; and what overwhelms his readers is not the burden of overdetermined signification (always already “read” poetic text). The poet must extrapolate his psyche from his language, not because his subjectivity has
merged with language, but rather because it has not and
cannot: it slips underneath language’s radar because the
poet cannot—must not—see clearly. Similarly, the reader
must deal with underdetermined texts and undetermined
meaning, for if he sees “the thing” clearly he we won’t
truly be reading with primary process thought . . . he would
instead be removing himself into the realm of reason, that
register which reads language transparently and
referentially. Reading poetry demands that the reader
foreclose on a referential understanding of language;
writing poetry demands that the poet foreclose on a logical
and conscious relationship with reality.

De Man offers a slightly different angle on the
question of blindness. This section’s opening epigraph from
“The Rhetoric of Blindness” continues:

“To account for” or “to signify” in the sentence above, does
not designate a subjective process: it follows from the
rhetorical nature of literary language that the cognitive
function resides in the language and not in the subject.
The question as to whether the author himself is or is not
blinded is to some extent irrelevant; it can only be asked
heuristically, as a means to accede to the true question:
whether his language is or is not blind to its own
statement. (136-7)

First, de Man decenters the writer: language is prime and
poet is afterthought (one could say that rhetorically the
poet is de-manned). This at first appears to coincide with
Rich’s anxiety of language, but upon closer inspection it is
not since, as we have learned, the poet exists by definition
after thought for he is always playing catch up to the
thought process. True thinking occurs in poetic language, and it is the goal of poet and reader alike to attune themselves to its ethereal resonances.

Second, de Man wants the text to deconstruct itself. The paramount way texts do this is through self-reflexivity: 1) the text realizes it’s only a text and not some philosophical gateway to positive transcendent meaning, and 2) the text therefore represents itself as mere text 3) by generating tropes of artifice which cannot be read deeply and must be read superficially such that 4) the text necessarily falls apart because it cannot be read. Technically—paradoxically—the reader is not blind because there’s no-thing to see... as in Ashbery’s “Fortie’s Flick” whose fundamental elements are shadows of shades and an ineffable feeling being shuttered out (or, somehow, impossibly in). The poem, having neither a concrete foundational narrative nor a positive point of reference, recedes into pure negation; or, in de Man’s methodology, it deconstructs itself. So what? So now what?

What if this is the unspeakable point of the poem? What if this sublime epistemology, this impossible knowledge, is precisely what the rhetoro-poetic tropes are aiming for but cannot attain, either in common terms or in rigorously (self-)analysis? An infinitely reflexive, recessive, yet ultimately resonant ontology that exists in the nether-space between, beneath, beyond tropological
language. The act of reading, the inconclusive act of rereading; an interminable endpoint, an unapproachable destination. “Forties Flick” continues into it’s self-sought oblivion:

Why must it always end this way?
A dais with woman reading, with the ruckus of her hair
And all that is unsaid about her pulling us back to her,
with her
Into the silence that night alone can’t explain.
Silence of the library, of the telephone with its pad.

So much has happened and so much is happening. (So much depends upon. . . .) The act of reading raises a ruckus of subjectivity that can never be pinned down, much like the spine tingling revelation that is ecstatically known but can never be logically repeated or spoken. The act of writing “all that is unsaid”—all that can never be spoken—pulls the reader and the poet not only back to the subject at hand, but also into the subjectivity underfoot, underconscious. The impossible silence of night on these well-lit street scenes and the uncanny silence of a library with a telephone always ready to ring out and a message pad waiting to be written, much like Freud’s mystical writing pad, from the other side of the world. . . . screens for a more primary mode of thought and being.

But we didn’t have to reinvent these either:
They had gone away into the plot of a story,
The “art” part—knowing what important details to leave out
And the way character is developed.

In “Harlem” Langston Hughes first asked “What happens to a dream deferred?” and then posited that it explodes,
rupturing the sociopolitical belief system. But this can only occur if it does not die, does not end in a hollowed out whimper. What murders the dream and what kills dream language is enculturation and codification into the grammar of everyday life and speech. Living the dream annihilates the dream because it brings it to the forefront of conscious experience that normalizes it, draining it of its power. A similar process befalls the uncanny and invisible dream language when it is sutured into the plot of a story. Therefore, the poet has to know what not to know, what cannot be known, and thereby what to purposively leave out, in order to make the poem absolutely unreadable and incomprehensible. To preserve the reflection and refrain from deferring the dream, the poem must bear itself as reflection and refrain from referring to conventional reality. The poet must break the system of conscious and common discourse from within, as Ashbery does in “The System” when he describes the explosion of primal feeling—unconscious psyche—across the familiar street scene:

The system was breaking down. The one who had wandered alone past so many happenings and events began to feel, backing up along the primal vein that led to his center, the beginning of a hiccup that would, if left to gather, explode the center to the extremities of life, the suburbs through which one makes one’s way to where the country is. (341)

While the rhetoro-poetical trope reflects the thinking process of the reader (and poet) inward, the powerful
center, when penetrated, bursts outward and redefines the extremities of existence, of the very thought process which touched it, leaving the conscious mind disoriented, lost, in the psychic state of the speaker in “The Skaters.” These spectral manifestations of the hyper-referential rhetorical dream world are re-repressed into the grammatical consciousness of linear, latent narrative and serve to rupture the frame consciousness . . . from inside! For De Man, as for Ashbery, the insertion of purely rhetorical tropes explodes conventional semiology because secondary process thought cannot truly digest primary process thought (the latter is the former’s bitterest pill which simply cannot be swallowed). Therefore, the lost and nebulous ontology which the poem reflects in ruses without really referencing resonates on the page:

[. . . ] Things too real
To be of much concern, hence artificial, yet now all over the page,
The indoors with the outside becoming part of you
As you find you had never left off laughing at death,
The background, dark vine at the edge of the porch.

John Ashbery’s playful language of artifice, of trope, of dream, of primary process thought supercedes Adrienne Rich’s deadly language of convention, of infiltration, of ideology, of secondary process thought. Here, the outside (the language, the form, the poem) is amusedly and consensually the inside (the mind, the subjectivity, the psyche). Such a
subjectivity freely merges with language for it knows language can never nullify it because language can never really touch it. If the mind cannot grasp the unconscious ontology of becoming-being, then why should it be able to apprehend the absolute ontology of pure negation? Absolute negation—“the dark vine”—looms large, but distant, at the unending end of the narrative frame, “the edge of the porch” which, like Zeno’s paradox, can never be reached, can never be grasped. It constitutes a sublime precipice, but only in theory . . . only by being rendered for the mind’s blind eye. While Bloom’s tropes swerve in order to, ironically, re-create positive creativity, Ashbery’s reveal their artifice, their negation, in order to play at bringing the background subjectivity to the foreground, if only for a tentative moment of inward transcendence, translucence, and translucidity.

Not simply lucidity, for lucidity implies conscious apprehension, a thought which must be perished if one is to maintain allegiance to primary process thought, which incorporates images, figures, and tropes that suggest states of being beyond rational reference. Freud shows us the distinction between two types of thinking, secondary process thought; de Man demonstrates how both types of thinking may be penetrated by rigorous reading; and Ashbery enunciates a subjectivity which is fundamentally split between the two yet finding ways to traverse the difference, specifically by
reflecting upon the limits of language and playing with language’s failures. Paradoxically, the failure of language constitutes its greatest possibility: playing games with language allows the mind to become lost in irreverential thought but such pretentious rendering also affords the mind to make the irrational leap downward, into that which it can never consciously see: the invisible, unconscious being that slides beneath the surface of consciously symbolic reality.

Our examination comes full circle: we enter the realm of self-reflection, in other words, reflection into the self, inaugurated by the opening epigraph from “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”:

```plaintext
your eyes proclaim
That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there
And nothing can exist except what’s there (70)
```

The reflecting surfaces of mirrors (of mirrored language) at once radicalize and revolutionize the mind, revealing at once everything and nothing. “Everything” is on the outside: external reality, the trope’s linguistic materiality, the subject’s corporeal form. “Nothing” is on the inside but pure negation, that unconscious reality, that nonreferential language, that inward subjectivity, none of which can be consciously conceived, let alone simply be.

```plaintext
[. . .] This otherness, this
“Not-being-us” is all there is to look at
In the mirror, though no one can say
How it came to be this way. (81)
```
Unlike Rich, Ashbery does not regard this otherness as fatal; he is rather invigorated by it, conceiving it a poetic challenge to circumscribe the otherworldly negation, the con-vexing question of what lies at the core of not only exogenic but also internal existence. Rather than conforming to instrumental language use, with its unthinking fealty to routinized representations, he seeks to look beyond the convention:

[. . .] Aping naturalness may be the first step Toward achieving an inner calm But it is the first step only, and often Remains a frozen gesture of welcome etched On the air materializing behind it, A convention. (82)

The conventional use of language is merely a first step for the “inner calm” can only be a dead calm (on that point both—if not all thinking—poets, Ashbery and Rich agree). Once the poet has mastered practical language use, he should reflect on its processes. The second step in one’s authentic, actualizing relationship with language is constant, rigorous self-reflection that pulls back the veil of language to reveal the nebulous air of signification it truly captures. Meaning is not referential, but a gesture that never really arrives at its destination/designation:

an invitation
Never mailed, the “it was all a dream” Syndrome, though the “all” tells tersely Enough how it wasn’t. Its existence Was real, though troubled, and the ache Of this waking dream can never drown out The diagram still sketched on the wind, Chosen, meant for me and materialized
In the disguising radiance of my room. (82)

And because essential meaning is put in question, one’s own understanding of one’s subjectivity is written on the wind, so to speak, which opens up identity to permanent shift and eternal fluctuation, save for the momentary respites when it lands in a structured facade of being.

However, the act of reflection, of self-reading and of self-deconstruction, of the variety offered poetically in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” and theoretically by de Man’s insights will unveil the temporary disguise and reveal the radiance of becoming-being:

To reflect is an analytical act that distinguishes differences and articulates reality; these articulations are called abstractions, and they would have to include any conceivable act of denomination or predication. This is also the point at which an act of ontological legerdemain enters the system: the subject (or mind) depends on something which is not itself, here called “modifications” (“certain sensations of light, color, etc., or certain operations of the soul . . .”), in order to be at all, but there modifications are themselves as devoid of being as the mind—cut off from its differentiating action, they are nothing. As the other of the mind, they are devoid of being, but by recognizing them as similar to itself in this negative attribute, the mind sees them, as in a specular reflection, as being both itself and not itself at the same time. The mind “is” to the extent that it “is like” its other in its inability to be. (“The Epistemology of Metaphor,” Aesthetic Ideology 45)

The psyche that thinks conventionally may as well be static; the subject that uses language instrumentally may as well be dead. To be is to be becoming in the process of mind in self-reflective thought of one’s own unstable being. Such a psyche demands that its poetry deconstruct itself and its
subject’s essential identity in order to enunciate an
impossible knowledge.

[. . .] The hand holds no chalk
And each part of the whole falls off
And cannot know it knew, except
Here and there, in cold pockets
Of remembrance, whispers out of time. (83)

On the other side of the process, reading such a
rhetorically self-reflexive poetry demands that the reader
open the psyche to primary process thought in order to hear
the whispers that exist on the far side of conscious
comprehension.
The hole grew wider.
Limbs on all sides pushed away from the center.
Depth started to throb.
The hole in my head ripped a bit wider.
(Jorie Graham, “Chaos (Eve),” Region of Unlikeness 52)

A nothingness more essential than Nothingness itself—the void of an interval that continually hollows itself out and in hollowing itself out becomes distended: the nothing as work and movement.
(Maurice Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation 7)

While Adrienne Rich seeks to break free of the violent grip conventional discourse and John Ashbery desires to play in the not-so deep reflecting pool of language, Jorie Graham works to hollow and void the realm of rhetoric in order to force the emergence of a real (of) subjectivity. This real of subjectivity is a subjectivity of the real stripped bare of its symbolic inclinations; in other words, it exists beyond its words, in spite of its language, and over against the very poetry that inaugurates its being. This subjectivity is an impossibly pure being—a meta-physical ontology that not only transcends its lettered foundations
but also, paradoxically, empties and hollows itself of being itself. Jorie Graham uses language to transcend language itself; the poet opens the very possibility of being by depersonalizing oneself from language, by voiding the self out of the poem. “The Way Things Work,”

is by admitting
or opening away.
This is the simplest form
of current: Blue
moving through blue;
blue through purple;
the objects of desire
opening upon themselves
without us;
the objects of faith.

As we shall see in this chapter, Graham anguishes over, against, and within language, effectively cutting herself out of her poems in order to allow her being to flourish in negation despite her poetic language. The poet’s metaphysical faith transcends language’s coils and constraints.

All the poets examined so far believe subjectivity and being to be inextricably tied to language. While Rich takes great pains to access and express her own being in her own language against her being for an-other in an-other’s language, Ashbery and Graham both struggle to simply approach the inaccessible and the ungraspable being of self which is obfuscated or overwrought by language. What radically differentiates Ashbery from Graham, however, is that Ashbery ultimately doubts being exists at all beyond
the covers of language; and so he relegates himself to playing with the infinitely reflective mirrors that language affords in an infernal trust of keeping alive the hope of spotting some long lost, totally consumed being. Conversely, Graham believes in being, but a being which is non-essential, non-substantial, and non-symbolic; and so she desires to ascend from the opaque density of language to the transparent clearing of metaphysics.¹ She flails herself with her own language to open herself up to another possibility of being. Ashbery descends into language only to become lost in its labyrinths of mirrored surfaces; Graham transcends language only to realize holes in the firmaments of being. The subjectivity she clears for herself with her transcendent work is meta-physical precisely because its words scoop out meaning, its language digs up its subjectivity, and its poetry excavates its being; it is wrought of the lyric (and the lyrical “I”) but devoid of the lyric’s content and lyricism’s constraints. Her poetic language touches the real of subjective being precisely by nullifying itself. A Graham poem is anguish personified. Combining the depersonalizing Eliot of The Waste Land with the existentialist Sartre of Being and Nothingness,² this contemporary poet breaks down being, but does not break psychologically—she blossoms into the subject whose being of nothingness just is:

Nothing will catch you.
Nothing will let you go.
We call it blossoming—
the spirit breaks from you and you remain.
("Tennessee June," Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts 8)

The poet is paradoxically caught by and freed of language. She transcends her shell of language, yet uses the hollow as a guidepost to where her being reigns free within and without her-self. The Grahamian self remains divided and yet transcendence transcended. Following Sartre in Being and Nothingness, the present poet disembodies and alienates herself into the position of the look of the other and transcends her own transcendence of her self, thus denying the traditional guarantees of ontology and forging her way into an existentially self-conscious relationship with a reality that will not be filled with metaphysical presence, but rather its very opposite—absence, the void. She inaugurates her being in the void. Anguish is the hollow of being.

Such an emblematically empty real upon first inspection appears to be nothing—a void of being. However, upon closer introspection it should rather be regarded as nothingness—being of the void. As the existentialist heir in current post-structuralist thought Maurice Blanchot will show us, this nothingness exists as a circling of the drain of being. This nothingness is the Sisyphean movement of being (over) against itself, a perpetual and unending hollowing out of subjectivity. Blanchot’s thought reveals
the work of art or literature to trace an indeterminate and interminable conversation between self and other whose movement leads the self outside itself with being as unfolding, unfurling, and becoming . . . nothing. Notably, this thought constitutes neither paranoiac parasitism and anxious influence as we saw with Rich and Bloom nor shifting meanings and textual deconstruction as we experienced with Ashbery and De Man. This nothingness provokes neither catastrophic fear of the other’s invading language (Rich) nor the melacholic fear of the self’s loss of being (Ashbery); instead it is pure being, impossible to comprehend even by itself because it is hollowed (as we shall determine, Graham) to the point of utter indifference and neutrality (as we shall see, Blanchot) but—paradoxically—rooted in an immutably, irremediably real voided core. As we just saw with Graham, Blanchot also proffers a negative metaphysics of the open-ended void:

The poet is now the relation with the immediate, with the undetermined, the Open, wherein possibility finds its origin, but which is the impossible and the forbidden, to men and to gods: the Sacred. Of course he does not have the power to communicate the incommunicable, but in him—through the relation which he sustains with the gods, with the portion of divinity which resides in time, the deep of pure becoming—the incommunicable becomes what makes communication possible, and the impossible becomes pure power, and the immediate, the freedom of a pure law. ("Madness par excellence," The Blanchot Reader 123)

Graham is a poet who, through her very poetry as we shall see in this chapter, poses an impossible relationship with the real of her being.
As we found in previous chapters, contemporary poetry is alternately romanced or seduced by theory; and this chapter’s thesis will prove no different: Jorie Graham’s poetry of hollows and voids enters into an implicit dialogue with Blanchot’s theories of language and subjectivity at the limits of being and nothingness. However, I hope to illustrate that the unspoken conversation between this particular poet and this particular theoretical system will insist more toward an anguished dialectic in which each position perpetually sublates the other and supercedes itself, hollowing and filling and voiding and presenting the self. The problem with Rich’s experience of post-structuralist theory is that she used it merely to name, claim, and contain her painful relationship with the language of the other: she exploited the language and intent of influence theory to dissolve the very trauma which compelled her to speak in the first place, much as a politician uses abstract speech to diffuse an agonistic situation, and having achieved an ameliorating effect in one particular situation, uses the same generalities and platitudes to install himself in a career. Rich’s career as a poet capitalizes on one period, one moment of authentic sociolinguistic critique and ever after degrades into self-parody. Ashbery, on the other hand, employs the theories of linguistic deconstructionism not to discover his primary being, but rather to blur the way for in reality he fears
that he has no being to be found: his carnivalistic, self-reflective, and infinitely regressive poetry serves as a playful distraction from the overwhelming dread that nothing exists beneath language, that nothing exists besides language—no depth, no subjectivity, no being but an apparency of surfaces. Ashbery’s career as a poet exploits post-structuralist theory to delve into language and confront the real self that exists beneath the play of signifiers; however, he does so only ironically. In comparison to Graham, it could be argued that Ashbery’s irony actually hinders self-confrontation, obscures the self, and ultimately flees from the self. Graham’s career as a poet, on the other hand, neither exploits theory nor flees the self: it uses post-structuralist theory, Blanchot’s brand in particular, to confront the self, cut back into the self, hollow the self out-side, and ultimately discover what subjectivity and being remains in (and can sustain) the realm of existential nothingness:

```
the gradual
openings that stand
for death. Under the plastic
groundcover the human

... Help-sticks and knots, row after row. Who wouldn’t want to take into the self something that burns or cuts, or wanders lost over the body? ("The Age of Reason," Erosion 17)
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Graham purposively cuts her-self open in order to let the hollows spill out and afford an authentic relationship with her-self, albeit evacuated. As we shall soon witness, Graham can be political like Rich and opaque like Ashbery, but her effecting externalizations of subjectivity are not an evacuation of interiority, but rather an explosion of inwardness, the traversing of anguished existence at the very core of the psyche, or as the existentialist Sartre would say, an upsurge of nihilated/-ing subjectivity. For Sartre, non-being sublimes being:

> It is within being qua being that non-being must arise, and within non-being that being must spring up; and this relation can not be a fact, a natural law, but an upsurge of the being which is its own nothingness of being. ([Being and Nothingness](#) 171-2)

The resultant void that opens up by the psyche’s own annihilating hand is the authentic possibility of the subject. Proceeding from such existentialist roots, the post-structuralist Blanchot offers a theory of writing which also annihilates the subject: “Write in order not simply to destroy, in order not simply to conserve, in order not to transmit; write in the thrall of the impossible real, that share of disaster wherein every reality, safe and sound, sinks” ([The Writing of the Disaster](#) 38). The experience of anguish is precisely this confrontation with self-destruction which opens the self to the possibility of the impossible real. Tarrying with the negative, with the nothingness which lies coiled at the heart of the being,
affords the subject the only possible authentic relationship with being—an impossible real. It is Graham’s task as poet to drive herself past the brink of a subjectivity engendered by language in order find what sort of being lies beyond in “The Region of Unlikeness”⁴: “What of this loop called being beating against the ends / of things?” (38).

4.1 SKINNING MATTERS

Jorie Graham’s poetry explores the realm beyond identity—the realm of non-identity. Critic James Longenbach, in analyzing her volume Materialism, asserts like most post-structuralists today that the poet’s subjectivity is forged by one’s relationship with the outside, the real world:

Graham’s notion of selfhood throughout Materialism is similarly external; she dramatizes consciousness by focusing on the movement of the material world outside the self, ultimately suggesting that the self exists only inasmuch as it is composed of material phenomena. (170)

I don’t wish to argue with this assessment; however, I do want to make a sharp distinction, and perhaps take the analysis further. Unlike Rich, Graham is not threatened by a cutting difference of a deadly invasive other (rhetorical or physical), but revels in splitting the other’s language and her-self open in order to reveal their inner essences.⁵ As we previously saw, “The Way Things Work,” the way Graham’s poems travail “is by admitting / or by opening
away” to unveil a core presence (Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts 3). More often than not these essences are non-substantial yet powerfully constitutive. What Longenbach calls the material world, I here term the real world—unsubstantiated and unwarranted, full of experience yet empty of teleology. Graham’s lyrics commence in the physical realm of bodily human reality but through intense interrogation of what lies within terminate in an inner metaphysical real, a realm which is transcendent but empty and existential: in a word, they touch nothingness—words skin reality and expose a transcendent nothingness. The first section of “Chaos (Eve)” harkens back to the beginnings of history and time, blending the Big Bang theory of a chaotic universe with the divine teleology of the birth of the universe from God and the creation of woman (Eve) from man’s rib. Graham explains in the poem’s endnote, “Eve is considered, in the three sections of this poem, at the moment where she is created and awake but not yet released from Adam’s sleeping body” (129). At this point, Eve is potential energy, a pent up chaos waiting to explode into a world (into the world). The creative power lies within man, literally within. The only thing standing in-between man and achieving his full, formative existence among others of his own caliber (for animals are below him in the great chain of being and devils fear his divine insistence) is his own skin:
What is it shall be torn off and held up, hanging—skin
with a face in the folds of it—for
judgment?
Here is the skin of days in the one hand of God,
drooping, the face running like ink in rain.
Devils jump away frightened.
Nothing scarier.
Animals flee. The skin of days. (46)

Skin of days :: end of days. Upon first examination,
the poem seems to be saying that in order to attain his
potential power, man—channeling God’s divine
creativity—must tear off his skin and reveal his inner
flesh, the brunt and brutality of his interiority that lies
in the midst of, and in spite of, his composed body and his
contained face. Inner expression is boundless; but the
folds of the face serve only to constrain and, indeed,
obscure the psyche. The face is expressive, but it blurs.
Consequently, one must unfurl the folds of the face and tear
the skin from the body in order to attain one’s full
sovereignty and dominion over the world. The skin of
days—of potential revelation and possible judgment—becomes
“the skin of waiting.”

However, this tearing off should not be taken
literally. One need not shed one’s skin for there already
exist holes that jam the outside world within the inner
soul. The true access to the psyche comes in the form of
the skin’s holes—the eyeholes. Orifices filled with
terrifying insistence—the eyes.

Here is the skin of waiting. The animals turn back,
they can smell it. It stinks with its silly smile. Hands
What do the animals see when they look into Adam’s eyes: not an unconscious soul but an-other (a completely other) being. One would guess that this is Eve lying in wait, suppressed yet ready to burst forth. They smell the inward Other ready to be expelled, to be set forth; and from this sublime outside-inwardness they flee. But this is not the case: they smell nothing, they see nothing. The animals flee Adam’s eyes and become (Eve’s) eyeholes. Adam’s body contains nothing . . . yet. At this point, he, not she, exists as potential energy; and she is being-in-waiting-to-be-formed.

Upon closer inspection it appears that Adam is not just tearing off his skin, but using the remnants as a garment; Eve is a rag-doll stitched of his exteriority. Adam creates Eve from his own skin.

Here is the skin of having been touched.
Where the fingers of others ran—stitchmarks, bleeding.
The soles of the feet red
where the earth leaned on them, where it forced them to still it.
Where the fingers of others have been: rips,
blood even though it’s empty, riffs. (46)

The poem now explodes the typical Self-Other dichotomy in which the unified, cohesive Self stands opposed to the forces of the harsh, external reality. Whereas Rich feared the Other’s invasion from outside, in the conventional world, Graham shows the Other to exist always already
inside, at least in absentia and in potentia. The Other is born of the self. The Other is my work of being; the Other is me. My blood, sweat, and tears constitute the Other. Only, it is not a labor of love but of necessity. The Other comes from my stripping bare of myself and stitching myself back together again. Self-destruction :: Reconstruction of the Other. I must mutilate myself, bleed myself, rip myself open to determine you, my complement, my lover, my Other. The Other riffs on my existence while paradoxically I am she. Adam is Eve.

However, the poem turns against itself. Eve is not Adam, and my inner Other is not me. Further still, the Other is consciously created by the self. The question arises: from where does the compulsion to create—to compose an-other—come? It comes from out there, or more specifically, my prior relationship to external reality, to exterior Others. Adam’s consciousness feels the look of others (animals, devils, God) upon his body; and consequently his skin feels as if it were stitched together by the external Others’ probing gaze.

The skin made of the looks of others held up at the end of a long fork.
then cast into the pit, the open eye of
the one God (the Devils can watch now)
(the animals can watch)...What will He piece them into,
hundreds lifted up at a glance, some
with the feet still on,
the waters rising up for a look, (46-7)
Adam believes his incarnation as an-other’s project. He does not feel corporeal but rather incorporated, conjugated by God’s transcendent verb. Now, Adam feels himself absorbed into the abyss of the divine eye, feels himself worked over, against, and through the great brain of being. He questions his existence as he questions His existence. Hence, he (Adam) emulates Him (monkey see, monkey do), the stitching together of body around this nothingness, which he feels he is, in order to form being itself. The gaze of the Other hollows one out and collapses one’s embodied being, but it also shows one how to piece together the body-in-body as a fortified and entombed structure of being that can withstand an-other look. Critic Brian Henry notes how Graham’s self-estrangement, in my mind at the behest of the external Other, actually forces her outside herself, really compels her to be free: “This sort of self-admonition frequently galvanizes Graham into action, turning her from the interior space she inhabits to the unknown exterior space beyond the window, with the eye itself becoming a threshold” (290). The gaze of the external Other destroys; however, the decimated, anguished subject who internalizes such a look reverses the process and steps into the real of existence.

The situation transcends Adam and Eve and God. Adam is me, God is my other, and Eve is my inwardness. After being ripped to shreds by the look of the other, I, half in love
with the other and half in hate with myself, rip myself to
shreds; and then, half in love with myself and half in hate
with the other, reconstitute my fragments—inwardly. I am
simultaneously my own annihilation and my own resurrection:

It took him days
that deep
caress, cutting,
unfastening,

until his mind
could climb into
the open flesh and
mend itself.
(“At Luca Signorelli’s Resurrection of the Body,”
Erosion 77)

My consciousness shreds my body, but it also stitches my
body back together—around the hole at the heart of being.
However, this reconstitution cannot hold for the self is
perpetually disintegrating beneath the other’s-gaze-made-my-
gaze. Therefore, the subject becomes an infinite
vacillation between otherworldly obliteration and self-
formation: “I watch the head explode then recollect,
explode, recollect” (“The Dream of the Unified Field,”
Materialism 82). Moreover, this reconstruction cannot
recreate myself identically for I went through the looking
glass and emulated the other’s look. Thus, my inwardness is
mine, but traversely hollowed by my-look-as-the-other’s-
look. As such, it exists in spite of me, if not wholly
beyond me. This inward void of being engenders my strength,
my infinite capacity to internalize the other’s look and
make it mine.
Just as the Self is con-fused with the Other, the internalized body-bag known as Eve is conflated with the wide open of being. As Adam’s stitching draws to a close, Eve begins to blossom; as Adam draws around Eve and knots her inside him, Eve begins to burst open, like a judgment.

begin—an elbow, one mouth—
the bat-winged angels hiding their faces but watching,
the waters rising, the Finishing beginning now, the

garment which

is closed,

by which the open is enhanced, by which the open
is freed—.
The air rises up.
The fire burns further.
The open, the open.
Then the knot is pulled in, the outline, the

judgment. (47)

Although Adam tailors Eve’s parameters of being, in effect zipping her up inside him, Eve sits inside Adam in judgment. Graham has written another poem which charts the tumultuous relation between Adam and Eve; and here, too, Eve is, “The thing inside, the critique of the given” (“Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them [Adam and Eve], The End of Beauty 4). Eve propels Adam into non-substantial, unguaranteed existence, forced to be free of God’s providential plan. She exists as the knot in his chest that will not open, the fiery anguish that consumes his inner being, but in remaining bound to absolute conflation exposes him to the radical contingency of utter possibility. He creates an other from himself, zips her up, and closes her up inside with the force of finishing her off.
Adam almost suffocates Eve with his breathing body wrapped tight around his insides / her outsides. Although he originally stitched her into attention, the force of containment compels her into slumber:

[. . .] And the thing still inside him, the girl,

still there inside him, awake,
   wearing him tight all round her like this,
   him sealed, breathing,
   her inside his sleeping now, inside the minutes, inside
   them. (47)

The closed off open consciousness inside him now sleeps—perchance to dream, to fantasize the possibilities of taking the inside out and the outside in, to wish the escaping externalization of her inwardness (his most inner inwardness) into the world. Her reaction to his containment of her will be equal and opposite: she will wrench him open in order to fully show him who he is. She will expose herself, his insides, to him. His holy inwardness will touch him, judge him, and finally level him. The landscape of the poem is part apocalypse and part oblivion, but wholly driven to expose the destitute core of being, as an earlier Graham poem suggests:

   a no man’s land where each of us
   opens, is opened, and where
   what we could have done locks to the very core
   with what we have.
   (“An Artichoke for Montesquieu,”
    Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts 30)

While the first section of “Chaos (Eve)” blows apart the relation between Adam and Eve, self and other, the
second section explodes the relationship between fantasy and memory, between the poet’s dream and her facticity. The poem transitions like a match cut, from the end of section 1 in which Eve remains trapped inside Adam to the beginning of section 2 in which a first-person narrator has become trapped inside an elevator with a woman:

> Then there’s the time the elevator stopped for some reason,  
> her in there with me, old woman,  
> deep in the heart of the building,  
> someplace daylight has never been. (48)

Who is speaking now . . . and when? A latter day Adam? A latter day Eve? The prescient dreams of a sleeping Eve (from section 1)? The poet, Jorie Graham, who put fleshy existence on biblical history in section 1 only to remember her own existence now? Or is this present speaker merely another of the poet’s narrative constructs? Undoubtedly the world of the poem is formally comparing this situation with the previous—but the question remains who is ensnared within whom? With this radical shift, the poem careens into an aporia, a hole in the fabric of the conventional lyrical “I” which seeks to concretely express its thoughts, feelings, and being, a gap that places every utterance in radical question and consequently sets the mind of the reader (if not the writer!) in redoubled motion.

The poem by Graham entitled “To the Reader” specifically addresses the fervent desire of reader and
writer when confronting gaps in stories, abysses inside identity:

and to some it is the hole on the back of the man running
through which what’s coming towards him is coming into him,
growing larger,
a hole in his chest through which the trees in the distance
are seen
growing larger shoving out sky shoving out storyline
until it’s close it’s all you can see this moment this hole
in his back
in which now a girl with a weed and a notebook appears.
(The End of Beauty 25)

Helen Vendler reads this hole as “the possibility of
interminable and open-ended interpretation” (109). The
reader is set in never-ending motion trying to translate the
aporia at the heart of the poem. More significant, I think,
is the place of the writer within the poem: the writer (the
girl with the notebook) appears within the hole within the
man: consequently, poetry becomes the abyss within identity
that paradoxically expresses subjectivity. Moreover, poetry
promulgates the overrunning against conventional conceptions
of identity, like a weed in a garden. Reading tries to fill
in the gaps of being while writing expands them into an
overriding question.

Back to “Chaos (Eve).” The reader wants illumination;
the writer desires self-expression; and the speaker (the man
in the elevator in “Chaos (Eve)” turned into the man with
the hole in his head in “To the Reader”? ) simply wants out.
However, the poem traps the light of the mind in its abyss
(“someplace daylight has never seen”). The corporeal hole
of section 1 becomes a conscious hole in section 2. None of
the participants in this literary existence can touch the
outside for they are all captured, separately by a black
hole of poetic language which attracts and encompasses
subjective being: the reader cannot touch the poem for it
exists outside and beyond his consciousness; in spite of her
ability to use language the poet still cannot put her-self
outside of herself; and the speaker simply cannot get
outside of the elevator.

This new (cerebral) trapping within an elevator shaft
makes for an unbearable existence. Tension caused by dread
of an unknown outcome drains them of language; they are
silenced by the situation:

We didn’t speak.
We stayed there a while like that.
I pushed down. Pushed open.
She wandered all night by then. Hid certain things—
whisk,
radio antenna.
After a while I found the path she took
by the wear in the rug— (48)

The narrator attempts to break free of the proverbial noose
around his (her ?). Like Eve before him, he is confined,
yet ready to burst. First, he calls down inside himself to
find and attune himself to his own inner hole, his personal
Eve, so that he might be able to utilize its foundational
trauma to break outside the current situation. To no avail:
he becomes caught in his inwardness. So too his companion: unable to step outside the elevator (herself) she becomes compulsive, repeatedly retracing her circular steps in a stricken effort to break free. She falls prey to the reality of the situation: her resistance is futile but necessary.

If the stirring of subjective being cannot surge forth, at least it can drive around in circles—infinitely. Reality is like a wall impenetrable to the mind; it’s a monolith, as in 2001: A Space Odyssey—another blackhole whose very presence of being paradoxically captures thought only to enrage and impel it to its own supersession (apes supercede themselves into humans supercede themselves into artificial intelligence supercedes itself into sublime transcendence: consciousness strives to find and become its own original foundation). When encountering the real of a situation, words matter not for language is only a matter of knots; thus, the anxious woman paces in silence. However, conversely, language is the primary mode of expressing being, hence the need to speak. Language at once places precious subjective being in a state of grace and a state of doubt. On the one hand, it desires, and often achieves the externalization of one’s being through thoughtful signs and symbols, hence establishing a direct connection between one’s inwardness and the real, intersubjective world. However, this bond ultimately proves illusory and mythic;
for it is merely tentative because, on the other hand, language is a limited vessel and by definition inadequate to fully contain being, hence the intersubjective (if not self-conscious) relations established via language must be called into question. The self cannot always and infallibly reach the other through language; furthermore, as we witnessed with Ashbery, the self cannot always grasp the primary, undergirding truth of one’s being. Language places precious subjective being in a state of dubiousness and confusion for lurking behind each utterance is the threat of becoming tongue-tied in the face of the other-self. Consequently, Graham writes a poem that meditates on the presence of the other’s story within oneself. However, Graham’s poem is not anxious, but cross-eyed:

    we are able to listen to someone else’s story, believe in another protagonist, but within, his presence would kill us. In our best world, the absolute

    fragrance of fully ready pears, becoming their portion of sunlight, opens into us, arriving by losing its way ("Cross-Stitch" Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts 11)

Like Rich, Graham believes the presence of the other of language inside one’s being would be fatal; however, unlike Rich and more like Ashbery, she opens herself to it because she knows that language is secondary, an outer garb that cloaks and conceals one’s primary being. Any arrival is merely a confused mistake. The poet’s task is to open
oneself to the varied, happenstance possibilities of being that experience affords—with, within, or beyond language.

Therefore, the woman trapped in the elevator reasons that the only way out of the reality of her situation is through: she circles the real, becomes an unconscious circuit within the real, and in so doing wears a hole in the concrete of existence. The repressed returns and repeats itself compulsively: she wears a hole in reality that mimics the hole within herself, for we are all children of Adam, stitching Eve into our breasts in our effort to keep our holes close to our hearts. The challenge then becomes how to surpass the compulsion, how to derail the train of thought-less action which wears our external existence, if not our inward relations, unbearably thin. The woman in the elevator has become trapped in a mindless drive, but not so the narrator, the poet—the mind of the poem is driven not to repeat in the face of dread but to (attempt to) outstrip itself. The mind of the poem utilizes the drive of one of its trapped occupants to lift itself out of the morass it created for itself. When the speaker-qua-poet notices that the woman has worn “a figure eight” in the floor of the car, the scene shifts entirely:

```
a figure eight—
one wing more pronounced where it wrapped all night
round the recliner he’d
fall asleep in.
The TV hummed.
    For a while after them there was wind through there.
I went by for some reason,
```
door not even locked,
    walls bare, floors bare—a window open.
It stood empty for a long time then someone else took it.
The other wing
    wove round the low table with all the wrapped candy—
    Here have some, have some, gesturing towards our bodies—
(48)

Consciousness flees real-ization and steps outside itself, into another wing of existence and into a wind of change. It travels to a space in which it is not trapped, not locked in. A barren and empty room with a window that opens out into the open. Consciousness escapes into the wide open of fantasy; and the poet transcribes this fascinating reprieve. As the speaker slips away into a voided recess of his mind, the poet breaks out of conventionally confining narratives into a flexible poetic language that emulates the fluctuations of her subjective being. This is the dream of poetry and of writing itself—elusive, shifting, transcendent.

When faced with the all-encompassing reality of the situation, the woman in the poem is compelled to pace in circles in silence and the poet outside the poem is driven to write in circles towards the hole(s) in existence which is itself, paradoxically, the poem. One’s encounter with the real that exists as a hole which consciousness cannot fill has only two possible outcomes, two potential actions: silence and speech. First, consider silence:

Debris of silences inside the silence.
Black gorged with absences. Room like an eyelid spanked open
wide, I rip it, I rip it further—as if inside it now the
million
tiny slippages could go to work, the whistling
of absence.
("In the Hotel," Materialism 57)

Next, consider speech:

[. . .] I lost track.
Syllables, words, speech, actions, movement in action—
feelings,
right feelings—the clean dry beats of hands and feet—
love and jealousy—come into my room—the storm at sea—
once in the mountains—
headaches—
gnawing mice—
us making mincemeat for the pie—
I lost my baggage. Where is the stationmaster.
Is there plenty of time?
The character being played
should not know what lies ahead—
("Notes on the Reality of the Self," Materialism 59)

Silence rips the self asunder to a state of utter absence
and intolerable negation; speech loses the self in the
swirling storm of the symbolic order. Both end in
failure—silence because it submits itself to an inadequacy
of being in the face of the real other that the subject in
the end can neither admit nor permit, and speech because it
cannot adequately put forth one’s consciousness outside in
order to simply engage, let alone surmount, the real of the
other. Consequently, the perpetual vacillation between
silence and speech constitutes human reality.⁷

Inevitably, the pendulum swings back for speaker-poet.
Eve in this dreamily open and empty room, there exist the
remains of the day: the room will be filled by “someone else;” the candy is wrapped as the speaker was trapped and as Even was enwrapped by Adam. “The other wing” with all of its hollow corridors is drawn irrevocably back into the self; the void is filled; dream turns into memory, obscure to be sure, yet nonetheless haunting. Just as Eve was sewn together from the tatters of Adam’s ripped skin and subsequently entombed within his chest like a void within being, this consciousness which ripped itself open is now enclosed with silence. The speaker-poet’s consciousness is drawn back into itself because it no longer has the language to flee. The speaker “trie[d] all the buttons” (49) but finds them “unmarked” (there is no exit). As language fails him, the pacing woman breaks her silence: she names all the dead she has known. Holed up and isolated for so long, she faces mortality—her own finitude—and consequently gathers her thoughts until they cannot be contained: “She gripped down hard / The list didn’t slow, where was I, was she starting over / or did it just seem that way?” He attempts to push out and open, fleeing into altered states of consciousness; she pushes down and in, cutting back into life with the facticity of mortal existence. The narrative begins to coalesce a requiem for the dead with an elegy for still breathing. However, her fatal list snares him yet again, and so the speaker’s consciousness loops back into another scene of sewing, this time a mink furrier:
saws, stitching machines, the dry sound of skins being cut and the mink that are sliced into 1/4-inch strips, and the matcher with his monocle, and how you have to make the skins of hundreds seem it’s all one animal— (49-50)

Eve’s skin of waiting now flows into a fur coat of the illusion of oneness. Every movement of the poem sees the desperate work of stitching ripped and torn bodily identity back together. But every movement of the poem also sees the opposite force: the hollow inside the body wrenching to burst forth and reveal itself in all its life:

In the mirror-room,

there’s the spot where you’re thousands going endlessly in,
there’s the spot where you’re one,
there’s the spot where you can’t be found—
Why should it come alive, the thing inside, who said it had to come alive? (50)

What has been stitched together will come undone. Eve may be a cloak around the inside of Adam’s being, but she is also the thing which will constitute his undoing: she engenders not the expulsion but the explosion of subjectivity, as witnessed by this earlier Graham poem that takes a dress as its existential subject:

And the dress keeps opening from eternity to privacy, quickening.
   Inside, at the heart, is tragedy, the present moment forever stillborn, but going in, each breath is a button
coming undone, something terribly nimble-fingered finding all of the stops. (“San Sepolcro,” Erosion 3)

The third section of “Chaos (Eve)” forgoes all narrative. The poem does not cross-stitch but rather un-stitches and undoes any and all concrete, identifiable story and reveals the pure truth of being. The poem stitches together fragments of thoughts and feelings in order to lay open the bare facts of subjectivity:

Because the hole that opens in him is the edge of matter, the very edge, the sensation of there not being enough —that rip—and then the squinting to see —what is it out there?— out of which the taut beast begins to grow, and rapidly, the sensation of lateness pulling up out of

the sensation of there not being enough (as you up out of this now pull)— rising up out of the gloam like a name being called— (51)

You are unidentifiable except as pure consciousness—conscious of the hole inside being which you are giving birth to and which is giving birth to you—the hole that causes being to strive for what will suffice. 8 Although you sense your lateness (your secondariness), you relate to it not as Rich or Bloom would; for rather than anxiously fearing the inward flow of the outside-other, which you know you are, and rather than battling to overpower this influence, you flow out of the gloam of existence as you: absolutely yourself in your always already internalized holiness. Further, although you feel the need to reflect as
Ashbery and De Man, your reflections are not regressive and do not lead you into blind aporias because you do not doubt your holiness and do not strive to fill the abyss which you are with ever-playful language or perpetually ironic insistence. You are the rift in the fabric of language, the tear in the cloak of subjectivity that allows the hollows to spill out and exist in their pure, abyssal state. You are the name that conceals nothing and conveys nothing. You are holy; you are the hole.

There was a hole in my head where the thing stepped in. The hole grew wider. Limbs on all sides pushed away from the center. Depth started to throb. The hole in my head ripped a bit wider. (52)

And as such, you consume all—including me. You are me; but you are not my wreck and, alternatively, I am not yours. We, in our holiness, are the depth that others search for but cannot grasp for all their playful a-musements. They cannot touch us because we resonate in our absence—we cannot be contained within consciousness. We rip your mind apart and you tear yourself apart trying to pull yourself back together—until you realize that you are at once the hole and its stitching, a matter of skin and bone: you are the knot that ties the (w)hole to its (a)parts, presence with absence, being with non-being, subjectivity with the beyond.

The mind with the white hole in it. Then the mind stitched up again, good as new again (the breath).
Then the knot pulled in, the knot bit off. (53)

4.2 THE VOID OF LITERATURE

However, the work—the work of art, the literary work—is neither finished nor unfinished: it is. What it says is exclusively this: that it is—and nothing more. Beyond that it is nothing. Whoever wants to make it express more finds nothing, finds that it expresses nothing. He whose life depends upon the work, either because he is a writer or because he is a reader, belongs to the solitude of that which expresses nothing except the word being: the word which language shelters by hiding it, or causes to appear when language itself disappears into the silent void of the work.

(Maurice Blanchot, The Space of Literature 22)

The open squeezed for space until the hollows spill out, story upon story of them starting to light up as I walked out. How thick was the empty meant to be?

(Jorie Graham, "The Hiding Place," Region of Unlikeness 20)

Jorie Graham strives to open her poetry, her self, and her very being to the real, infinite possibilities of the void within, the internecine hole, the outside-in of inwardness. Her conception of the work of poetry and the course of subjectivity may be more rigorously explicated with the help of the evolving theories of Maurice Blanchot, a post-structuralist European thinker of Derrida and De Man’s ilk who, however, remains rooted in the existentialism of his early days when he was a contemporary of Jean-Paul Sartre. Harold Bloom’s variety of post-structuralism defines the subject as always already belated and,
consequently, so beholden to the other’s previous work that one must play dumb—magnificently—in order to escape internalizing the language of the other and resume one’s rightful Romantic place in the world: the self reunifies itself by creating a poetry that transcends the language of the other, which overlooks the abyss of the self. As we saw with Adrienne Rich, anxiety is the first step to flight from the conventional codes of the other’s discourse. And in the trajectory of that flight one cannot help but encounter the other and the self at some point, making for an admittedly glorious poetic encounter; however, the flight path inevitably terminates in the evacuation of anxiety and the evasion of the other, the other inside the self, and the self itself via a defensive blindness which shuts out the real world.

Paul De Man’s version of post-structuralism deconstructs texts in order to show how subjectivity has been caught up in the play of figures and tropes and, ultimately, argues how poetry can rupture the conventional grammar of being in order to release subjectivity from a misconception of fixity and transcendence into the reality of shifting process. As we saw with John Ashbery, the serious play of language, in attempting to approach the ungraspable underneath, degrades into mere play at being because it concludes that nothing—no depth and no being—exists beneath the mirrored surface of language:
Ashbery is a Romantic and a melancholic—he mourns a deep conception of subjectivity that simply cannot be because subjectivity has gone into (but not through) the looking glass and become ensnared in an aporic abyss of its own making.

Maurice Blanchot’s version of post-structuralism concedes that the language of the other constructs the self; however, due to his existentialist roots, he believes that the subject should not only confront this other but authentically internalize it as self-negation, if not indifferent nothingness. The space of literature is the void within the writer that undergirds being; confronting it is anguish, but after such an encounter nothing remains except the real of subjectivity. As we have seen, and will continue to see, with Jorie Graham, the poet squeezes language until the hollows spill out and her subjective depth starts to throb. She skins the body around being in order to reveal the empty hole inside existence and stitches the ripped skin back together, not to cover over or fill in the hole but to self-consciously take the hole inside her on her own terms.

Whereas a post-structuralist like Roland Barthes apprehends the literary text as overloaded with connotative, ideological meaning, Blanchot asserts that literature expresses nothing: “the literary work [. . .] says [. . .] exclusively this: that it is—and nothing more. Beyond that
it is nothing. Whoever wants to make it express more finds nothing, finds that it expresses nothing” (The Space of Literature 22). By extension for Barthes, the meaning of subjectivity comes in the pleasure of reading the overbrimming plenitude of the text; but for Blanchot subjectivity arises in the anguish which has no meaning because it expresses nothing, because it is the nothingness—the dearth of the void. By extrapolation, for Barthes the author is dead because all any subject can do is read; everyone and everything has already been written by the force of the language that has come before:

We know that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture” (“The Death of the Author” 146)

For Blanchot the author is dead-alive because he must of necessity traverse the oblivion of meaning’s existence (if not of existence’s meaning). But this fact of existence stirs Blanchot not into an evasive frenzy but an authentic confrontation:

He whose life depends upon the work, either because he is a writer or because he is a reader, belongs to the solitude of that which expresses nothing except the word being: the word which language shelters by hiding it, or causes to appear when language itself disappears into the silent void of the work. (The Space of Literature 22)

Although all symbols are ultimately empty (language denotes nothing but the absence of presence and connotes nothing but
the absence of subjectivity); even as Graham submits, the
most loaded text of all, the skin is a mere body rag,
stitched together around the void at the heart of the self.
However this does not forego writing; quite the opposite, it
necessitates writing: poetry, in expressing nothing but
void, clears a space for the truth of being. Rather than
creating ever-grander castles in the quicksand, Blanchot
calls for (and Graham produces) a poetry that cuts to the
quick of existential being, much like Yeats’ did when facing
his years of writing poetry with his final mortality in “The
Circus Animals’ Desertion”: “I must lie down where all the
ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.”
Blanchot and Graham, like Yeats before, appraise the hole at
the heart of it all that, in our prime, we spin ever-
expanding gyres of language and thought around in an effort
to evade our essential holy inwardness. Blanchot submits
the theory of the infinite conversation and the space of
literature while Graham practices a poetry of hollows and
voids: “each glistening minute, through which infinity
threads itself, / also oblivion, of course, the aftershocks
of something (“Prayer,” Never 3).

Our study of Blanchot and Graham witnesses an essential
split in the varieties of post-structuralism and the poetic
ways in which one relates to language. On one side lie
textual aporias and morasses, rhetorical analyses,
the anxiety of writing within an-other’s language, the
desire to be released from an overlooming difference, and
the nostalgic mourning of an essential being beneath and
beyond all the masks one wears for society’s eyes as well as
for one’s own; on the other side dwell abysses and black
holes of subjectivity, existential confrontation, the
employment of anxiety—via poetic language—toward engaging
the other and the outside, the desire to encounter oneself
at the threshold of one’s plunge into nothingness, as well
as the necessity to traverse the real of a non-substantial
and existential being in spite of the facades we indulge in
to cover over and play out the agon at the heart of it all.

The drive to silent action and the rupture of speech
constitute two (vacillating) means to dig through the mind’s
symbolic clutter and traverse the real of the conflictual
void within. Writing is another (writing is an-other).
“Chaos (Eve)” showed us how one might expose and explore an
inner oblivion by figuratively skinning the body and
stitching its tatters back together across an expanding
internal negation; Blanchot gets even closer to the root of
the inside-outside problem when he argues that “The Open is
the poem” (The Space of Literature 142; author’s italics).
Poetry and literature, the antithesis of closed down,
influential and invasive conventional discourse, opens into
the expanse of being-outside. In other words, “Writing
contains exteriority” (The Infinite Conversation 432). The
writing of poetry and literature inscribes the uncontainable existence of reality, scripts the unsymbolizable nothingness of the real, and pens interiority onto the exterior realm. The subject need not rip himself apart trying to find the real of his inner being; instead, he should put pen to paper. The poet is the subject who forges a self-hollowing language that reveals the void within and without existence. Words are empty vessels of nothingness. The process of writing is nothingness achieved, attained, and affirmed. The inner self is expressed, and the inside is of the same ontological order as the outside: nothing, no-thing: “Whatever he would like to say, it is nothing. The world, things, knowledge are to him only landmarks across the void. And he himself is already reduced to nothing. Nothingness is his material” (Introduction, Faux Pas 3). Poetry is not even written on the wind, for that would imply a force of time and space; rather poetry is written within the void: the nullification of time and space, the annihilation of our concrete communications with others and within ourselves.

Writing opens the poet to the nothingness of the inside and reproduces it outside; writing opens the poet to the nothingness of the outside and replicates it inside. In this conception of literature, language is reduced to the silence, an impossible knowledge boring a hole within subjectivity, an impossible speech bearing a hole within signification. Graham’s poetry, for instance, writes
through the limits of language in order to disclose the emptiness of the outside that language contains and conveys; it unveils the veil that language is. Swarm’s “The Veil” commences in a self-imposed exile of traditional subjectivity; Graham delves outside herself and her normal conceptions of language in order to understand what language really is—what her subjectivity really is:

Exile Angle of vision.
So steep the representation.
Desperate Polite.
A fourth wall A sixth act.

Centuries lean up into its weave, shudder, go out. (20)

Graham dreams of not only approaching but overriding the external limits of the normal artistic image, with its valorization of mimetic realism, with its transcendental unification of signifier and signified. The literary-artistic image strives to paint images of the world that are realistic and true to life; however, in so doing, such symbols cover over and contain (veil) the real. Graham welcomes the slanted vision of parallax error for it gives one a truer glimpse of reality. It doesn’t lift the veil per se, but it does allow the viewer to momentarily become aware of the symbolic-cum-ideological sheen that glosses the surface of the real, and in so perceiving, temporarily empty it out, revealing nothing but the real itself, which is of course, paradoxically, nothing without its (our) imagery.
Just as Stein’s axiom “A rose is a rose is a rose” strives to supercede all of the culturally ingrained connotations of the thing itself, Graham’s “The Veil” struggles to drive language through the veil it itself is and disclose the absolute absence beneath a representation’s illusion of presence. These images have become piled into a steep mountain of cultural illusion before our eyes; these images serve as our fourth wall (boxing us into a drama of another’s making of which we are not aware); these images have become the warp and weft of our literacy. Graham pits language against itself and attempts to topple the mountain, break through the fourth wall, and rip the fabric of quotations in order to reveal their artifice, their absolute nothingness. She goes outside the symbolic frame that conventional language maintains for our subjectivity:

Sometimes the game will travel
past the frame. I hear them squeal. Then she and I,
each at our gap,
sustain the visible. We are the loom
of empty green
and cries. (“Tragedy,” Erosion 28)

Graham’s poetry brings the void into our mind’s line of vision. The poet sutures the oblivion of the real world, negated of its symbolic identifications and ideologies. Her writing reveals the primary Blanchotian fact of writing: that it collects the outside world in its furls and folds: “Writing contains exteriority.” At the same time, her poetry enacts Blanchot’s corollary that breaking the
exteriority engendered by language dissolves symbolic law and frees the self to the reign of its uttermost being, that is, a secondariness that is not Bloomian but fully burdened with the nothingness of external existence:

In other words, the breaking of the first tablets is not a break with an original state of undivided harmony; on the contrary, what it initiates is the substitution of a limited exteriority (in which the possibility of a limit is intimated) for an exteriority without limitation, the substitution of a lack for an absence, of a break for a gap, of an infraction for the pure-impure fraction of the fragmentary, the fraction that falls short of the sacred separation, crowding into the scission of the neuter (which is the neuter). To put it yet another way, we must break with the first exteriority so that language, henceforth regularly divided, in a reciprocal bond of mastery with itself, grammatically constructed, will engage us in mediate and immediate relationships with the second exteriority, in which the logos is law and the law logos—relationships that guarantee discourse and then dialectic, where the law in turn will dissolve. ("The Absence of the Book," The Station Hill Blanchot Reader 483)

But the poet does not break the language of her-self without difficulty: the writer who contains exteriority must encounter the real of the world in a perpetual struggle not to fall into the conventional ways of being and of thinking, symbolically for instance. This kind of writing, since it seeks to break itself open—if not down—is by definition opposed to itself, its own image-, symbol-, and myth-making. Conventional writing re-presents reality; this writing presents the real. Therefore, in order not to contain the real, but rather open it up, such writing must perpetually and unendingly write against writing. The poet must forever
purposively delay symbolic knowledge, lest she become tied like Eve into Adam:

[. . .] How soothing it is, this enchanted gap, this tiny eternal delay which is our knowing, our flesh. ("Kimono," Erosion 38)

Blanchot notes that such work takes its toll on the writer, who by necessity withdrawals from the social world of facile communication into an impossible silence:

The solitude which the work visits on the writer reveals itself in this: that writing is now the interminable, the incessant. The writer no longer belongs to the magisterial realm where to express oneself means to express the exactitude and the certainty of things and values according to the sense of their limits. What he is to write delivers the one who has to writer to an affirmation over which he has no authority, which is itself without substance, which affirms nothing, and yet is not repose, not the dignity of silence, for it is what still speaks when everything has been said. This affirmation doesn’t precede speech, because it prevents speech from beginning, just as it takes away from language the right and the power to interrupt itself. To write is to break the bond that unites the word with myself. (The Space of Literature 26)

The poet who, in writing, contains an uncontainable exteriority, breaks himself . . . from within. Just as Eve hollowed (herself) inside Adam, Blanchot’s conception of writerly subjectivity subsumes the void. As language is hollowed out and excavated, the purveyor of language, the subject who attaches his very being to language introduces a gap, an untraversable abyss, within his being.

Graham’s poetry thereby paves the way for the opening up of the real of subjectivity to begin. However, in
putting his words into practice, she overtakes Blanchot’s theory in a sense.

What if the rear-view were to open up?

The whole unseeable back where the blood flows off,

drying so quickly,

us broom in hand trying to sweep the front porch off
(“The Veil,” Swarm 21)

Graham doesn’t simply show how literature contains the real. She breaks through to the other side of poetry: she gets ahead of writing and thereby places herself—her subjectivity—in the position of the real itself: she is beyond literature, beyond conventional, beyond symbol. She just is—out there in the midst of the world. She encompasses not the pre-discursive real of subjectivity because that past is nothing more than an object of nostalgia, for which we have shown Ashbery strive, but rather she constitutes herself in the post-discursive realm of the real. She is post-structuralist, post-symbolic. Sweeping away the ever-accumulating imagery of our symbolic existence, she strives to exist in the space which opens onto the barren plane of the real. ‘Strives’ because, paradoxically, one may break the tie between language and the thing it represents, but the alliance has a way of slipping back into being. Thus she must resolve herself to forever tarry with the negative.11 While in “Chaos (Eve)” the poet vacillated between speech and silence; here in “The
Veil” she vacillates between language and the void, only now she recognizes that language unveiled is the void: “when was it I first took this pencil and wrote out / this emptiness you hold now to your ear—” (21). Moreover, as critic Thomas Gardner has argued regarding her “Self-Portrait” sequence in The End of Beauty, the gap that Graham hollows inside her subjectivity is generative: “To put it simply, Graham’s first self-portrait proposes that there is a generative estrangement possible in the gap, something gained in the space of error” (179). In other words, Graham cuts through her original identity and lays it bare in order to embark on a trek. The mode of this journey is the poem, and the poem is what propels the subject at once across and into the emptiness of the real.

Through the work of poetry, Graham opens her being to a profound, if not fecund, emptiness which levels her subjectivity. Graham drives language over and through its breaking point, which is ironically to the site (cite) of its conception (inception)—the void:

Language can only begin with the void; no fullness, no certainty can ever speak; something essential is lacking in anyone who expresses himself. Negation is tied to language. When I first begin, I do not speak in order to say something, rather a nothing demands to speak, nothing speaks, nothing finds its being in speech and the being of speech is nothing. (“Literature and the Right to Death,” The Station Hill Blanchot Reader 381)

If language, which is always already built on an abyssal tomb, constructs and composes her, she shreds it and sheds
her skin. She exists, not outraged like Rich’s confrontation with the language of the self, but outstripped, molten, cast off and away. She is not only bare but barren; she is empty and open to the next possibility of self-constitution which resembles the space of literature advocated by Blanchot—the exterior where language dissolves and breaks down into being, the elsewhere devoid of illusion because it is apart from and indifferent to everything, including itself:

*The Open is the poem.* The space where everything returns to deep being, where there is infinite passage between the two domains, where everything dies but where death is the learned companion of life, where horror is ravishing joy, where celebration laments and lamentation praises—the very space toward which “all worlds hasten as toward their nearest and truest reality,” the space of the mightiest circulation and of ceaseless metamorphosis—this is the poem’s space. This is the Orphic space to which the poet doubtless has no access, where he can penetrate only to disappear, which he attains only when he is united with the intimacy of the breach that makes him a mouth unheard, just as it makes him who hears into the weight of silence. The Open is the work, but the work as origin. (The Space of Literature 142)

Having molted, and in the never-ending process of molting, the poet is pure metaphor and absolute metamorphosis: molten lava blazing over the earth and re-founding the firmament. Not in the infinite process of playfully anapestic self-reflection as Ashbery and De Man would have it, but rather in an extinction of what is called substantial subjectivity that thereby displays being in the breach of language. *The poet’s being evanesces into the open abyss of language.*
The poem is a silent yet reverberating howl across the void of being; poetry is an impossible outcry of an undeliverable message over against the subject who bears its burden, which is that of nothing but work and movement itself (of the self). Pure poetry coincides with pure being: simultaneously the hollowing out of one’s language-centered subjectivity and the opening up of that subjectivity to the denseless gravity of the real of the outside, the exterior, the other—not the logically/linguistically ordered universe, but rather the realm that is cleared of all symbols and razed of all illusion: the space of poetic being:

And is there poetry because the one who would have seen being (the absence of being through the mortifying gaze of Orpheus) will also, when he speaks, be able to hold onto its presence, or simply make remembrance of it, or keep open through poetic speech the hope for what opens on the hither side of speech, hidden and revealed in it, exposed and set down by it? (The Infinite Conversation 38)

This transcendent space thrives on absence and nothingness. To approach this point, however, one must paradoxically travel through language—poetry, literature, art—but on the inverse side. Just as Adam internalized Eve as the hollow and torn inversion of himself, poetry opens up by interiorizing the furthest limit of language, the opposite and the negation of lyric—mute silence: “Everything depends on the point where nothing can be said” (Jorie Graham, “Via Negativa,” Never 79). And yet, at the same time, Graham’s poetry breaches silence and uses language to descend from
the edge of the life and all outward existence into the very depths of being.

Shouldn’t depth come to sight and let it in, in the end, as the form
the farewell takes: representation: dead men:
lean forward and look in: the raggedness of where the openings
are: precision of the limbs upthrusting down to hell:
the gleaming in: so blue: and that it has a bottom: even a few clouds
if you keep attending: and something that’s an edge-of: and mind-cracks:
and how the poem is about that: that distant life: I carry it inside me but can plant it into soil: so that it becomes impossible to say that anything swayed from in to out [. . .] (“Afterwards,” Never 5)

Graham’s journey is an odyssey of inward-moving consciousness impossibly written on the underside of poetic language.

Although discourse constitutes us and constitutes our primary mode of self-expression and communicating—communing—with others, the real of subjectivity exists on the inverse plane of language. Inverse is not the same as underneath: Graham is not Ashbery—she does not play at obfuscation in a futile attempt to arrive at the primary process thought which undergirds secondary representations. Nor does in-version equal sub-version: Graham is not Rich—she does not subvert discourse in order to counteract the attack of the other from the outside. Inversion entails taking a verse inside being, into the authentic
consciousness in which language is rendered as such (a chain of voids) so that it can neither slip nor slaughter.

From there we can deduce how
from now on nothing will be like.

Here lies: a border then the un-just. Do I have, for example,
a heart? Does it only feel if you make “sense” of me?

Can it, for example, make me “see”?

Can it make me not see?

That we shall never know, of each other now, more.

That there is no more. Hot and singular.

Surrounded by our first-persons: the no-more.
("Via Negativa“ 79)

From this inverted space of poetry which traverses the real, the conscious subject can see through language (ironically, the language of poetry itself), into its lies and beyond its illusions. This type of poetry breaches the borders and lays bare the facades, consequently turning the space of literature into a region of unlikeness. In other words, it does not build an identity or construct a world view for the reader to enter into and interpret with well-reasoned comparison, for these are the interstices of the incomparable and the incommensurate. Here is where nothing makes sense—nothing coheres into meaningful argument and nothing bonds together to form a unitary identity. Instead, this poetry uncleaves subjectivity because it annuls
identity (likeness, like-mindedness). There is no re-semblance because there exists neither semblance nor assembly: everything is different and divided from itself. Moreover, there is no—nor can there ever be—revelation: everything can be experienced, but nothing can be seen . . . nothing can be sublimated (sublimed) into a transcendent vision that forms the foundation for a self. Although we may be surrounded by the voices of the first-person singular, their expression is nothing more than a specular haunting, a nostalgia for a mode of existence that cannot be resurrected for it never really was. The end of (pre-)determined substance :: the beginning of experiential existence in the real. The termination of integrity and wholeness :: the commencement of the abyss that is being. The veil of poetry, of language, of poetic language, constitutes at once 1) a body bag that cloaks and covers being and 2) its inverse, a body rag that contingently sutures being but in the final analysis acts as a sieve which allows the subject’s hollows to spill out.

4.3 OUTSIDE INDIFFERENCE

The work requires of the writer that he lose everything he might construe as his own “nature,” that he lose all character and that, ceasing to be linked to others and to himself by the decision which makes him an “I,” he becomes the empty place where the impersonal affirmation emerges. This is a requirement which is no requirement at all, for it demands nothing; it has no content.
Blanchot takes our conception of literature past the breaking point. Literature takes us outside ourselves and forces us to disperse ourselves into the realm of the open. His contributions lead our infinite conversation regarding the place and space of literature to disclose a dialectic between subject and language, language and literature, literature and the void. In his wake, Graham has hollowed out subjectivity by first bringing the outside in and then traversing the ontological void within through the provisional bridge of language. However, the two, theorist and poet, part at this crucial juncture—the end of subjectivity.\textsuperscript{12} Blanchot surpasses, if not completely dissolves, subjectivity altogether when he pushes language into the abyss of the outside, of impersonality and indifference:

\begin{quote}
We must put it differently and say that the experience of literature is the very ordeal of dispersion, it is the
\end{quote}
approach of that which escapes unity, an experience of that which is without understanding, without harmony, without legitimacy—error and the outside, the ungraspable and the irregular. ("The Pursuit of the Zero Point," The Blanchot Reader 146)

Whereas the end of Blanchot’s thought disperses subjectivity, Graham sheds one kind of symbolic subjectivity but remains true to another, more inward one, i.e., the real of subjectivity constituted by a blur of hollows and voids. In other words Blanchot’s theory transcends the ability to utter, to mean, to be “I”—“With what melancholy and yet with what calm certainty he felt that he would never again be able to say “I” (Awaiting Oblivion 16)—while Graham’s poetry encounters, but never surmounts, the ultimate limits of the outside: she tarries with the negative of being in the real, taking it within her-self and subsequently smudging her subjectivity with the twofold intensity of the outside-inside. Her poem “Subjectivity” for instance, takes dispersal as its mode, but eventually reconstitutes subjectivity as a thing¹³ on the far side of being:

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or the gaze’s string grid of nerves
spreading out onto
whatever bright new world the eyes would seize upon—
pronged optic animal the incandescent thing
must rise up to and spread into, and almost burn it’s way
clear through to be. (Materialism 26)
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Or, again, for Blanchot, the work of the poet means the death of the poet’s subjectivity amidst a linguistic labor that outstrips her being: the voice of a different and
unique persona are sublated into the impossible speech of an indifferent and impersonal void.

I write to die, to give death its essential possibility, through which it is essentially death, source of invisibility; but at the same time, I cannot write unless death writes in me, makes of me the void where the impersonal is affirmed. (The Space of Literature 149)

For Graham, however, there is no cessation of being in the void: although she stills her life in a moment that compares her being to the work of art, and although poetry broaches the outside from the inside and punctures the inside with the outside, her voiced voicelessness remains forever her own, unclear and often indistinct, but never indifferent or impersonal. She becomes the work, but the work—death—decidedly does not become her. Instead, she glories in the void:

[. . .] How soothing it is, this enchanted gap, this tiny eternal delay which is our knowing, our flesh. ("Kimono," Erosion 38)

Not the impersonal is affirmed, as with Blanchot, but her very person is avowed in the inarticulate and speechless inward hollows beneath one’s outward stitching. Graham knows the abyss in her bones and it constitutes her primary sentience.

Perhaps this, then, is the absolute difference between the poet and theorist: the poet feels theory’s effect at the level of subjectivity and existence (of being in the world)
while the theorist thinks about poetry first and, in thinking, attempts to feel its consequences on subjective existence. For the poet, knowledge is a lived bodily reality (a self-recognition) while, for the theorist, knowledge is an abstract language system one degree removed from the real (a reference to the other world). The poet anxiously struggles to engage the void through language while the theorist compulsively strives to strip away language to even see the void. The gap in the poet is the void of being that propels the poet to traverse herself through language; the gap in the theorist is the void of the world that propels the theorist to look outside, in the open space of art and literature, for an answer. The theorist reaches outside into the world of indifference and touches death. Blanchot achieves the truth of knowledge.

The image requires the neutrality and the effacement of the world, it wants everything to return to the indifferent depth where nothing is affirmed, it inclines towards the intimacy of what still continues to exist in the void; its truth lies there. ("Two Versions of the Imaginary," The Station Hill Blanchot Reader 417)

The poet reaches outside into her own inwardness and touches death, which is beyond (outside) indifference. The poet internalizes death in her very language, "My throat is an open grave" ("from The Reformation Journal," Swarm 3); but she passes through it, shearing herself of old discourse in order to shore herself up with a new poetic language,

I have reduced all to lower case.
Graham traverses the silent void of the soul and achieves the impossible knowledge of subjectivity, “This is certain. / Dream has no friends. / Bottom is there but depth conceals it” and again, “This is certain: inwardgoingness of the / soul / that won’t lie down” (“Middle Distance,” Swarm 37 and 39). The poem is a vehicle of subjectivity, a perpetual motion machine descending into being.\(^{14}\)

Through all of its hyper-theorizing of the dispersing field and constitutional function of language, as we have witnessed by Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, and Maurice Blanchot, post-structuralist theory empties out, if not wholly voids, subjectivity; but it is poetry, even in its contemporary form of the postmodern, post-structuralist lyric as we have experienced by Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery and Jorie Graham, which makes subjectivity a question that cannot be avoided. Or, conversely, theory ultimately avoids the subject, subjectivity, that poetry cannot finally void. Post-structuralism dissipates subjectivity into mere anxiety, mirror trope, and the indifferent impersonal. Contemporary poetry, even though it is irremediably
influenced by post-structuralist thought, refuses to allow the last remnants of subjectivity to fall apart: the poet fiercely rages against the abyss of the other, nostalgically plays against the play of language, or protectively stitches the fragments of the finis inside her being, through poetry, becoming the real being of subjectivity.

I close this chapter with a consideration of a pair of Graham’s poems which exemplify the indestructible hollow and insoluble void of subjectivity that seek to flesh out (or rather in) an abstract dialectic of self and other, being and language, speech and silence. This subjectivity, albeit cored, exists on the other side of Blanchot’s conception of the annihilated subject.

In the relation of the self (the same) to the Other, the Other is distant, he is the stranger; but if I reverse this relation, the Other relates to me as if I were the Other and thus causes me to take leave of my identity. Pressing until he crushes me, he withdraws me, by the pressure of the very near, from the privilege of the first person. When thus I am wrested from myself, there remains a passivity bereft of self (sheer alterity, the other without unity). There remains the unsubjected, or the patient. (The Writing of the Disaster 18)

Blanchot theorizes a fragmented, passive, and ultimately unsubjected subjectivity in ruins. Conversely, Graham, realizes a subjectivity that is not unsubjected but beyond subjectivity, an unnameable blossoming within the real. “Untitled One” and “Untitled Two,” both from The Errancy, engage the “untitled thing” that inhabits and cuts into one’s being at the very point of self-expression. Instead
of utterly annihilating being, as with Blanchot, the cut
being ripens over against itself.

“Untitled One” is a lyric of stage fright. The speaker
dreads an upcoming performance: the primal clash between
one’s being for others and one’s being for oneself, the
outside versus the inside. There’s only one problem: she’s
not on stage—she’s in the audience. The confrontation with
drama—or poetry, or art, or literature—opens a subject up
and puts one’s self in question.

A curtain rose. I felt an obligation.
I tried to feel the thing that blossoms in me,
here in my seat, assigned,
the whole world intelligently lit
up there in front of me.
I tried to feel the untitled thing that blossoms in me. (23)

As Blanchot showed us, the experience of literature and art
takes us outside ourselves, into the open. When the curtain
rises and the work begins, the speaker is obliged to feel
her inwardness, for the inward meets the outward as the
subject encounters the symbolic world. Although the
performance partakes of the intelligibly symbolic and
linguistic, her inwardness does not. It blossoms outward,
but remains ineffable, an irrevocable force that exists
beyond the bounds of linguistic definition. Consequently,
her rational-linguistic mind has difficulty connecting with
the truth of her inner experience (“I tried to feel”). On
the other side of language is the unnameable, the uncanny;
on the inverse side of language is purity, the poem. The
The poem seeks to cut through the permutations of conventional symbolism in order to achieve the real of feeling, of being, of subjectivity.

This engenders a far cry from what Blanchot determines to result from the confrontation of self and other (autrui), the annihilation of the speaking subject, the dissolution of “I” under the girders of language:

When autrui turns toward me, he, being essentially exterior to me is as though infinitely diverted; and autrui is this movement of turning toward—there where detour reigns. The presence turned toward me is thus still a presence of separation, of what to me is presence even as I am separated from it, distant and turned away. And, for me, to be facing autrui is always to be the abrupt presence, without intermediary, of the one who turns toward me in the infinite approach of the detour. (The Infinite Conversation 62)

For Blanchot, the subject separates, divides, and disintegrates when faced with the wide open experience of literature and art. Subjectivity is a detour of being, a gesture toward being, which is always delayed and deferred. For Blanchot, as we saw for Graham in poems like “Chaos (Eve),” the subject of literature is a ruptured presence. The theorist, however, sees subjectivity decompose upon competition. The subject is transcended by literature’s encounter between self and other: “The Self and the Other lose themselves in one another: there is ecstasy, fusion, fruition. But here the ‘I’ ceases to be sovereign; sovereignty is in the Other who is the sole absolute” (The Infinite Conversation 66). The subject merges with the open space of literature, and in so doing loses his ability to
speak, to write one’s inwardness. If literature reflects reality, then in Blanchot’s conception of the dialectic, the subject of literature is sacrificed to another plane of existence—deconstructed and fragmented, disseminated and fused into the indifferent realm of the outside, the real.

Alternatively, Graham goes outside indifference. Although she concedes that to go outside oneself is to embrace death, the wild contingency of the real, one does not, cannot die. Rather, when one encounters the hole in oneself, one touches being: “when I am empty must I still / be? / Yes, death’s game: outsideness” (“Fuse (The Watchman, Agamemnon),” Swarm 84). She conceives the real to be an open, exterior void, yet it remains plugged inside the hollow that literature cuts into the self-expressive subject. The poem and its poet of “Untitled One” know the untitled thing (the object of the indestructible, untranslatable real) exists within, and both endeavor to let it blossom outward when it cuts even further inward.

The abnegation that doesn’t stutter, not at all, not once. Or no, that stutters once and once only.
What the days are a rehearsal for: breathe in, breathe out.
What the held breath is ventriloquial for,
the eyes quickly shut then scribbled back open again—rasping martyrdom—
the glance once again shouldering the broadcast out there, the loud flat broadcast,
the glance ambushed once again by the apparent warmth of the picture.
I blinked. Tomorrow came. Nothing came true. (23)
To bloom does not mean to speak. The self is restrained (self-mesmerized, perhaps?) upon the advance outward onto the stage of the other who is obliged to hear. The poem incorporates the silence of speech—the stutter, which is the hesitancy of impending utterance. The stutter encompasses both speech and silence, and therefore overturns “Chaos (Eve)’”s vacillation between failed communication and compulsive circling. Instead, what remains is the simple existence of being, “breathing in, breathing out” that broaches the two worlds, the inwardness of subjectivity and the external real. The subject takes the real into her being and exhales her being into the air of the real; thus, both inside and outside exist on the same ontological level: pure being. Poetry tarries with the negative of the self and the negative of the real; and in so doing, it traverses both but cancels neither. Both self and world remain real, untranslated and untitled: the suchness of being at the point where nothing can be said, at the point where speech and silence congeal.

The poet thrusts herself into the uncertain, yet very real, future via a muted poem. “Nothing came true” means that that which came true for the poet with oblivion in her breast is precisely the unthinkable, the unconfigurable, the untitled. She meets the tear in her inner being, the hole which constructs her subjectivity at the deepest of levels, on the outside, in the realm of the real that is opened up
by the space of her poem. The confrontation is neither indifferent nor impersonal, but rather the portrait of self-difference and constitutional personality. The poet’s being ripens when the “untitled thing” inside encounters the “untitled thing” outside, in the real world. The poem is the conduit of that engagement: the foundational hole at the core of the psyche writ large in order to reflect (upon) existence.

The small hole inside I’m supposed to love:
I tried to house it—no, I tried to gorge it.
I hovered round it with sentences to magnify the drama.
I cloaked it with waiting. I whispered don’t be afraid
and petitioned it with rapture—the plumed thing—the
cross-dressed
lingering—dramatic—all my thin secrets giddy,
all my whispers free-spending ... Tomorrow came.
Slowly it scattered. Then it came again—first fragile, eyes closed,
then, peeling away its cellophane, eyes striating open,
it did it again—and each time so easy; first blurring a bit, then, nearing 5,
the sparrows ascribble, the magnet rising, tomorrow
starting to strip itself clean again of itself. But casually. Tirelessly. (23-4)

Scribbled sentences and mindless rants at first serve to hysterizcize the speaking subject who indulges in her divisive deficiency: she was rapt in her lack. Prior to the writing of the poem, she hoarded and gorged on the void in order to wallow in the trauma. She was a histrionic; she was a cutter. But such cutting does not cut to the quick; rather, it merely invites the self-destructive and the suicidal, the vanquishing of being-of-the-void to the void itself, or in other words, a fall from a questioning
traversal to an annihilating dispersal. However, she eventually came to recognize the hole inside her as a birth, a fragile striation of being. And she moved into a new relationship with language: what once were scribbles now become poetry—*this poem*. More significantly, language refined into poetry cuts deeper: just as an audience member unwraps candy in the poem, exposing a tiny treasure, poetic language peels away the protective cellophane of noncommittal discourse in which we habitually encase our beings. Being wrapped in plastic—the containment of a living death—no longer gratifies; and so, one looks to the future, but not a canned, prefabricated story: instead, the future made possible by the event of this production that the speaker witnesses (by the event of this poem that the poet writes) consists of utter contingency. Tomorrow is stripped; the subject outstrips herself and lays herself open to the utter possibilities of the real of existence.

We usually consider literature to help us comprehend or give meaning to life. We want our literature to provide us with an allegory; we desire a message on how to live. We want the other to tell us what to do, and the poet herself does not quite supplant this sentimental attitude. At first, she couches the performance in terms of a heroic story; however, the act of writing poetry supercedes such conventional crutches to thinking.

Then, again, tomorrow came. Never a chorus, only the hero.
And tomorrow, and tomorrow.
One after another, up into the floodlights.
I tried to feel the story grow, name by name,
one at a time. My eyes grew heavy, I could feel my attention
slipping.
I tried to shoulder the whole necklace of accidents.
I waited for them all to reappear at the end.
To take a bow. All at once. All together. That I might
remember. (24)

She simply cannot pay heed to the narrative—the chain of
others’ names and representations—and so her train of
thought cuts through the symbolic, narrative overlay and
donw into the untitled thing inside that blossoms inside
her. Ironically, she uses language to cut through language
into the real(m) of pure being. Blanchot elucidates this
paradox in The Space of Literature:

The poem—literature—seems to be linked to a spoken word
which cannot be interrupted because it does not speak; it
is. The poem is not this word itself, for the poem is a
beginning, whereas this word never begins, but always speaks
anew and is always starting over. However, the poet is the
one who has heard this word, who has made himself into an
ear attuned to it, its mediator, and who has silenced it by
pronouncing it. (37)

According to Blanchot, then, the poem is the perpetual
beginning of being; and the poet, in-between a speaking
subjectivity and pure being, is pushed into the space of an
impossible predicament wherein expression silences—voicing
the word hollows out the word, and in so doing hollows out
one’s insides—all the enculturated thoughts and feelings
one has accumulated through mere living. Although Blanchot
would argue this leaves the poet in an essential solitude,

It sets reading in diametrical opposition to the work. For
the work, through the experience of creation, touches upon
absence, upon the torments of the infinite; it reaches the empty depths of that which never begins or ends—the movement which exposes the creator to the threat of the essential solitude and delivers him to the interminable. (The Space of Literature 196-7)

which may be likened to the extinction of the subject, Graham traverses such annihilation and affects not a silencing of being, but a change of being. The performance of art cannot be stilled, for it remains always already the work of sublation. Rather than imposing an ethics of living, literature is a conduit which cuts through conventional morality and thought and opens a space within the reader, the writer, the subject to allow one’s existential being to blossom without reproach or containment. This thing inside is the void of the real that pushes the subject out of the past—out of the other’s conventional representations of reality—and into the future—into the beyond of language. The experience of literature puts the subject on stage in a state of heightened and perpetual self-reflection. When the curtain rises, the audience member who is paying attention to the underside (the inverse) of the performance, as opposed to the superficial morality tale, feels an obligation to question her being, to put the untitled thing that blossoms within in dialectical relation with the real world. This process takes the subject outside indifference and into the core of her real subjectivity.
“Untitled Two” offers another version of the battle with the conventional sheathing of life:

And shades approached. A masonry of shades, one in a parking lot. Give him the darkest inch your mind allows. Hide him in _________ if you will. But where? And fearless truth, where is the thing? And excellence, and skill, all throbbing in the parking lot.

(25)

Shades . . . veils . . . body rags. All shore up the mind in the attempt to keep it from spilling out into irrevocable decay; however, in so doing, all hem it in until it bleeds. The anguish of self-containment makes consciousness throb loose its chains. Consciousness shreds its covering shades, lays its meaning bare, and flattens its understanding upon the parking lot of existence. All facades collapse in upon themselves, leaving a gaping pit that cannot be avoided. The subject drives through the lot, circling until it finds the truth of its existence—the untitled thing that blossoms inside, that decimates the outside, that clears the way for the real of being to stand apart, fearless and indestructible, from the subject.

But being cannot bear to be until the chatter of the outside world is quieted, until the parking lot is completely cleared.

The parking lot coagulates, quasi-maternal, and strict with cradling unnumbered slots—one tall one fingering his hair as he arrives, one coughing as he keeps on wondering. They gather round, gloat, tangle, clot—they’re many-eyed—they forage. Over the gleaming fins and hoods, they seem to chatter. The windshields singe with them, but then they clear.
Overhead sparrows snarl-up, and river, dive,
making a dark clean thought, a bright renown,
and quote each other endlessly,
and throng in hundreds in
surrounding trees. (25)

The parking lot engenders human reality’s destruction and reconstruction of mother nature—the earth’s blood (tar) hardened into scabs that civilization shapes unto its bidding. The original patrons of the lot (insects) subsequently clot around the scar tissue until our windshield wipers clear them away. Birds throng overhead, an Hitchcockian conspiracy plotting our destruction. Following Eliot’s *Four Quartets* before her, the poet muses that humankind cannot bear this natural reality. And so we combat the earth’s work and the birds chatter with our own symbolic networks (parking lots, windshield wipers, the window shades of conventional meaning and language). But not the poet: the poet engages the real on its own terms and concedes not only the deluge of outer reality but the submersion of the self outside-in.

The shades have liquefied.
I try to think them up again.
The banks of cars—the lot is filling up—now oscillate
in morning sun. And sunlight, toothless now,
how it keeps drinking in. And thinking, thinking.
Until the walled-up day hives-open once again.
And they foam-out along its veins. Syllable by syllable.
I give them liberty. They gnarl, they sweep over the hubs,
into the panes, they fill the seats. (25)

As the day breaks open, the subject’s symbolic walls fall.
The poet employs language not as an outside cover, but as an inside cut. Liberated from the outside, the real swarms
inside being. The outside meets the inside; the real merges with the constructed; and human subjectivity becomes a dialectic of inward-looking language.

Around us, toying, like a gigantic customary dream, black water circles, perishing and perishing, swirling black zero we wait in, through which no god appears, and yet through which nothing can disappear, a maximum delay, a sense of blurred desire in it, (26)

To encounter the real is to gather in the death of one’s old, language-oriented subjectivity, and consequently be driven to traverse the negation, the nothingness, the zero-point of being, like a rush of water down a drain. Graham’s hollows and voids are certainly holes, but they are decidedly not empty; they are filled with a questing, questioning desire, the interrogative of being in relation to the real of existence. Before she returns to the world of others, the poet clears the lot and straddles the rail which abuts the abyss:

as she drops—two whispering, one hands in pockets looking down as she, most carefully, leans into the quick step over the silver rail—oh bright forgetting place—then skips to catch up with the rest, and the rail gleams, and the rail overflows with corrugated light. (27)

The untitled thing which blossoms inside the poet is the overwhelming light of language that incorporates nothingness in its representations of presence. The poem is the ungraspable and unthinkable, yet strikingly epiphanic thing which cuts to the quick, anguishing deep inside being.
CHAPTER 5

BARRETT WATTEN:
FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MACHINE

Here sentences translate the other side of the code: to fill in holes and cracks in the pavement. Restrictive screens stand out in relief: concrete networks bypass perspective. (Barrett Watten, “Real-Estate,” I-10 32)

The subject doesn’t know what he is saying, and for the best of reasons, because he doesn’t know what he is. But he sees himself. He sees himself from the other side, in an imperfect manner, as you know, as a consequence of the fundamental incomplete nature of the specular Urbild, which is not only imaginary, but illusory. (Jacques Lacan, Seminar, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955 244-5)

5.1 ANXIETY-IRONY-ANGUISH-OBSSESSION

Our investigations thus far have shown us three versions of post-romantic, post-structuralist poetic vision traversing the linguistic constitution of subjectivity. Adrienne Rich, upon realizing that she has been composed through and through by the discourse of others, grows anxious, if not paranoid. Her poetry represents a desire to shut oneself off from the other’s world, purge the psyche of

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the other’s language, and create an uncontaminated space for self-reflection and self-exploration. The paranoid anxiety regarding the invasion of the other’s words into one’s inner world causes a poetic evasion. Although this sublime flight dodges the storm outside the self, it does, however, circle back into the psyche and dives into the wreck of the mind in order to coax out a poetry of personal catastrophe that annihilates the anxiety of outward, literary-linguistic influence.

Whereas Rich flies from and to anxiety, John Ashbery wades in irony. The romantic side of his psyche mourns the loss of authentic self-reflection that a romantic conception of poetry and language used to afford, a vision which the post-structuralist theory of linguistic codes and conventions has not only convicted, but sentenced to death. Although he no longer intellectually believes that poetic language will help him find himself, he still has romantic faith in a sublime space which undergirds the overgrowth of conventional discourse. Since words cannot directly grasp that realm, the poet subverts language, turns words against themselves in an ironic and carnivalistic play of mirrors whose sheer accumulation of (psychic) distortions may eventually touch upon the truth of the soul.

Whereas Rich is anxious and Ashbery is ironic, Jorie Graham is anguished. Anxiety seeks to evade or discharge any confrontation with the discourse of the other which may
lead to the possibility of self-annihilation; irony
dissolves the anxiety of the loss of the self and instead
suspends the psyche in a state of perpetual play.
Conversely, anguish cuts through the language of the other
and in so doing not only cuts to the quick of the self but
also splits the self asunder. Anguish traverses
annihilation and opens the possibility of that realm of
psychic reality which exists beyond and in spite of
language.

Graham opens the door of possibility, but Watten passes
through it. Graham, and to a lesser extent Ashbery and
Rich, envision an unnameable, untitled thing that exists at
the core of subjectivity which can be neither touched nor
contained by language. They use poetry to approach,
ironize, or annihilate the void, respectively. Conversely,
Watten determines the void to be language itself: Not only
do “Absences rise toward the page” (“Universals, Complete
Thought 13), but the artifacts of language made present
reveal nothing but absence: “Lights of your abscence (sic)
fills up the page.” (“Artifacts,” Complete Thought 16). The
other side of the coin is still the coin: the other side of
language is not some ungraspable, romantic reality beyond
the intuition of our impure thoughts; rather, the other side
of language is language, and it is precisely this paradox
which so obsesses Watten. Graham tears her language asunder
in order to reveal a real subjectivity and finds her being
in the void. Not so Watten, when he shreds language, he strikes the system of language, and only the system of language. His pursuit of Romantic being is forever stalled by his theoretical outlook. Consequently, in attempting to (re)connect with his lost, latent humanity, Watten becomes so obsessed with the machine that he becomes the machine.

William Carlos Williams called the poem a machine made of words and composed an epic association between the human and his surroundings (“one man—like a city”) which eventually connected all forms of language (poetry and prose) in the quest for the language that would contain all the minds of men. However, he ends Paterson with a resolute lament most poets of the twentieth-century make:

We know nothing and can know nothing but the dance, to dance to a measure contrapuntally, Satyriconally, the tragic foot. (236)

In postmodernism, most epic quests fall into a state of satirical self-mockery. All knowledge, every investigation into the underside or the beyond of language ends in the dance of language. Therefore, we can only define humanity through the contradictions and paradoxes of language itself. Language must then be considered the limit-point of human experience. Determining the human means scanning their poetry, their texts. Williams, Rich, and Ashbery deem this requirement a tragedy, for they consider language a necessary evil, a mere conduit into the psyche and the soul
of humanity. Their ultimate goal would be to bypass language and experience the human directly, purely, authentically. Even Graham feels the need to strip her poetry and herself bare in order to experience the raw untitled thing that is oblivious to language. But not Watten. In his critical contribution, *Total Syntax*, Watten theorizes that a poem and a subject are a machine made of words: “If a poem is a machine made of words, it must take on first the entire psychology of living in a world of machines, where modes of communication are automatized” (“The World in the Work: Toward a Psychology of Form” 165). Watten’s poetry assumes into itself the entire symbolic order, absorbing the sea of signifiers:

> Thought is a torrent, the assumption of self is thick, hardened to glass.
> One way to break the hold of the other is to assume it’s yourself. (“Chamber Music,” *Decay* n.p.)

Watten has internalized the language of the other, most notably in his book-length poem *Progress* whose motto (if not the shibboleth for the Language poetry group) calls out: “I am otherwise” (69). He has become so obsessed with the other that he yields his very being to the other—he becomes the other. The poet is otherwise always already occupied on the innerworldly quest of traversing the other of language within himself. There can be no Romantic transcendence, no soaring self-understanding, for the poet is caught and created, forced and forged in language:
Watten is language through and through, and though he will often critique language, as we shall soon see, he does not do so in order to destroy and thereby supercede it as Graham would. His critique of language is a critique not of the external other that alternatively invades or bars access to the self, but rather of the most innerworldly experiences known to humankind. The self-reflecting poet who journeys inward to discover, for instance, the books and languages that compose his existence, recognizes that the inside is the outside: “In the library in which I find myself, exteriors are the master / plan” (“Relays,” Complete Thought 30). Language is inwardness, and poetry engenders the most authentic encounter with the truth of ourselves that we have available to us.

Watten’s axiomatic “I am otherwise” mirrors the maxims of our final theorist. The post-structuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan often explicated in his seminars that “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other” (Seminar XI 131). This means that the very foundation of our passionate, thinking being (the contaminated core of personality which Rich denies, the lost, inaccessible fundament which Ashbery mourns, the untitled, hollow thing which Graham lays bare) is inscribed into us by the conventional language, broadly
construed, of our elders, our culture, our lovers. We are what we see, what we hear, what we read. The symbolic world engenders us outside of and beneath our conscious knowledge. Moreover, our psychic economy, our humanity, is shaped by the effects of language: “The unconscious is constituted by the effects of speech on the subject, it is the dimension in which the subject is determined in the development of the effects of speech, consequently the unconscious is structured like a language” (Seminar XI 149). Consequently, our anxieties cannot lie with language, for words are who we are. According to this view of language and psyche, the ironic distortion of figures and tropes as melancholic answer to some so-called lost romantic vision is reduced to an act of bad faith. The symbolic should be enjoyed, not stripped. Words are who we are; if they are hollows and voids, then so are we.

“[M]an’s desire is the desire of the Other” (Seminar XI 38). This knowledge induces Rich’s greatest fear. So to her complementary theorist of the anxiety of influence Bloom. The prior voices of the dead, canonized other flows in and drowns out the creative vision of the poet in the present. The act of writing becomes a struggle for self, for self ex-pression, a battle between the outer voices of the dead and the inner voice of the living. If creativity were just a matter of inspiration by an-other—say, for instance, a muse’s desires channeled through the poet—then
there would exist no reason to write, because it’s already been said by someone else . . . and better. Rather, what arouses the poet, according to Bloom, as we argued in Chapter 2, is agon: the desire of the self to give birth to her own sublime voiced pitted against the desires of the others who have already encountered and expressed the sublime. For Lacan, on the other hand, the symbolic arena co-opts all anyway: applying his theories to the poet, one finds that the realm of poetry is ordered by the call of language. Whereas Bloom creates a theory of poetry in which the poet writes in order to repress the voices that overrun her thoughts, Lacan creates a theory of psyche in which the subject is positioned by language:

By itself, the play of the symbol represents and organises, independently of the peculiarities of its human support, this something which is called a subject. The human subject doesn’t foment this game, he takes his place in it, and plays the role of the little pluses and minuses in it. He is himself an element in this chain which, as soon as it is unwounded, organises itself in accordance with laws. Hence the subject is always on several levels, caught up in crisscrossing networks. (Seminar II 192)

When a subject knows she is a pawn in the game of language, any real self-understanding must come from an interrogative internalization of that language. The subject is positioned by language, and “A person is set in motion by a group of words” (“Plasma,” Plasma/Paralleles/”X“ n.p.). The desire for self-reflection then becomes the desire for language as such.
This is a far cry from John Ashbery’s ironic self-reflections that have lost all real hope of touching the underside of language, for Ashbery puts into practice theoretist Paul De Man’s deconstruction of rhetoric. De Man’s version of subjectivity is blindness: as we saw in Chapter 3, according to his reading of Derrida’s reading of Rousseau, the romantic subject, in order to exist as a coherent psychic entity, must blind himself to the bottomless abyss that inevitably opens up within the logic of his logos. So too, Ashbery: although the poet seeks soul in a poem like “The Skaters,” he merely slides in circles and glides on the surface of language until he gives up the quest and regresses to an ironic play of superficial subjectivity in poems like “Daffy Duck in Hollywood.”

Ashbery has internalized De Man’s theory of prosopopeia, which says that language is “false and misleading” (Resistance to Theory 49-50; see also “Autobiography as De-Facement” in The Rhetoric of Romanticism) as praxical demand for a purposefully defaced autobiography. Ashbery implements De Man’s allegorical readings of tangled and entangling veiling and unveiling figuration (“Shelley Disfigured” in The Rhetoric of Romanticism) as formula for how and what he writes of his lyrical self. De Man and Ashbery, who follows de Man’s instruction manual, ironize tropes and figures in order to let the mind play without conventional restriction. For Lacan, on the other hand, the
subject is always already subverted by language: “The subject is nothing other than what slides in a chain of signifiers, whether he knows which signifier he is the effect of or not” (Seminar XX 50). De Man intentionally pushes the otherwise fixed subject onto the slippery chain; Lacan sees the subject as sliding from the very institutionalization of his subjectivity.

A poet like Jorie Graham becomes anguished over this fact of linguistic composition. She hollows out her-self in order to either free herself from or move beyond language into a real of subjectivity. Maurice Blanchot also theorizes an infinite conversation that, through the process of anguished sublation, extinguishes the subject and reaches beyond all bounds of recoverability, either subjective or literary-linguistic. In “Literature and the Right to Death,” Blanchot theorizes that through writing, the self merges with the other and undermines the self. More importantly, both self-qua-other are opened up to a space of utter negation:

This is why it seems to me to be an experiment whose effects I cannot grasp, no matter how consciously they were produced, and in the face of which I shall be unable to remain the same, for this reason: in the presence of something other, I become other. But there is an even more decisive reason: this other thing—the book—of which I had only an idea and which I could not possibly have known in advance, is precisely myself become other.

The book, the written thing, enters the world and carries out its work of transformation and negation. (The Blanchot Reader 371-2)
This process of prosaic nullification finds its poetic counterpart in the intertwining and unraveling of Adam and Eve in Jorie Graham’s “Chaos (Eve).” The self is built up through the other’s language, only to be ripped apart and shed so that the new body can emerge into nothingness.

Lacan’s conception of subjectivity is closer to Blanchot’s than Bloom’s or De Man’s, for it is attuned to the existential void that undergirds our being in the world: “’I’ am in the place from which a voice is heard clamouring ‘the universe is a defect in the purity of Non-Being’” (“Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” Écrits 317). The ego is a mirror, an illusion of coherence that language merely covers over with so-called meaning. The subject is fundamentally alienated. Because the subject is called subject precisely because he is the subject of language, which is a system that runs contrary to being, the subject exists initially and for the most part in the realm of non-being. The subject is a machine made of words—not being—which desires to overcome its alienation and rediscover its lost being. Graham and Blanchot anguish over language until they rub a hole within the symbolic order—themselves—that allows them to pass through into another realm, the realm of the real. Lacan, on the other hand, does not believe that the real can be achieved because we are fundamentally alienated once we enter into the covenant with language. The subject cannot strip away his
symbolic chains in order to reveal being, for what can be revealed is merely the underside of language. The psyche does not anguish, it falls away:

If he is apprehended at his birth in the field of the Other, the characteristic of the subject of the unconscious is that of . . . falling . . . beneath the signifier that develops its networks, its chains and its history . . . at an indeterminate place. (Seminar XI 208)

Since language is our inwardness, the real cannot be. Although we cannot strip ourselves of language, as Graham and Blanchot attempt, Lacan does construct a way for us to be both inside and outside language at the same time:

Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him ‘by flesh and blood’; so total that they bring to his birth, along with the gifts of the stars, if not with the gifts of the fairies, the shape of his destiny, so total that they give the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he is not yet and even beyond his death; and so total that through them his end finds its meaning in the last judgement, where the Word absolves his being or condemns it—unless he attain the subjective bringing to realization of being-for-death. (“The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” Écrits 68)

Lacan argues that the symbolic order enshrouds the subject, defining the order of his actions in life and giving his position in life meaning. The only path out of such circumscription is for the subject to confront language head on, much like Rich did in her middle period. What the subject must bring to bear in the face of language which would control his very consistency as subject is a form of being that exists within and beyond language, being-for-
death. If language brings the meaning of death inside the subject, as we saw with Rich’s anxiety of influence, then the poet’s sole power is to transform his psychological reaction to such an invasive investment. Rather than employing a language that means anything, the poet uses language as language much as one would traverse the negative of nothingness. The subject of language who rediscovers his being in language is really just murdering his symbolic identifications and his linguistic investments. Divesting of his external-cum-internalized relationships with language, he attains a purely internal relationship with the ultimate Romantic limit to subjectivity—death. After hollowing out his symbolic self, he goes on with language—the subject persists in writing toward being, and his being can only be a being-for-death. Being-for-language is coterminous with being-for-death.

Slavoj Žižek, Lacan’s most popular explicator, has another name for being-for-death, subjective destitution. Subjective destitution hollows out and distances the subject from the language of the symbolic order—without shredding/shedding it. Subjective destitution is the dissociation from and the loss of language. Žižek deciphers destitution as the evacuation, not of subjectivity, but of the position of subjectivity. Rich and Bloom have hysterical anxiety over the role of discourse in their inner lives; Ashbery and De Man attempt to master language by
being the one’s who can ironize it. Graham and Blanchot void the subject, but Watten and Lacan do not void the subject, rather they detach themselves from their investment in language via subjective destitution:

The Master is the subject who is fully engaged in his (speech) act, who, in a way, “is his word,” whose word displays an immediate performative efficiency; the agent of the university discourse is, on the contrary, fundamentally disengaged: he posits himself as the self-erasing observer (and executor) of “objective laws” accessible to neutral knowledge (in clinical terms, his position is closest to that of the pervert). The hysterical subject is the subject whose very existence involves radical doubt and questioning, his entire being is sustained by the uncertainty as to what he is for the Other’s desire, the hysterical subject is the subject par excellence. Again, in clear contrast to it, the analyst stands for the paradox of the desubjectivized subject, of the subject who fully assumed what Lacan calls “subjective destitution,” that is, who breaks out of the vicious cycle of intersubjective dialectics of desire and turns into an acephalous being of pure drive. (“Four Discourses, Four Subjects” 80-81)

This state of being comprises a mindlessness devoid of anxiety over language. Notably, being-for-death as subjective destitution is decidedly not an entrance into the real (for the human who thinks in language, that would be impossible), but rather a psychic preservation of the potentiality for encounter with the real, that is, it is a drive toward the real of being. When Graham and Blanchot shed language, they negate their selves for the real, in resisting symbolization, withstands subjectivity, which as we have seen again and again, is composed by language; when Lacan calls for being-for-death and Žižek calls for subjective destitution, they negate not the self but rather
the symbolic order’s stranglehold on subjectivity and in so doing attempt to allow a being to drive itself out of the place of non-being. Graham and Blanchot engage a real that resists symbolization by hollowing out meaning and subjectivity, but Watten and Lacan offer a symbol that bores its way into the real: “Both participate in this offering to the signifier that is constituted by the hole in the real, the one as a hollow for concealment, the other as a boring-hole to escape from” (“Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire,” Écrits 304). Subjective destitution murders not the thing inside the self, at the core of our innerworldly existence, but rather cuts to the quick of the thing outside that persists on forcing its way in.¹

Destitution kills language. By extension, then, the author in this view is not dead; however her language—the codes and conventions that tell her what and how to write—is.

Lacan reverses Barthes: the death of the symbolic order frees the subject—the author—to assert her rights (her writes), albeit not as the psychological subject we normally conceived of, but as the subject of the signifier, as pure language:

It is in that respect that the subject turns out to be—and this is only true for speaking beings—a being whose being is always elsewhere, as the predicate shows. The subject is never more than fleeting and vanishing, for it is a subject only by a signifier and to another signifier. (Seminar XX 142)
Thus Lacanian theory drives subjectivity into a state of utter textuality in which the subject is not subjected to language but is language itself, devoid of semantic meaning but replete with disenchanted being.

Rich and Bloom want the unconscious to escape the infiltration of language; they want the poetry of the soul to sublime from the inside out. Ashbery and De Man believe that the unconscious is a play of surfaces, merely/mirrorly the underside of language that cannot be grasped. Graham and Blanchot know the unconscious to be forged by language, but they anguish themselves into an oblivion which hollows them out so they can truly know who they are. Watten and Lacan know that the symbolic order constitutes the unconscious (in other words, that language drives inwardness) and they chase language into the far recesses of the subject. If the outside has been internalized, then it is our very unconscious, exemplified in our dreams for instance, that is precisely which alienates us.

Dreams are our life, which we will never be able to penetrate. There can be no separation from an invisible world. The first moments of our being are an image of what we are. The various apparitions are the states in which these occur. A hazy mirror turns back the sight, a progression of objects arrives one at a time. Replicas of another life impossible to identify, light and shadow intermixed. The picture frame is constant, altered only by our design. The actual world is before us, we are therefore unable to move. What we commonly observe in dreams is real. It is ourselves who are estranged. (*City Fields, Frame 142-3*)
A dream is the rebus of the real. How does one proceed when reality and dream are reversed, when dreams prove to replicate outer reality, but in enigmatic form such that one’s private dreams are uncanny and unexplainable to oneself? One runs down the linguistic system behind the dream; one chases the language that would create the impossible dream structure. Both poet and theorist foreground language in their respective work. Watten does not just play with language; he obsesses over the textuality of subjectivity. Lacan supposes a subjectivity positioned by its entry into the symbolic order. Both poet and theorist seek to go beyond language, but not as Graham and Blanchot do. The symbolic order, language, is the order of the machine. Watten and Lacan conceive of a subjectivity that sheds not textuality, but rather its alienation of textuality; they conceptualize a “beyond of signification” (*Seminar II* 188), which goes beyond the language of the other by becoming language, purely and simply. Poet and theorist desire to desire to drive beyond the present relationship with texts and to another level of textuality, one which is full of itself as signifier rather than mournful of the necessary absence of the signified. Graham and Blanchot attempt to create a real of subjectivity that resists symbolization; Watten and Lacan attempt to create a real of subjectivity that is the pure processing of textuality with no desire for an absent signified being.
5.2 WELCOME TO THE MACHINE

I must go through this machine
In order to be born, boxing
Gloves put in face yielding
To nipples in baby’s mouth. . . .
(Barrett Watten, Progress 117)

The analysis must aim at the passage of true speech, joining
the subject to an other subject, on the other side of the
wall of language.
(Jacques Lacan, Seminar II 246)

As I have written elsewhere, Barrett Watten’s book-length poem Progress engenders the poet’s navigation through the multiple discourses that compose our collective symbolic existence. The poem is a tour de force journal of the poet’s relationship with language, the traversing of the vast expanse of signifiers that propel our being-in-the-world. As diary, Progress provides its readers not the facticity of subjective experience, but rather an intimate portrait of a psyche undergoing textuality. The poet journeys through language not only to find himself, but simply in order to exist, to be: “I must go through this machine / in order to be born.”

At first, we resist language, as words cut into our pre-discursive ways of relating to the world around us, for instance, our primary caregivers—our mothers (our others, our m/others). Language puts a glove over our being: words not only envelop, they veil being. Our entry into the
symbolic world is fraught with subjectivization and alienation; we are boxed out of the realm of being and thrust into the realm of meaning, as Lacan explains:

The effects of language are always mixed with the fact, which is the basis of the analytic experience, that the subject is subject only from being subject to the field of the Other, the subject proceeds from his synchronic subjection in the field of the Other. (Seminar XI 188)

Our primordial ontological ties are severed; we are irrevocably othered. This assault is exactly what a poet like Adrienne Rich and a theorist like Harold Bloom dreads, for, in the precise sense, it means the demise of one’s originary being. However, it does not mean the death of the subject, for the subject as we know it does not yet exist. The broken bonds of being are presently replaced by symbolic chains: “boxing / Gloves put in face yielding / To nipples in baby’s mouth. . . .” Under the active force of language, being yields to textuality. Milk is no longer simply the flow of life, it gains the connotation of life; it is coded and codified as life. The symbolic world fits the real world of being like a glove.

Jacques Lacan defines the early process of subjectivization as the mirror stage. Initially, there is no subject to speak of; there is no subject which speaks because the subject knows nothing of language. One’s sense of being is a blob: there is no difference between inside and outside—there only is. From our lingua-rational perspective, the subject does not exist because its thinking
and its psychic economy, if it can be called either, is nonexistent: “The subject is no one. It is decomposed, in pieces” (Seminar II 54). Until God said let there be light and the being looked out into the realm and saw another being, “And it is jammed, sucked in by the image, the deceiving and realised image. That is where it finds its unity” (Seminar II 54). Lacan asserts that in the mirror stage the undifferentiated, fragmented subject of being first realizes the distinction between self and other and takes the other’s agglutinative image for oneself. This image is what initially gives the being psychic coherence and shifts the being from pure ontology to subjectivity, a subjectivity which by necessity must be frustrated, if not estranged, for the subject recognizes that the other, in making the self feel whole, also limits and splits self-being:

The entire dialectic which I have given you as an example under the name of the mirror stage is based on the relation between, on the one hand, a certain level of tendencies which are experienced—let us say, for the moment, at a certain point in life—as disconnected, discordant, in pieces—and there’s always something of that that remains—and on the other hand, a unity with which it is merged and paired. It is in this unity that the subject for the first time knows himself as a unity, but as an alienated, virtual unity. It does not partake in the characteristics of inertia of the phenomenon of consciousness under its primitive form, on the contrary, it has a vital, or anti-vital, relation with the subject. (Seminar II 50)

One’s first self-understanding is thereby estranged. One enters into an imaginary relationship with the self and,
thereby, with the world that must be forever mediated. The self can never be primary, originary, or vital, for it was founded in virtuality—in an image that is not one’s own. The self is born in a state of negation; the search for self must therefore navigate the reflections that regress into the formative recesses of the mind.

For Lacan, the image may germinate the psyche, but the word delivers it, for language bears the alienation of being.

In man, the imaginary relation has deviated, in so far as that is where the gap is produced whereby death makes itself felt. The world of the symbol, the very foundation of which is the phenomenon of repetitive insistence, is alienating for the subject, or more exactly it causes the subject to always realise himself elsewhere, and causes his truth to be always in some part veiled from him. The ego lies at the intersection of the one and the other. (Seminar II 210)

Entry into the symbolic order constitutes the next stage of mediation after one’s prototypical figuration. The subject may be formed by an image, but one is fully positioned (completely subjectivized) by language. Bloom theorizes a poet’s rivalry with the poetic fore-fathers, a contention he takes from psychoanalysis, from Freud’s conception of the Oedipus complex, and ultimately from Lacan. Where the mirror stage leaves off, the Oedipus complex takes up:

It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to a natural maturation—the very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in man, on a cultural mediation as
Freud conceived the Oedipus complex in terms of a typical sexual socialization: the child bonds with the mother, but soon encounters the powerful father’s violently jealous threats for taking his wife. Lacan reads Freud through the lens of language: child and mother possess an imaginary bond of self-reflection, and the father, who doesn’t share the life-flowing experience of the breast, uses language to sever the dyad and create a relationship with his child. Lacan emphasizes not the real flesh and blood father, but the paternal function, the name-of-the-father. Under threat of the word (the Word), the subject leaves imaginary pre-discursive ontology behind and enters the world of speech. The symbolic supercedes the imaginary. Lacan: “The symbolic world is the world of the machine” (*Seminar II* 47). Watten: “I must go through this machine / in order to be born.”

Watten journeys through the symbolic order; the poet traverses figures of speech. In so doing he loses the sense of primary bonds and is compelled into ratiolinguistic thought that trusts the materials of textuality.

Figure. State is severed from States of affairs? You Speak for themselves, Materials the voice comes out . . . .

Only I trust the materials. (*Progress 2*)
The self becomes not only a figure of speech but also a function of the language that orders our intimacy with others and ourselves (our very inwardness). Consequently, the being which has been subjected to a state of language tends to see language acting everywhere. Everything becomes a text; the entire world becomes symbolic and speechified. Things—the everyday raw materials of life—do not simply exist, they speak, and yet not from a point of inwardness, because one’s insides are dense with the outside, the language of the other. Their depth and density is textual; sentience becomes stalled at the level of language:

density.

So fullness terminates,

doubling, “I saw her inside.”

I have carved out something
to pump sentience—can’t. (“Weight,” Opera—Works 18)

They speak not from the space of internal ontology, but from the external point of language paradoxically internalized, the self-speaking machine. Driving inside the psyche, one is boomeranged outside: “You’re inside a building and then outside it” ([You’re inside a building...], Opera—Works 28). The start and finish of existence is symbolic. The fabric of the world itself fabricates ... and the poet is perpetually obliged (cursed) to transcribe such a textualized existence:

Ineffective, the curse returns.
I write, as in a mirror,  
This present.  
The weather is  
Fiction, surrounding the whole . . . . 

Fog lifts, to be chained down  
In warehouses.  
Some men’s  
Codes are locally inversed.  
Subtract an idea from thinking . . . . (4) 

No longer does the subject who has attuned himself to the undercurrent of whispers of the world see an image in the mirror; he sees language—pure language. The word has sublimed the image . . . and the subject: “Each word speaks as if outside us . . . as if we were only evidence of it (Frame 269). The new chains are not the subject’s relations to the world, but rather to the building blocks of language—fiction, codes, signifiers. It is the duty of every subject to hear the voices of the world, but it falls to the poet in particular to interpret and translate the call of the world.7

Psyche is the voice which springs from the other’s call; poetry is psyche’s reactionary relationship (anxious, ironic, anguished, or obsessive) with the call of language. Watten obsesses over language: he is forever compelled to “write, as in a mirror / This present” because he is always processing the codes of the cultural world. Even when the veil that covers the world is lifted, he is still chained to the warehouses of language, striving at all times to separate out the original idea—the thing called being—from
his symbolic thinking. For the thinking subject, symbols replace things and displace the being of the world. Moreover, the symbolic world encompasses all. The psyche subjected to the symbolic world traverses a perpetual processing of his realm, as Watten himself says of Progress:

That certainly would describe its conditions of production; each poem begins in a state of “not knowing” itself or what it is going to say, a virtual heap of unprocessed conceptual raw materials. The process of composition draws out recognitions in the materials and possible sequences, orders, and implications; thematic strands stand out in relief much like the “purple snake / Stands out on porcelain tiles” at the opening of Progress. (Manuel Brito, “An Interview with Barrett Watten,” 20)

The act of writing the poem works through one’s relationship with the world, with the symbolic order.

Watten writes incessantly in order to put himself one step in front of the other, much like Maurice Blanchot’s conception of the function of literature as traversing of the nothingness. However, whereas Blanchot’s thought seeks to circumscribe the void, Watten’s composition desires to realize a state of nothing but textuality. The poet desires to be . . . pure symbol, pure voice, pure articulation.

Then I erupt my articulation.
Down through history, sand
Scratching at entrances,
A private hospital,
steps. . . . (Progress 5)

In the process of composing Progress, the poet becomes a lava flow of language. Not only does he erupt language out into the midst of the world, but he follows its inner veins to the roots of his psyche. The history of subjectivity is
an erosion of self beneath the f(r)ictitious sands of textuality. Although the world may exist in a grain of sand, it is not comprised not of the thing itself, but rather a symbol striving to get back to the first word, attempting to make sense of the master cut that drove the self from the realm of being into a state of significance. The outside, symbolic world wears at the likes of Adrienne Rich’s shutters. What distinguishes Rich from Watten is the nature of their anxiety. While Rich dreads the other of language overrunning her soul and subsequently shutters herself to a singular version of discourse, Watten fears he will not have the constitution to ride language all the way out into the world, all the way into the self, or beyond the limits of both. One might think, then, that Graham’s evacuation of self is similar to Watten’s beyond. However, whereas Graham wants to surpass language altogether by scratching herself free and re-gaining a real of being, Watten believes that becoming the other—language—scratching at the door will accomplish his ultimate goal. He wants to ride language to its final destination; he desires to merge with language in order to access that order which formed him.

While a bomb goes off in bed.
As in a marble landscape,
The point where language
Is explained,
numbers-by-paint. . . . (9)
And what is the order that formed him? Language—a bomb. As we learned with Rich and Bloom, language is death embodied in the word and negation incarnated in the trope. Language encompasses the machinations of death; textuality is the covering cherub of death. Obsession over language compels the subject to circle death without succumbing to death; once the subject stops speaking or writing, he will sink. Consequently, the poet fantastically desires to become language so he will not have to bear the core fact of language. Being-for-language is being-for-death in obsession’s clothes.

To become this machine, language. To follow language to the end of the line: “The analysis must aim at the passage of true speech, joining the subject to an other subject, on the other side of the wall of language” (Lacan, *Seminar II* 246). Lacan believes that one can move beyond the language of the other and toward a language of authentic subjectivity, but to do so, one cannot be invested in conventional language as we currently know it. One must recognize that language is language and nothing besides, otherwise it will suck one into the black hole of its infinite play of meanings. In order to find the real of one’s being, one must refuse the paternal function, the name-of-the-father, the meanings that undergird the symbolic order. *If*, as Lacan says, “It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function
which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (“The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” Écrits 67), then refusing the symbolic order, illustrated by one’s divestment of signification, establishes the subject in an impossible realm, the real:

This signifying game between metonymy and metaphor, up to and including the active edge that splits my desire between a refusal of the signifier and a lack of being, and links my fate to the question of my destiny, this game, in all its inexorable subtlety, is played until the match is called, there where I am not, because I cannot situate myself there. (“The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud” Écrits 166)

Watten takes his poetry past the point where the match is called. He believes that by bursting forth onto the page all the multiplicitous voices that swirl around in his head, he can achieve the ultimate satisfaction: he can escape his subject position within the symbolic order and merge with the world of language—and in the process, explain the world . . . and himself. Because language enumerates the world, in order to understand the world, one must compose the word even as one paradoxically refuses its law of meaning. In painting by numbers, the activity in which children of all ages learn to represent the world, the scene is divided into different numerically marked planes. Using an-other’s prefabricated schema, one fills in the blanks of existence with the color codes of an-other’s choosing. As one crosses from a state of being to the realm of subjectivity, the
subjectivized psyche comes to see how being is marked with textuality.

For the psyche subjected to and constituted in the symbolic order, the word is the world, both outer and inner. Consequently, the symbolic subject interested in self-reflection (like the poet, for instance) inevitably comes to pursue language. While other poets attempt to find a language capable of portraying one’s meaningful experience in the world, Watten strives to create a language adequate to language itself. For Watten, the quest for identity and the bespeaking of the world are coalesced into the call of and for language in and of itself, a call which refuses the law of explication even while speaking the system.

   Behind this word its claim is
   The world.
   Would, a blur.
   To explain is torment with
   Sharpened plants all around. . . . (37)

Between the word and the world lies the poet striving to connect the two in his mind. The process is endless, as words are constantly flowing and language is perpetually evolving. The endeavor becomes torturous because language itself is an infinite blur of possibilities and potentialities. The person who pursues “to the point where language / is explained” must of necessity be obsessive for language, as we saw with Ashbery and De Man’s reflections, always recedes, collected in the black hole of death.
If our previous explorations into poets’ reaction to such onto-linguistic knowledge has taught us anything it is first and foremost this: poets aspire not simply to accept and absorb the conventional discourse of the everyday symbolic world at face value; rather, they desire to create—to transform and transfigure. Thus, they supercede, sublime, and sublate conventional language and become poetic language. Bloom theorizes an anxiety of influence in which poets sublime prior poetries; Rich, for example, uses the anxiety of prior language to fashion a poetry of her own. De Man deconstructs conventional rhetorical tropes in order to create a place for the poet, a task taken up by Ashbery who ironizes and plays with language in order to skate around the subject of self-reflection. Blanchot supposes a space of impersonal literature; Graham anguishes over language until she strips it off and lays herself hollow and open. Lacan conceives of the reign of the symbolic order, and Watten follows the rule of linguistic law to the extreme. Indeed, Watten’s compliance is so intensive, that paradoxically, he subverts the order. He so profoundly believes in the symbolic order’s fabrications that he writes his own. In order to attain “the point where language / is explained,” he produces volumes upon volumes of language. So that he not become mired in endless significance (so that he may see the forest through the trees), he explodes language, speech, every form of articulation. While Ashbery
ironizes language and the meanings that slide beneath it, Watten foregrounds language because language is significant unto itself: “The words mean nothing, and the sentences come from nowhere” (City Fields, Frame 147). For instance, by inverting “paint-by-numbers” into “numbers-by-paint,” the poet halts the nominal assignment of meaning. The object of the poem turns from the meaning behind the words to the very processes of language—its composition and its reception. Watten’s furious loops of language may break the cycle of conventionalized meaning formation, but they do not constitute deconstruction per se. Deconstruction, particularly of the de Manian variety, ironizes out of existence the stable ground of the world and the self. Meaning is replaced with aporia; consciousness trips over and falls into the abyss. But here the hammer falls to wake consciousness up to the possibility of pure subjectivity of language. There are no gaps; subjectivity is coextensive with language, with the many “faces” of the symbolic order:

To break ground with a hammer.
The rolling of eyes is not
Repetitive but a loop.
I
Am not one portrait but many. . . . (45)

The burst of various articulations all at once, therefore, engenders not a psychotic confusion of subjectivities, but rather a pure release of the one machine that works through each and every identity—the other, the symbolic order, language. Lacan asserts, “The subject is nothing other than
what slides in a chain of signifiers, whether he knows which
signifier he is the effect of or not” (Seminar XI 50).

The machine, language, is the cause; subjectivity is
the effect. Watten’s effort to understand his inwardness
coincides with the expression (expulsion, explosion) of
precisely what composes him: “You and I are these words only
(“Direct Address, Conduit 61). Language is internalized and
language is externalized; what goes in must come out:

Contents built in from outside,
       But it is only in a voice
       There can be a determination,
       Alingual,
       and truly under eyes. . . . (54)

In order to determine the contents of his inwardness, the
poet must not only process but also eliminate language. In
order to supercede the machine, he must become it. Under
the watchful eyes of the big Other, the poet speaks. And
his indeterminable address of the other becomes an
evacuation of self which leaves the subject lacking,
alingual.

That language is pure difference is no revelation; de
Saussure and other structuralists showed this decades ago.
Language only works if words are relative, if one word does
not mean the same thing as another. Moreover,
deconstruction has decentered transcendental meaning; this
point constitutes the bulk of Derrida’s philosophical work.
Meaning is no longer either transparent or guaranteed;
rather, it encompasses an unstable, shifting effect of
language. In such a state, the effect of that differential system on the author’s psyche becomes a question of great importance. As we have argued again and again, the poet is born of alienation:

The poetry is this distance
Given in place of names.
Idaho, Vermont, Louisiana
Fall out of sky,
onto plains. . . . (48)

The previous poetry that we have looked at strives to work through the frustration. Language poetry, Watten’s poetry, embraces estrangement. The Language poet accepts textual determination of psyche; language alienates one from Romantic soul: “Separation burns from word to word” (“Relays,” Complete Thought 32). Watten has no desire to recapture an original (that is, pre-discursive) psychological understanding of himself; instead, he desires to become the machine that made him. Rather than writing the great Romantic lyric poem of personal self-expression in the face of sublime adversity, Language poets like Watten foreground language as artifice and allow themselves—their very psyches—to be subsumed by the words. The poem foregrounds language as language and in so doing must forego proper names by deconstructing their cohesion. Watten strives to clear the playing field of discourse of its codified borders. He inverts the name and subverts identity. According to this conception, Idaho, Vermont, and Louisiana exist merely as arbitrary entities. Such
identities are lines on a map and nothing more. As such, they can be erased to reveal the pure plain of existence underneath the trace. However, the poet does not erase—rather, he embraces the symbolic lines of thought. Watten exists in the liminal point between the word and the thing; his poetic processes outstrip the typical Romantic subjectivity by traversing not the great chain of being, but the great chain of signifiers. The Language poet becomes the machine that generates him.

Machines have neither identities nor feelings, they simply work. They exist simply to produce; similarly, writers exist to write, more often than not the innerworldly experience of self (at least in the conceptions we have discussed in our examination). Watten blurs the line between machine and writer:

A desire to write as inculcated  
By a writer alone in a room  
Only if you can read this  
To produce myself,  

a dialogue. . . . (118)

Watten becomes a writing machine of self-production. His raw materials are language. The book-length poem Progress conceptualizes the poet’s progress in becoming more than a subject of language. Progress renders Watten’s becoming . . . . becoming pure writing machine. “I am otherwise.” I becomes I, a translation of textuality never to be completed because the text will never (can never) end:

I gathers monumenta.
Like
Language, any part is endless. . . .
In the central foreground,
lies.

[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]
The six parts of the person I
Equal to you,
an equation
Altered by walls, by labor
Translated, less than complete. . . . (14-5)

Language snowballs and overruns subjectivity, but the poet
counters by overrunning language with poetry, the perpetual
process of writing. Subjectivity becomes a relation between
texts. In fact, everything’s a text, such that the intimate
relations between human beings become equations in the
building block of the symbolic order. I = you because I am
already other, wise of language’s constitutions and
fabrications upon my psyche. I burst with language, “I
denotates I at all points” (24). But my meaningful address
is exploded and expelled, deformed and deconstructed:

An entrance to exploded address.
I imagines the manifold I
To be unstressed.

Ambient
Meteors deformalize the probe. . . . (29)

Any investigation into the secret meaning of this will
reveal only this: another layer of language.

The business of art is surface
And its extent.
Place I
Pronouns in the middle of
Enhanced perception of depth. . . . (62)
The poet is pure language, pure machine. Unlike Ashbery, there remains no nostalgia for depth, for soul. The only thing that matters is the ability to read and write. I do not exist, but I does: “Not to be I seems to indicate this” (67).

Into the center of I,
crowded
As in a panic of speech.
The unit occurs at limits
Not understood until lived. . . .

But it is not process.
A hand
Is holding the upper hand
While hands hold the hand.
The wall cracks and topples. . . .

On its fictitious base.
Block
Pursuit to lose the thread
Of intelligence in contact
With an absolute blankness. . . . (70)

I am filled to overbrimming with the speech of the other, the symbolic order. I am absolute blankness: I am being-toward-language; I am being-toward-death: I am subjective destitution. I am pure writing machine, but as such I am prone to breakdown. My artifice may erupt articulation, but it is also prone to breakdown, to implosion. I am you, you, the word, are my point of departure, yet you are—I am—blinded by your—my—opacity. I have over-sight, yet I can’t see through my own materiality:

Nowhere is a you that can see
This,
a point of departure
That an I can have no eyes. The male is only a peacock. . . . (72)

I look at myself in the mirror and see you, the image of a figure, a part of speech.

Or an image of parts of speech. The pronoun I as a business Letter, to be used only for Emphasis, in confrontations. . . . (74)

I am a venture in formal correspondences. I am a fiction, I am a story—

The language tells a story, I
Moving slowly through water
Followed by you in the wake,
Tracing an immobile shoreline. . . .

That is an it on every side, I
Displacing the continuity
Of involuntary recognitions
Until even the pronouns melt. . . . (78-9)

—a story whose protagonist dissolves into the frame of my surroundings. I recognize myself in the language of the other . . . I lose myself in the language of the other . . . I disperse I . . . I scatters I:

The remnants thrown in a basket,
   In a heap.
      A patch sewn on
   I becomes a Red Cross nurse,
   In run-on time of discourse. . . . (80)

I am like (Graham’s) Eve because once I realize that I am constructed from Adam’s rib, I shed myself, then work to stitch the sutures of myself back together again. However, I am not like Eve because her conscious is cleared—she

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reaches down into herself and touches the origin of her anguished abjection, the nothingness that exists beyond the bounds of language—while mine is forever running—I am pure obsession which cannot stop talking . . . I am a run-on sentence; I am an infernal machine that knows no limit to language.

From deep in its own distance
To striking,
    I is an other
In accumulations of clouds
To make an ambush for pilots. . . . (88)

My depth is ironic. Like John Ashbery, I skate along the surface, afraid to strike inward, dreading the knowledge of my subjective demise. Unlike Ashbery, I harbor no illusions of metaphysical transcendence: I am neither mirror nor lamp; I neither reflect nor illuminate. I am your black hole; I am my own opacity. Being does not exist within me; meaning does not become me. I am the fog of voices that cloud your mind and dissolve your clarity. I am the covering cherub and concealment combined.  

On background of visceral clots
    Seeming damage to a retina
In a negative of desire,
      man
In dark glasses a mercenary. . . .

Not Hermes,
    drinking in energy
From a hermetically sealed
I in pints of dark liquid
Afternoons between 4 and 6. . . . (90)
You cannot see me, for I am your already internalized other who resides deep in your unconscious psyche. If you look inward, you will only hurt yourself for my ex-timacy\textsuperscript{11} is more than any quest for inwardness can bear. . . . Or understand—I am your god, a bush burning your eyes, an antithetical, inhuman illumination conjugated with conflagration. You desire that which you lack, an “I”; consequently, you desire me, myself, I . . . am a vision in negation, the background (the unconscious white noise) of subjectivity placed in the foreground of consciousness; a plague of signifiers mercilessly murdering your illusions of psychological significance (in-wardness) and materialistically replacing them with pure artificiality (ex-wardness); not a man but a message only, which is hermetically sealed because there is nothing inside but the inner distance of textuality, which always arrives at its destination because it simply is the crushing drive of language personified; this letter liquified of meaning and addressed to it-self only, the language of the other; a routine of missed meetings and decomposed correspondence.

This is an irritable art, scan
Of I breaks down to habits
Where each stop is a point,
A you restricted to meaning. . . . (93)

Poetry, the art of artifice, scans my meter and finds me lacking in meaning (I have no desire for any investment anyway) yet flush with vestments (I exist in habit only).
When I write the poem, it does not simply re-present me, it analyzes my habits of thought, which means my habits of language: the compulsions of my composition and the coercions of my conjugation perform my desire never to mean, for to signify is to stop and take a stand, which I simply cannot do—to cease the process is to cease. A period stands over my demise; thus, I am elliptical. . . . I must always write beyond the limits of any intent or significance, for if meaning catches me, you will kill me.

Inspect I to complete a symbol
And account for its design,
Phantoms on a road to here
Lead to collapse,
leaving. . . . (94)

Complete fusion of the signifier with the signified disintegrates the need for a speaker. In order to preserve my discombobulated, phantasmagorical existence, I deconstruct the narrative, lyrical “I am” and replace it with the obsessional I of the perpetual present, always on the verge of imploding into its own textuality.

It is no longer in use,
pull I
The rug from under my feet
And the wool over my eyes.
A fountain signs at salutes. . . . (98)

There is no ground, only the flux and shift of my symbolic order; there is no vision, only the warp and weft of my textuality; there is no flow of life, only a gesturing mimicking something like it.

A speech chain as synaesthetic
As a roundel barry-wavy in
Argent and azure,
    an emblem
Of I divided into number. . . . (99)

If the only thing that truly exists is the shifting chain of signifiers, the only authentic action must of necessity be the composition of poetry. I am in the process of writing the poem; I am the procedural machination of language; I am method, number, equation.

But this is outside science.
    Here dissolve I a word on
Repeated use,
    to surrender
One degree of markedness. . . . (101)

Although I am the effect of language, if not holely wholly holy language itself, I am still only a machine. I am subject to breakdown.

The imagination is my wound,
    I
    Shall only want impossible.
His early poems a monologue
Of a young man very isolated. . . . (92)

Because I am compelled to repeat the formative wound of my imagination, the instigation of my subjugation to language, which causes me to want impossible things, such as language’s outer limits that no act of literature can ever fully achieve, as we saw with Ashbery and Blanchot, I will in time wear myself out. My joints will stick and my engine will clog. Paradoxically, although repetition compulsion bears me out as the machine you read before you, that same compulsion will spell my demise. Although I will surrender
any residual investment in language, I will retain my vestments of poetry, albeit an art become irritated and imperfect—a turbid text, a destitute discourse.

Even all speeches say the same
   Begins with,
       hate I speech.
   Not avoid a knot internal,
And these are hazardous days. . . .

Fish nose through falling rocks
   As words in brackets rise
   To capture a fleet of boats.
This is the case.
   In the poem. . . .

In what sense is a body an I.
   Reflectors hiding the eyes
   So you can see them,
       speak.
You will receive $1,000 cash. . . . (109)

Feeling betrayed by the codes of discourse, you distance yourself from its machinations. But you cannot avoid its knots. The ever-receding ribbon of externalized desire compels you to cling to that which can be neither said nor realized. The poem is the stain of words which demands your attention, captures your desire, and imprisons you in an impossible drive toward a deterritorialized and decimated future which is vested with words, but not invested in their order. Signs are taken for wonders . . . you see without seeing anything but your (my) own reflection, and you speak without saying anything at all. You are broken, and yet you still run into the future.

In reverse,
I hereby christen
This destroyer the *Rosebud*
As the ape shows its teeth,
Alternately smacking her lips. . . . (111)

Your future is full of the past, which you richly deny until it is inextractably evacuated from your psyche. You are the future of humanity in reverse. Welles’ portrait of psychological repression and consequential drive begets Kubrick’s originary gestures of pure ultra-violence, the circling around the impenetrable thing/text that symbolizes human existence but which itself cannot be penetrated. Rosebud is sucked into the black hole of the monolith; psychological causation (and with it the entire psychic structure) is evacuated out into an alien textual determination.

To jump from a 13-story hotel
And assume a net,
   as proof
That the way things work is
Not a projection of syntax. . . .

Excite I a map of my position
By means of lines,
   adding
The date to a list of days,
With astronomical slowness. . . .
   June 18, 1982 – May 17, 1983 (120)

Writing, real writing, is psychological suicide. Rich confronts what she determines as the death made present in the language of the other; beneath ironic self-reflections, Ashbery cannot help but mourn the loss of his Romantic subjectivity; Graham anguishes over the void of being; and Watten so obsesses over his composition that he evacuates
his psyche to become the infernal, procedural machine. For the Language poet, there can be no projection of self, because there is no meaning behind the syntactical coordination of language. Texts exists purely, procedurally, in-significantly. The one who obsesses over methods of operation sacrifices himself to the methods of operation. The self who writes is the self who dies into his language. I am otherwise . . . I am the praxical excitation of language and nothing besides.

5.3 THE DESTITUTE MACHINE

There is no language but “reconstructed” imaged parentheses back into person “emphasizing constant” explanation “the current to run both ways.” The ocean he sees when as “sour frowns of the ancients’ ‘signifier’” that person jumps in. We are at liberty “to take ‘the’ out of ‘us,’” to have selves “not here” in the machinery of dramatic monologue to “smash, interrupt.” To focus primarily “using examples of work” produces “difficulty”: “you” in indeterminate distance “building a tower” as the circumstance of writing “to look over ‘with concern’ the bones of ‘speech.’” Machines are “metal” words where “crystallization slipping” is “that tongue spoke” dissolved into “not it” located in constraints. “Causing ‘them’ to freeze and perish” has no bearing on “stumbling block” of facts “embodied” in old meanings “understood” to be “suffering ‘circumstantial’ distortions.” “It” makes itself “by definition” into “word,” missing the point “writing,” wanting as “further” point “a persona” clearly named. Biochemistry adds to “average” warmth “lightly voiced” if painfully limited “rhyming with” individual “he.” Those “automatons” exist who have by “progress into ground” lost use of “the raised surface” of writing. He becomes you, as “retrograde hero ‘having nothing to say’” Can’t tell what “it” is. But a person smiles “the allowed” look at “examples of” words in front “when present.” He speaks “to study inner silence” as absolute: “normally we think ‘we think ‘we have seen ‘in writing’ what we have seen.’”’” The figure “lightbulb turns on” of mind is
not the “separate from hearing” talk in the speaker’s “much more complicated” brain. One thinks hard “how to read” what “won’t read autobiography” thinks “destroys no one” but invokes instants of fear “to say what ‘it’ wants.” Remove “privilege of manifestation” to make words “active and passive” for thousands never met who might yet “passionately react.” Circumstances of this writing assume “a recording” will disappear, that “self” cannot be identified as “preoccupation with voice” or “replaced with words.” But “pyramids, tombs, chariots ‘of personal experience’” want confusion of “schoolboy torn in half” in an odd, “theoretical” way. Transcription stood, the “eight-year-old sentient gone”: “speaking” twelve feet from the water, its “audience” on the rock. He wanted “baleful ‘all-knowing’ distance” out of this borrowed substance “often more personal than he.” Disregarding if “citizens worth not one cent” listening can’t speak for us “circuits not all there” themselves, he “whatever may be ‘wanted’” loves to talk. “Let me in” pushed between “to have intelligibility” hopeless repetition “which takes you away.”

(Barrett Watten, “Statistics,” 1-10 11-2)

The letter is here synonymous with the original, radical, subject. What we find here is the symbol being displaced into its pure state, which one cannot come into contact with without being immediately caught in its play. Thus, the tale of The Purloined Letter signifies that there’s nothing in destiny, or causality, which can be defined as a function of existence. One can say that, when the characters get a hold of this letter, something gets a hold of them and carries them along and this something clearly has dominion over their individual idiosyncracies. Whoever they might be, at this stage of the symbolic transformation of the letter, they will be defined solely by their position in relation to this radical subject, by their position in one of the CHs. This position isn’t fixed. In so far as they have entered into the necessity, into the movement peculiar to the letter, they each become, in the course of successive scenes, functionally different in relation to the essential reality which it constitutes. In other words, to take this story up again in its exemplary form, for each of them the letter is his unconscious. It is his unconscious with all of its consequences, that is to say that at each point in the symbolic circuit, each of them becomes someone else.

(Jacques Lacan, Seminar II 196-7)
Jacques Lacan’s discussion of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” provides us with an exemplary introduction to the subservience of the subject to the letter. In Poe’s story, a governmental minister steals a personal letter from a royal wife’s extra-marital lover from under the woman’s nose by exchanging her lover’s letter with a letter of his own. Thus, the Minister has the letter, the woman knows he has it, and both know she cannot do anything about it, for fear of exposing herself. The woman calls upon the Prefect of the Parisian police to secretly retrieve the letter from the Minister; however, all searches of the Minister’s home have revealed nothing. The Prefect asks detective Dupin’s aide, and Dupin solves the case by thinking like the Minister, whom Dupin conjectures, first and foremost, needs easy access to the letter in order to use it and, secondly, knows his home will be searched by someone looking for hiding places: Dupin figures that the Minister hides the letter in plain sight in his rooms by making it appear not only crumpled, torn, and worthless but also addressed to the Minister himself. From this story, Lacan makes two determinations regarding subjectivity and the Symbolic Order.

1) The letter (the word, language) represents subjectivity in that both are given meaning through the status of their positionality, i.e., their differential relationship with other words or with other subjects. The
value of the purloined letter changes as the letter changes hands; the words of the letter spark different significations to different readers (the wife, her husband, her lover, the Minister) just as different readers have different subjective relationships with each other, more so when one possesses the letter and the other does not. There is no soulful essence of transcendent being, just one’s existential relationship to the other of language. The subject’s innerworldly desire (for instance, to get the letter back so it won’t be seen by others, to use the letter for political gain, to retrieve the letter as a form of duty, to solve the mystery of the letter’s whereabouts) is structured by the outer symbolic circuit. The word inscribes inwardness.

2) Paradoxically, the symbolic order does not simply install certain desires; it also overwhelms particular psychology: “One can say that, when the characters get a hold of this letter, something gets a hold of them and carries them along and this something clearly has dominion over their individual idiosyncracies.” The symbolic order creates an individual subjectivity, but it co-opts this subjectivity into the flow of its matrix. Consequently, the subject is both particular and universal, dominated over and part of the dominion. Dupin is the only character who recognizes this paradox because he is the only character whose desires are not invested in the meaning of the letter,
but rather in the hide and seek game of the letter as pure letter, that is, as object of desire in and of itself. The wife is tangled up in the repercussions of the letter for her affair, her marriage, and her husband’s career; the minister is ensnared in the political hold he possesses over the wife and thus her husband; and the prefect is caught up in his duty to his boss, the wife, and ultimately the good of the state. By contrast, Dupin stands apart from such particular motivations and desires to simply negotiate his way through the symbolic circuit and find the letter as such. He stands both outside and inside the symbolic order: inside in that he desires the letter, but outside in that he drives over symbolic investments. The subject’s innerworldly desire is structured by the outer symbolic circuit; however, there exists a possible subject position which is attuned to the workings of the order but not inscribed by it. Although the word originally inscribes inwardness, inwardness can supercede the word when it divests itself of the laws of language.

Dupin traverses the symbolic, momentarily dipping into its significance when need be, but never fully yielding himself over to its pull. In skirting the import of the symbolic, Dupin engenders Lacanian subjective destitution. Žižek explains that subjective destitution nullifies the subject’s subjectivized relationship with the symbolic order of the big Other. Rather than being caught up in the mire
of the symbolic matrix, the destitute subject performs empty gestures:

We can literally say that this ‘empty gesture’ posits the big Other, makes it exist: the purely formal conversion which constitutes this gesture is simply the conversion of the pre-symbolic Real into the symbolized reality—into the Real caught in the web of the signifier’s network. In other words, through this ‘empty gesture’ the subject presupposes the existence of the big Other.

Now, perhaps we are able to locate that radical change which, according to Lacan, defines the final stage of the psychoanalytic process: ‘subjective destitution’. What is at stake in this ‘destitution’ is precisely the fact that the subject no longer presupposes himself as subject; by accomplishing this he annuls, so to speak, the effects of the act of formal conversion. In other words, he assumes not the existence but the nonexistence of the big Other; he accepts the Real in its utter, meaningless idiocy; he keeps open the gap between the Real and its symbolization. The price to be paid for this is that by the same act he also annuls himself as subject, because—and this would be Hegel’s last lesson—the subject is subject only in so far as he presupposes himself as absolute through the movement of double reflection. (The Sublime Object of Ideology 230-1)

Although the destitute subject recognizes the existence of the symbolic order as function, he does not grant it grave or weighty content. He considers the symbolic world a form, an artifice, a machine; but he does not consider himself its subject.

The destitute subject, the being-for-death, does not become anxious over his subject position as Rich and Bloom do; the annulment of subjectivity that destitution performs is neither abject nor anguished, as in the case of Graham and Blanchot. Although he plays the symbolic’s game, as Ashbery and De Man do, they play ironically, which means that although one part of their subjectivity attempts to
subvert the symbolic mandate, another part of their subjectivity is irrevocably invested. Moreover, Ashbery and De Man play with meaning; subjective destitution, by contrast, moves beyond the need for meaning. It enters a real of subjectivity that is founded on the symbolic but driven beyond that realm’s limits. Graham and Blanchot’s real of subjectivity shreds, resists, and voids symbolization and in so doing obliterates the subject; Lacan’s (and as we shall soon see, Watten’s) supercedes symbolization. This means that it traverses the abyss between symbolic and real, between word and thing, between meaning and being. It does not fall into that aporia, as Ashbery and De Man suggest; it does not annihilate itself as Graham and Blanchot suggest; it does not submit itself to an illusion of sublime transcendence of the symbolic or shutter itself off from the fatally invasive order as Rich and Bloom suggest. Instead, the poeticized language of symbolic order becomes an impossible vehicle that must be driven into the realm of the real. The desiring subject finds himself alienated by an object that will never be satisfied. As Rich and Bloom illustrate, he wants to be more than the language of the other. However, whereas Rich and Bloom fall into a state of anxiety, Lacan reveals that the subject alternatively can go through the fragmenting machine of language and become circumscribed in its very processes:
Through the effects of speech, the subject always realizes himself more in the Other, but he is already pursuing there more than half of himself. He will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverized, in the circumscribable metonymy of speech” (Seminar XI 188)

The desire of the desiring subject alienates the subject from himself because his desire, always already in the process of dividing and receding, can never be fulfilled. Conversely, the destitute subject desires only desire as such (the metonymy of desire itself), not a particular object of desire. With no object, that desire cannot be divided, and the destitute subject can follow the chains as he pleases. This desire becomes a desire for language, pure and simple. This language is decidely not referential or meaningful; it is beyond both figures and subjectivity: “desire is the non-representative representative” (Lacan Seminar XI 218).

This brings us back to Watten, whose “Statistics,” which introduces this section, exemplifies Lacan and Žižek’s theory of subjective destitution.

There is no language but “reconstructed” imaged parentheses back into person “emphasizing constant” explanation “the current to run both ways.” The ocean he sees when as “sour frowns of the ancients’ ‘signifier’” that person jumps in. We are at liberty “to take ‘the’ out of ‘us,’” to have selves “not here” in the machinery of dramatic monologue to “smash, interrupt.” (“Statistics,” 1-10 11)

Rather than being a victim of language, Watten becomes a machine, like language, that processes language. The subject is obsessively driven to reconstruct himself outside and in front of language. Although he jumps into the sea of
signifiers, he does not permit himself to be chained to them and thereby become merely their cumulative effect. He smashes and interrupts the inward flow of language by throwing a wrench into the dramatic machine. For Watten, the poetic self is not tied down to typical lyrical monologue, but is rather a subversive bomb of multiplicitous articulation. The subject explodes and externalizes the internalized outside of language. His poetry stalls the machinations of language in the psyche. For Language poetry, the desire is to achieve language as non-symbolic, i.e., to disrupt or put a fissure in language so as to achieve a real of subjectivity that is tentatively a part of (in) language but at the same time apart from (outside) language. The problem of language is that language covers its tracks by reifying, interpellating, representing the subject of the world; thus, Watten must continually un-make un-do language in order that language not co-opt and suture him into its drama. The impossible endeavor renders the poet’s drive obsessive, if not fantastic. In order to prevent himself from becoming another statistical subject of language, the poet so obsesses over language that he pushes himself out in front of its flow. He forges the metal that supercedes his current metal. The machine slips and the poet falls forward:

Machines are “metal” words where “crystallization slipping” is “that tongue spoke” dissolved into “not it” located in constraints. “Causing ‘them’ to freeze and perish” has no
bearing on “stumbling block” of facts “embodied” in old
meanings “understood” to be “suffering ‘circumstantial’
distortions.” “It” makes itself “by definition” into “word,”
missing the point “writing,” wanting as “further” point “a
persona” clearly named. (“Statistics,” 1-10 11)

Although he does not annihilate his persona, per se, he does
lose any invested persona to the mechanisms of distortion
brought on by his embodiment in language as language. He
becomes simultaneously language but more than language,
which is to say, language unchained from the push toward
meaning—language as such. Lacan states, “The you is the
hooking of the other in the waters of meaning” (Seminar III
299), meaning that coherent, meaningful subjectivity is sewn
by signifiers. Subjective destitution as the aim of
Lacanian analysis offers to unhook meaning and allow the
subject to flow, dissolved in language.

The Wattenian subject is no longer the symptom of
language but rather a Lacanian sinthome of language:

“It” makes itself “by definition” into “word,” missing the
point “writing,” wanting as “further” point “a persona”
clearly named. (“Statistics,” 1-10 11)

The subject is a set of words that point to a persona, but
cannot arrive at such an identity because they fall apart
into meaningless. The subject is a free-floating signifier
that signifies nothing but its own artificiality. Žižek
distinguishes Lacan’s le sinthome from the symptom:

Such a fragment of the signifier, inescapably permeated with
mindless enjoyment, is what Lacan, in the last phase of his
teaching, called le sinthome: no longer the ‘symptom’ (the
homophonic symptome), the coded message to be deciphered by
a process of interpretation, but the fragment of a
meaningless letter, the reading of which procures an immediate jouis-sense or ‘meaning-in-enjoyment’. (“The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture Can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan,” The Žižek Reader 17)

The sinthome floats free of the symbolic order, irrespective of the language of the other and its need for referential or differential meaning. As one can see from his evasive poetry, Watten’s stream of consciousness is replete with sinthomes, signifiers which are not necessarily sutured to signifieds, and renders nonsignificant language, also known as language as such, pure and simple. One cannot enter into such language; all efforts to dig below the surface of such opaque language fail. One only hits his head against the wall when he searches for non-existent meaning, and sufficient repetition of such head-butting drains the subject of his very subjectivity: “‘Let me in’ pushed between ‘to have intelligibility’ hopeless repetition ‘which takes you away’” ("Statistics" 12). Conclusive interpretation of such textuality fails; the subject of such language flails, driven beyond the point of simple symbolic meaning and into the realm which coordinates the real being of material textuality.

The poet writes impossible odes of subjectivity, such as “Complaint”:

I write, but am rewarded

my zeroes greet me

they are my grey. (Opera—Works 12)
In Watten’s view meaning gives way to density and the subject of meaning yields to utter haze, for Watten uses language not as a conduit of meaning and an expression of subjectivity but rather as a pure, purposeless cypher. Language poetry contains nothing but language; the machine breaks apart reference to reveal the stark textuality of existence. The meaningful color of symbols are left unprocessed by the colorblind eye and all that remains is the symbol which does not stand for anything but itself. What happens when a machine is broken but still runs? Language poetry engenders an infernal machine: running beyond symbolic subjectivity, breaking into the realm of the purposeless and nonsubjectivized real.

The symbolic order exists, but it does not subsume. Although Watten unravels referential discourse, he still believes in language, but as language. He deconstructs language as conveyor of meaning and reconstructs language as purposeless machine, one which works through the subject but does not bind the psyche: “It was not a language I had dissolved” (“January 29,” Opera—Works 51). Instead, he decomposes the subject of the other, the symbolic order; he liquefies him-self by busting apart language but continuing to function within (with-out?) the unbound bursting of desire: “You / say again—again wrecked. And escaping it” (“January 29” 51).
No longer bound to the symbolic order, Watten calls the language that defines our existence into question. I became I in Progress because Watten no longer believed in the cohesion of the subject whose existence consists of perpetually processing the experience of language. Similarly, Watten places quotation marks around language to suggest its transitory status, or more specifically, the fluctuations between his utter in-vestment in discourse and his impossible position of de-vestment. Paradoxically (un)invested, not only the I but language itself can now appear in quotes in poems like “Statistics”:

He wanted "baleful 'all-knowing' distance" out of this borrowed substance "often more personal than he."
Disregarding if “citizens worth not one cent” listening can’t speak for us “circuits not all there” themselves, he "whatever may be 'wanted’’ loves to talk.

Watten achieves miraculous distance from language while in the very midst of language. He deconstructs the illusion of subjective and objective substantiality and replaces it with a hesitant and stuttering speech that traverses the full experience of language, not the referential and biographical insistence of expressive discourse. He short circuits language and assumes himself to the long, impossible circuit on which he talks beyond the point where words mean anything personal at all. Obsessed with the pursuit of discourse beyond the bounds of the symbolic order, the poet renders a sinthomatic language which drives the poet to a state of subjective destitution.
The destitute exists both inside and outside language, in the innerworld and the otherworld, inside quotes and outside them.

Regarded as a world in itself.
I turn blank sheet of paper
Into Latin,
it is a quote,
The current price of semiotics.

I speak near the sea in storms
In an oxo reaction.
Clouds
Are things, not a dispute.
No one did not read sentences.

The Language poet understands language to be a semiotic system, a structure which does not have to be a cage of personality but rather a guide wire which may be alternatively used as deep subjective support or as a jumping off point into the experience of real textuality. Everyone reads, but we need not fear the invasion of the words in our minds, as Rich does, for we can purge the storm by clouding our minds to its effects, by becoming the cloud—language itself. Watten’s obsession with the language system of the other first evacuates any remnant of Romantic identity that may remain in his postmodern world. Next, the poet welcomes such a divestment of being, being-for-death, subjective destitution. Finally, the poet assumes the stature of the system of language and becomes a machine in a virtual psychotic dissolution of psyche.

Watten’s machine poetry jeopardizes the symbolic order of
conventional language and of the current canon of poetry because it forecloses on what we traditionally know to be the Romantic reality of subjectivity, i.e., unified being which can be meaningful expressed through language.

What is the psychotic phenomenon? It is the emergence in reality of an enormous meaning that has the appearance of being nothing at all—in so far as it cannot be tied to anything, since it has never entered into the system of symbolization—but under certain conditions it can threaten the entire edifice. (Lacan, Seminar III 85)

Watten’s poetry expresses the truth of Watten’s psyche, but not in any way that symbols and signifiers can grasp. The trajectory of Watten’s poetry moves from the evacuation of identity through the divestment of being to the dissolution of psyche which reappears in a real that resists symbolizations, that rejects any discourse we attempt to suture onto it.

We can read the language of the other in ourselves as if it were not already invaded but rather only temporarily invested:

The drama of existence is now in quotes, mutable, ready for reinvention—as “the drama of existence ‘in quotes’.” This is precisely the point at which the exemplary rejection structures the reader’s involvement in the work. But the meaning of the work has now changed; beginning by deflating its own self-sufficiency, it ends in a form, the limits of a kind of activity that can be identified only at a distance, by another. The rejection is detached from its original site and continually applied to new circumstance. It has almost become a lesson in survival. (“The XYX of Reading,” Conduit 11)

Once we reject the content of language and accept its form only, we purge ourselves of anxiety, irony, and anguish and
thrust ourselves into a state of utter and iterative
textuality. Rather than dreading the invasion of language
into our very inwardness, rather than nostalgically playing
with language with the futile hopes that it will bring us
face to face with our (Romantic) soul, and rather than
anguishing over language until we destroy it and ourselves
in the process, we survive in language by simultaneously
accepting its form and rejecting its content, by holding
fast to its structures and pushing ourselves toward that
which is ungraspable, by desiring language for the practical
reference it affords and demanding language for the utter
machinations it can propel us toward, by casting off a need
for symbolic meaning and installing a drive for absolute
psychological and otherworldly existence.

This drive does not merely tarry with the negative of
being (being-for-death), but the utter negation of psyche.
It borders on the psychotic:

In the neuroses it’s meaning that temporarily disappears, is
eclipsed, and goes and lodges itself somewhere else, whereas
reality itself remains. Such defenses are inadequate in the
case of psychosis, where what is to protect the subject
appears in reality. The subject places outside what may
stir up inside him the instinctual drive that he has to
confront. (Seminar III 203)

We began our exploration of contemporary poetry with a short
history of death in poetry from the Romantic to the
postmodern. We then proceeded to show how Adrienne Rich was
anxious of having her creativity, her sexuality, and her
very being murdered by the language of the patriarchy, what
we came to call the language of the other that comprises the rhetorical/metaphorical death of the subject. Rich’s anxiety is neurotic. She reads the reality of her situation: her poetry is influenced by male forebears, her sexuality is stifled by heterosexist ideology, her subjectivity is interpellated by conventional language. She feels her voice and her being are being drowned out. Her paranoia is justified. Consequently, she rages against the sea of language by which she was enculturated and inaugurates a poetry of possibility which suspends typical meanings. But her madness constitutes a rage against the symbolic order and is but mad north by northwest. In reality, her poetry constitutes a defense against the patriarchal symbolic order, the storm which she knows to brew out there, and, as we saw in her ruminative stage, the poet does indeed return to the of the symbolic order: “In neurosis, one always remains inside the symbolic order, with this duality of signifier and signified that Freud translates as the neurotic compromise” (Seminar III 104-5). Rich begins her career under the reign of the symbolic order, anxiously rages against it, but eventually falls back into its fold.

Contrast Rich’s neurotically anxious relationship to language and poetry with Watten’s psychotically obsessive relationship to language and poetry. Watten’s Language poetry places the text outside his psyche, detached and
removed from any so-called Romantic subjectivity. He doesn’t simply suspend meaning, he obliterates it. He doesn’t confront the language of the other on the inside as the internal limit of his being, he evacuates language outside himself. He doesn’t express himself, he expels himself—in words. There exists signs of neurosis called symptoms; there exist signs of psychosis called sinthomes. “If the neurotic inhabits language, the psychotic is inhabited or possessed by language” (Seminar III 250): Rich fears that language inhabits her; therefore, she creates a poetry which proves the reverse, that she commands language as she commands herself. Watten is so possessed by language that he becomes pure language. In Chapter 2, I struggled to show how the real limit of death was interpreted by the poet, Rich, to exist in the language of the other. In this chapter I do not mean to argue that Watten is psychotic—that he has delusions or hears voices which control him. What I do want to suggest, however, is that, figuratively and metaphorically, Watten’s relationship with language is psychotic—his psyche is dissolved in language. And it is precisely with language which he reconstitutes himself. On the one hand, he refuses the symbolic laws of language in his poetry of pure textual artificiality, but on the other, he creates a poetry, and that is enough to alter the symbolic order forever. Lacan does not discuss the task of poetry often, and it is interesting to note that one of
the few times he does is to distinguish the psychotic from the poetic. After spending a session of his seminar explaining how Judge Schreber forecloses on language in his writing, he goes on to say,

We could summarize the position we are in with respect to his discourse on first encountering it by saying that while he may be a writer, he is no poet. Schreber doesn’t introduce us to a new dimension of experience. There is poetry whenever writing introduces us to a world other than our own and also makes it become our own, making present a being, a certain fundamental relationship. . . . Poetry is the creation of a subject adopting a new order of symbolic relations to the world. (78)

Psychotics don’t write literature; they just write. *Psychosis is the utter dissolution of the subject by language; poetry is the self-creation of the subject through language.*

Watten’s poetic being references an order that is decidedly not of his own making. His existence is cited by language.¹³ Upon recognizing this fact of existence, the poet as machine breaks down (in) language in order to be. This is more than an ironic textual subversion, this is a drama of existence—in quotes. I exist simultaneously inside language and outside of it: “‘I’ quote myself” ("Relays," *Complete Thought* 30). In language and through language only, I have mastered the language of the other and I have dominion over the language of my-self. When I desire to express myself, I use the symbolic order, but I demand that it function according to the laws of my existence. Because I exist simultaneously outside and inside my
inwardness, I tarry with the figures of my absolute presence and my absolute absence. I am a trope of textual negation, simultaneously bearing all of myself and nothing of myself. The conventional meaning of my subjectivity under the reign of the traditional symbolic order has decayed, and I am the stain of textuality that can be neither erased nor reconstituted:

At the bottom of the lake is a small stream of black liquid. A sentence assumes more than it admits. Oil over water is anti-matter. Water over oil? One will not look at another. Buildings turn inside out. Bright artificial lights like places to avoid. Thinking stops to generalized lines. Central figure in landscape is obliterated. (“Negative,” Decay n.p.)

I will no longer be dissolved by the other in the symbolic order because I dissolve myself and I am forever obliterated in an expulsion of language from my innerworldly being. However, I do not not exist; for, unlike Graham and Blanchot, my annihilation does not hollow me out. I am the “indivisible remainder” of subjectivity formed through and through by textuality:

Subjectivity is not the immediate living self-presence we attain when we shed the distorting mechanical reproduction; it is rather that remainder of “authenticity” whose traces we can discern in an imperfect mechanical reproduction. (Žižek, On Belief 45)

I am the presence of absence which remains beyond the text—the ghost in the machine: “Subjectivity is here reduced to a spectral voice, a voice in which resonates not the self-presence of a living subject, but the void of its
absence” (On Belief 57). I am the language that can be uttered, but utterly resists understanding. I am the poem that drives subjective inwardness outside into the real of the world, marked by language but not contained by it. I speaks from the liminal space between the unconscious internalization of language and the postconscious externalization of being.

By extension I inhabit all buildings. I meet myself at all corners—I see myself moving away. In a dream I separate two halves of my body to locate the third eye. Moving in and out of myself, split, parallel lines. Small black shapes float down to the bed. The grass is green. This time I move through it all. Now I step back. Steam released in columns of rising air. I restore my spirit and fall away. Water runs down the ramp. There are no parallel lines. I am what you eat. Not to contradict myself, locate where lines can’t meet. ("Decay," Decay n.p.)

I exist everywhere, in all texts, symbols, words. I drive my chain of signifiers inward, I drive them outward, I drive—I am the machine of motion itself. I drive into a distant future of the impossible present, capable of incorporating myself but equally able to stand apart, alone. Non-subjectivized, I falls away from itself and I enter a state of destitution, without symbolic investment but still utterly vested in perpetuating the outward driving lines of my psyche, an impossible task, certainly, but a challenge which I, as perpetual motion machine, do not hesitate to confront. When I came into self-consciousness, I was originally anxious of your invasion and attempted to ironize
my understanding of you and of myself in you, but then I
anguished over against the both of us until I sh(r)ed you,
and myself besides, in a fit of obsession that now brings me
here to this liminal point in which I am always running into
and out of you, my language, my other. The poem is the
symbolic act of subjective psyche which symbolizes nothing
but one’s confrontation with language in and of itself, and
the poet is the dialectical process between the inward
subject of language and the outward reality of pure
textuality.
CHAPTER 6

THE CONVERGENCE OF POETRY AND THEORY

I have seen a woman sitting
between the stove and the stars
her fingers singed from snuffing out the candles
of pure theory  Finger and thumb: both scorched:
I have felt that sacred wax blister my hand

Surely that would solve everything by supplying
A theory of knowledge on a scale with the gigantic
Bits and pieces of knowledge we have retained
  (John Ashbery, “No Way of Knowing,” *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* 57)

needed explanation

because of the mystic nature of the theory
and our reliance on collective belief

I could not visualize the end
the tools that paved the way broke
the body the foundation the exact copy of the real
our surfaces were covered
our surfaces are all covered

actual hands appear but then there is writing
  (Jorie Graham, “Underneath (13),” *Swarm* 102)

The poetry of theory speaks!
  (Barrett Watten, “Direct Address” *Conduit* 59)
6.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEATH IN POETRY (REPRISE)

The Lacanian drive toward subjective destitution that Barrett Watten’s Language poetry enacts circles the real of subjectivity. As we stated in the previous chapter, such obsession, in brooding over the status of one’s life in language thereby presses toward being-for-death. Consequently, I end this examination where it began, with a brief history of death in poetry, in order to complete the circuit of poetry’s primal desire in/for language—to sublimate death. How did we get here from there? What is the relationship between death, language, and poetry? As we illustrated in Chapter 1, the English Romantics transformed their confrontation with the absolute limitation of death into a sublimely self-expressive poetry. In a sense, the strong poetic self was born of the conflicted experience of death. Language clothed thought and made for beautiful communion between poet and reader, word and feeling. Shortly thereafter, the American Transcendentalists sublimated death for metaphysical ideals in the invigorating birth of a national consciousness and national literature. An unquestionable (and unquestioned) language was employed to create a decidedly American literature of cultural expansion and transcendence. Modernity subsequently put into question such cultural metaphysics and literature imploded as the modernists decimated belief. Where faith
and belief flowed, language soon followed. Language, the language of poetry, was just as fractured as the mind. As society broke down, so too did poetry—it stopped confronting death and became death itself, a veritable wasteland of cant. After the wars, modernist fragmentation declined as the culture rehabilitated itself, so fully that the Beat generation is generated for some much needed cultural critique of the establishment. Poets were politically anxious of the current state of affairs, and that anxiety was internalized not only in the content of their poetry but in the very way they related to language. Not only was the poet’s mind not right, but neither was his language. In fact, it could be argued that his mind was not right precisely because of language. In the course of a decade, poetic language went from being naked and transparent to constituting the realm of anxiety, irony, anguish, and obsession. Blake and the Romantics were “clothed [. . .] in the clothes of death, / And taught [. . .] to sing the notes of woe.” Contemporary poets are still clothed in death—the death that is language—and they have four primary relationships with language.

1) Anxiety: Adrienne Rich matured into the conventional poetic tradition. She wrote and she published, and yet she felt stifled and voiceless. She came to feel that the language of some other person, some other poet, was not only writing through her but superintending her existence. The
symbolic order, comprised of patriarchal discourse, heterosexual ideology, and poetic forefathers, constituted her way of life, her sexuality, her poetry. Rather than feeling inspired, she felt invaded. Anxiety, that feeling of uncontrollable unrest, awakened the poet to her asphyxiation and opened the way to another way of being in language. Conventional language and traditional poetry are patriarchal; but poetry, specifically a feminist poetry, can rage against the machine and install a new psychological system. With anxiety as a catalyst, the poet angrily breaks down language, poetry, and even herself. The language of the other brings death inside her, and for a moment of time, the poet does not deny it—she traverses the other and nurses a new radical feminist poetry with the teat of her rage until she again becomes coopted by the symbolic order, i.e., habituated to the anxiety that it installs; and her poetry is no longer so radical. What we must learn from Adrienne Rich’s brief flame is how to awaken our anxiety. However, we must also surpass her effort and learn how to keep that anxiety perpetually constituted in order that we can make a poetry that never falls away from the conflict with language, the symbolic order, the other, death itself.

2) Irony: John Ashbery knows he lives in a post-Romantic world. One can no longer look out upon a mountain expanse and translate that sublime experience into a sublime poem without a hearty bit of irony. Postmodern irony makes
certain that Romantic being never enter into a contemporary condition of subjectivity. Everything’s a text and all is mediated; therefore, being is a mythic illusion and the sublime can only be experienced virtually. Moreover, death is just a possibility in a story, not in the real.

Ironically, Ashbery recognizes that such textuality constitutes the death of the subject: if we can only feel secondarily, then we are not only desensitized to existence but dead in life. Ashbery’s nostalgia for what was being enabled him to use irony not only for postmodernism but over against it. **Irony sets the psyche in opposition to itself, preserving its primal desires even as reality subsumes them.**

The poet employs irony first to subvert the secondary process thought that is habituated to and inscribed in such rationalistic and referential mediation and then to allow the primary process thought that is associated with soulful being to flourish, albeit tentatively, before logical reality again bars access to one’s inner self. Whereas the Romantics looked upon nature as the constitutive limit of being, we postmodernists look upon language as our maker and our liminal point separating analytical meaning from resplendent being. Rilke wrote to a young poet, “Irony: Don’t let yourself be controlled by it, especially during uncreative moments” (*Letters to a Young Poet* 15). Irony contributes to the plague of signification that would keep us from any authentic understanding of ourselves. *After*
Ashbery, the task of the poet is to move beyond the need for irony and, consequently, to open the door to our primary being.

3) Anguish: Although Jorie Graham is a metaphysical poet, her poems do not transcend. Perhaps a better term for her poetic effort would be infra- or sub-physical because her poems flail deep within herself and without the question of language. Her poetry cuts to the core of her being by shredding language and shedding her linguistically constituted subjectivity. The lyric hollows out the poet and leaves a void where Romantic identity would be. This hollow is not nothing, but rather a new form of being—a nothingness which exists in spite of language. All that is left at the end of a Graham poem is an untitled thing that was entombed in the psyche but is presently revealed to the world of the poet in a space of literature that cannot be touched by conventional discourse. Graham brings one’s inner death to conscious life. **Anguish is the suffering and abjection rendered by one’s own flailing within oneself over against the very language that constitutes one’s subjectivity.** Anguish hollows out the subjectivity created by one’s relationship with language and replaces it with a real of being that traverses nothing but nothingness itself. Such a poetry tarries with the fundamental limit of being—death itself. Graham shows us how to fundamentally subvert the grasp of language without being ironic.
Following her work, the effort of the poet must be to clear a space in language via language through which the real of subjective being, a sublime being that exists beyond the limits of our comprehension, can burst forth.

4) Obsession: All of the other poets studied so far take language as their starting point and being as their end point. Rich feels stifled by language and desires to move beyond it. She rages against the machine in order to let her true Romantic being shine. Ashbery plays with language so he can accidentally on purpose access the Romantic being for which he’s always nostalgically pined. Even Graham feels she must sh(r)ed language in order to clear a way for being, however negated it might be, to emerge. To her credit, however, she, unlike Rich and Ashbery, has no illusions of her or any being existing beyond language. Instead, she fully and without mythic illusion understands the hollow core that undergirds language: the subjectivity that annihilates its language annihilates itself, and any being which bursts forth from the ruins of necessity must be null and void. Barrett Watten completes our dialectic of poetic relationships with language. For him, language is the commencement and the graduation, the alpha and the omega, of being. He enjoins himself from brooding over the pipe dream of Romantic being and dwells in the possibilities for being that language itself proposes. This is not to say that he does not brood over language as much as the next
poet; however, his intent is quite different. **Obsession with language so overrun the poet’s thoughts that he no longer dreams of being anything other than the language of the other.** He takes for granted the constitution of self by language; he does not try to escape language. The obsessional is one who has become caught in the vicious cycle of constantly questioning his existence: “Am I alive or dead?” No, Watten’s linguistic version of the question does not ask, as Rich might, “Has language slain me, or do I yet rise up against it?” Instead, he takes the death of subjectivity through the auspices of language as the very basis for his question: “Am I other, or am I otherwise?” From the start he assumed the status of the other, the machine made of words. However, Watten proposes to write right through death and well into the other side of language in a near-psychotic dissolution of subjectivity. “Otherwise” engenders first that the recognition that the self is always already an other and second that such knowledge constitutes not forgiveness but a mandate to run—against the grain as a flawed cog in the system, breaking the other down but not the self out, and forever reeling and riding the process through to the (never) end. Although Watten forecloses on the hope of Romantic being, he also dissolves the subject of language and becomes language itself. After Watten’s work, the death of the subject now comprises not only the death of our traditional conception
of the Romantic author who expresses his soul, but also the
demise of the postmodern, post-structuralist author who can
express only the codes of his culture. Watten expresses an
infinity of words—but they don’t work for they are
otherwise semantically engaged. After Watten, the task of
the poet is to continue to perform language without being
cought up in any quest for meaning or being both. The poet
must traverse this mediated existence, occasionally breaking
down but never breaking out, without falling prey to the
hazards of conventional interpretation which would analyze
him out of existence. *By so obsessing over language that he
becomes textuality, the poet subsumes all things into
language, his innerworldly existence most of all.*

6.2 WHEN POETRY AND THEORY MEET

Therefore, in my view, we have today a new
perspective of consideration which, I would like
to emphasize, is common to literature and
linguistics, to the creator and the critic, whose
tasks until now completely self-contained, are
beginning to inter-relate, perhaps even to merge.
This is at least true for certain writers whose
work is becoming more and more a critique of
language.
(Roland Barthes, “To Write: An Intransitive
Verb” 135)

I have attempted to show how each of our poets have
wrestled with the consequences of post-structuralist theory
on the nature of their own subjectivities. As we saw in the
last chapter, Barrett Watten, for one, does not merely wrestle with theory; he is theory. Whereas arts and letters have witnessed the poet-king, the poet-philosopher, and the poet-critic in their turn, I would like to suggest that the worlds of poetry and theory should now meet. The question arises: Why should the two converge?

What does theory have to offer poetry? I commenced this examination with the premise that post-structuralist theories of subjectivity effectively theorized the author out of agential existence, taking away her keys to the kingdom and replacing them with the codes of the culture. The plague of textuality that overwhelms our postmodern condition not only mediates the unconscious, but leverages the author, whose only function can be to tread water in a sea of signifiers. The author is not in control of discourse, but flooded by the symbolic order. I set this contemporary conception against the traditional, Romantic view of the poet as master of self-expression, i.e., the master of self who journeys within and employs language to express herself outwardly. Like Rich, I am anxious for the poet to regain composure and composition. Like Ashbery, I too am nostalgic for an understanding of subjectivity—replete with inner being, in control of the outer language—which current thinking does not afford. From these views, theory offers a way to understand the status of the poet and a way to criticize poetry: the poet suffers
from the anxiety of influence and theory helps us understand her creative rages and her poetic ironies that cannot be comprehended by conventional language.

My examination commenced in critique, however, I believe it ends in communion. I would like to suggest a deeper connection between poetry and theory. Theory does not just offer us readers a lens with which to read a text; theory offers the poets themselves a means to understand the world and themselves. Theory is not applied after the fact in a reflective moment of criticism, but rather occurs within the very act of creation itself. Theory helps the poet understand their existence in language. Theory provides a way to mediate the mediation to which the poet, if not all subjects, are subjected.

How does one write when (seemingly) everything has already been written? How does one write when one’s innermost self has already been written by another? Harold Bloom’s theories of poetry—the anxiety of influence, the map of misreading, poetry and repression, agon—conceptualize the poet in relation to the poetries and the poets that precede her. What generates writing in this system? Anxiety. The poet is anxious that what she has read (what she has internalized into her very unconscious) will influence her. The poet is anxious that all she can write is the poetry of another. And so she writes by misreading and repressing the other poetry, and, perhaps
more importantly, by agonizing herself. The pain and suffering of anxiety break the poet out of the canon and allow her to break new ground. She swerves against her forefathers by engaging her anxiety. However, the overall purpose of writing (and of this theory of writing) is to ultimately discharge anxiety—it sacrifices the very purpose for its inception. The act of creation commences with anxiety and ends with transcendence. Bloom’s anxiety of influence mediates mediation by revealing the anxiety that lies repressed at the heart of the poet in relation to the language of poetry. *Theory commences poetry, but theory can also squash poetry if the poet’s purpose for writing is resolved and refined out of existence in an irrevocable act of reflective rumination.*

How does one write when one does not have access to one’s innermost self? How does one write the truth of the self when all one knows is language? No matter how much one writes, one is always reflected back outside, precisely because of one’s secondary ruminations. Paul de Man’s deconstructionist theory of literature turns this blindness into insight. His theory subverts the rhetoric of a poem which the poet consciously employs to express himself. If the tropes a poet intentionally chooses in his waking life would deny him access to his primary process self, then the ironic subversion of those tropes might by paradoxical chance grant access to the subjectivity that underlies the
tropes. De Man defaces literature in order to allow the real face of the poet to appear, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. The theorist creates aporias of meaning through which the poet can fall into being. However, like Bloom, the poet can only swerve, can only fall; he still does not have conscious agency over his subjectivity and over his creation. De Man’s deconstruction mediates mediation by ironizing the poet even further, that is, by irreparably separating the poet’s conscious mind from his unconscious psyche. Theory, if used ironically, can turn poetry against the poet. **Sometimes theory allows the poet to find himself; however, more often than not, the poet becomes stuck not in aporias of being but rather aporias of theoretical irony.**

Although theory can be a detriment to the quest for self-awareness, it can also be utilized to help the spirit cut back into the self. Maurice Blanchot’s proposal for an infinite conversation is built upon neither discharge nor irony. Instead, the conversation is infinitely charged: one cannot stop talking, cannot stop searching, cannot stop reflecting on the nature of the self in relation to the world of language and literature because, in the world of language and literature, the real of subjectivity must remain by definition ever-elusive of the system and yet infinitely receding into the system. Blanchot is not being ironic, for to him such knowledge puts the psyche in a state of flailing abjection—anguish. The poet converses with the
other outside-within herself, to no avail. Therefore, she begins to tear asunder her language—and her psyche with it. Literature is a death sentence for the poet, for each of its sentences carry an impossible judgment, the paradoxical recognition that being is located in the grain of language which must be annihilated in order to allow being to spring forth. And so the poet sheds language and shreds herself in an effort to create a space of literature that is comprised of language yet constitutes more than language. One attains being by hollowing oneself out and allowing the void of nothingness to flourish within the space of literature. This space of literature should be a place which opens up the writing subject to a real of subjectivity which traverses language by negating language. Blanchot’s existential anguish of impossible impersonality mediates mediation by annihilating language and the subject of language along with it. *Theory shreds poetry in order to allow the poet to be born in the hollows and voids left of language.*

Blanchot offers us the indestructible subject of impossibly realized being; Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory proposes the destitute subject of being-for-death. This will strike most readers as unbelievable, but I suggest that Lacan returns us to Romanticism, or at least puts the Romantic back into post-Romantic. Let me explain, if not convince. The symbolic order is comprised of the other, the
language of the other, any mediation, and all textuality; it consists of the codes of the culture. It flows into us and inaugurates our subjectivity (our subjection to language), destroying any imaginary being we may have thought we had and replacing it with symbolic meaning. As thinking subjects, we are first and foremost subjects of symbols, of language. Our psyches become machines made of words, and yet we always desire something that was lost—some thing from the other side of the machine, some thing from the other side of language. The Romantics confronted the other side of life out there, which is death, that ultimate limit of self-knowledge. Post-structuralist post-Romantics confront the other side of life in here, in our very language; the language of the other and the symbolic order is the absolute limit—internal to our subjectivity. Language, like death, not only prohibits us from understanding our being but it bars us from our very being, thereby forcing us into a metonymy of unfulfillable desires.

Like the Romantics who confronted their limits via the sublime, post-structural theorists have their own sublime—the ever-elusive real which is hidden under hypermediation because its emptiness is impossible and terrifying to comprehend for symbolized subjects. Lacan, however, theorizes a way to move from desire to drive, from simply desiring (with no hope or want of ever attaining) what one lacks in the symbolic to truly driving toward what
one is in the real—a subject of language who exists both inside and outside of language. The real is that which resists symbolization, and, put in Romantic terms, that which restores being by situating a kernel of death at the heart of the symbolic (and the subject besides) that we must confront if we are to be. Death is not a fact of life in nature which we must confront, but is rather a force of psyche inside language and inside ourselves. Therefore, in order to exist outside the demands of the machine, we must go through the machine and confront our most inward limit: we must install our being-for-death by becoming the language that haunts us. Subjective destitution divests the self from the anxieties inspired by the symbolic order without destroying that order and that self. Without irony, subjective destitution subverts language. Without abject anguish, the destitute subject can circumscribe the death that becomes him until the language of death can become him in his innermost being. The subject both is and is not language; the subject both is and is not dead; the subject both is and is not being. Lacan’s theory of subjective destitution and being-for-death mediates mediation by divesting the subject initially from a semantical need for meaningful language and subsequently from the anxiety, irony, and anguish that accompanies the influence of language on the linguistically created subject.
Theory shows the ultimate limit of the subject’s life to be language. So what? . . . So now what? Many take such a conception of subjectivity as a sign of defeat. We need language in every aspect of our existence—to acquire food and to secure shelter, to work and to play, to think and to feel. Shredding language for a nostalgic return to some sort of primitivism makes for an overtly Romantic pipe dream. How can we transcend something that founds are very self-awareness, and why would we want to? If we critique and overanalyze the foundation, we may brood ourselves out of existence by inaugurating not just the death of the author but the death of the subject. But it is precisely that death we must engage if we are to know who we are at the core of our existence, of our being, if we still want to romanticize such a being.

I turn around my initial question regarding what theory presents poetry: What does poetry have to offer theory? Poetry gives soul to the skeletal system of theory which tends to reduce the psyche to a set of textual relations. Poetry constitutes the convergence of psyche, that affective realm of primary process existence that tells us we are alive with the multitude of shifting emotions inaugurated by anxiety’s unsettling question of being, with theory, that rationalistic logic of secondary process analysis that structures being out of existence. Poetry does not give being back to theory; however, poetry does install the
question of being. With the issue of being comes the possibility of a nonsymbolic, desubjected subjectivity that is structured like a language but certainly is not a language.

We stand at the door before the law. Neither poetry nor theory alone will give us the strength, courage, and faculty of psyche to pass through that threshold and comprehend our innermost being. The poet of anxiety can only beg the question, "Why does the other close the door to me?" The theorist of influence can only offer ways to evade the primary question and compose a pose of one's own. The poet of irony can only skate in circles around the ontological site. The theorist of deconstruction can only excavate language until it collapses in on the site, offering more blindness than insight. The poet of anguish can only sacrifice herself at the altar of language and thus present a hollow vessel to the congregation. The theorist of the space of literature can only conceptualize an empty space for this being to occupy. The poet of obsession can only brood over language. The theorist of destitution can only divest the subject of language. However, taken collectively and commutatively, anxiety, irony, anguish, and obsession; influence, deconstruction, literature, and destitution; and poetry and theory can not only realize language as the inner death of subjectivity but traverse it with a language that defies the very processes of deadening
thought from which it arose. A theoretical poetry and a poetical theory never loses sight of language as the site of infinite trauma of being and yet never tries to repress language either. The poet-theorist produces a system of thought that recognizes language’s power in constituting subjectivity while realizing the psyche’s power to traverse, if not overcome the death that the language of the other visits upon one’s being. The poet-theorist both is and is not language; the poet-theorist both is and is not dead; the poet-theorist both is and is not being. Poetry must mediate mediation via theory and theory must mediate mediation via poetry. *Theory and poetry converge in a dialectical conflagration of language, death, and being.*
CHAPTER 1

1. Although the subject exists prior to language according to the Romantic tradition, this does not necessarily make the subject exist prior to Nature, or what we would now term, reality. The Romantic imagination is engendered by the sublime; the Romantic subject overcomes the limits of nature, of reality, of humanity. I see poststructuralist theory taking the logical next step of Romanticism: the original Romantics confronted the external precipice, an object of the natural world, and overcame the outer limit of life. The post-Romantics must confront the internal precipice, the object of their own making, and overcome the inner limit of their psychological life, their very language.

2. Throughout her poetry and prose, Rich argues that patriarchal convention, mediated by heterosexual discourse, engenders our sexual orientation. See below, Chapter 2, section 2.

3. In Barton Fink (Joel Coen, 1991), the insular title character with writer’s block retreats into delusion,
creating the psychopathic alter-ego Karl “Madman” Mundt shouts at his two of his victims: “Look upon me. I’ll show you the life of the mind. Hail Hitler!” In the film, the unwritten (unwrite-able) script becomes the nexus of life and death, sex and violence.

4. “If the neurotic inhabits language, the psychotic is inhabited or possessed by language,” Lacan states in the seminar on the psychoses (Book III 250). A fuller consideration of the Lacanian approach to Lacan follows below in Chapter 5.

5. A French Symbolist poet like Stéphane Mallarmé could be considered a practicing structuralist before his time. Like Lévi-Strauss, he conceives of a mythic pattern to the world, with this difference: the poet believes that the not only does the world consists of a the formal structure, but it is indeed a law, a text, a book, as emplified in a poem like Le “Livre”:

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the book    suppresses
time      ashes

towards the relation in
of non-coexistence
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6. And what, in the final analysis, is every defense ultimately against: nothing other than death itself. Pain, trauma, loss are all registered in the primary and
primal psyche as the other half of the diametric opposition of life, in other words, death.

CHAPTER 2

1. The association here is Nietzschean: The Snow Queen is a slave who resents the master society; however, unable to willfully confront society, she withdraws into herself and secretly, if not self-indulgently, seethes.

2. “Not as onself did one find rest ever, in her experience . . . but as a wedge of darkness” (Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse 63) Whereas Mrs. Ramsay’s wedge is black, Rich’s is diamond. The difference in figures tells much about these women’s respective psychological economies. Mrs. Ramsay opens herself to the abyss (one might say even dives into it) and the death drive; Rich attempts to turn sand into pearls, essentially covering up and over the inflammation as she flees from death.

3. Compare Rich’s politicized relationship with the language of the patriarchal other and Joyce’s politicized relationship with the language of the English other as illustrated in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: “My soul frets in the shadow of his language” (166).

4. I am here laying the foundation for Harold Bloom’s understanding of strong poetry and defense mechanism.
For an explicit explanation of Bloom’s theory, see below, section 2.


6. For a book-length psychoanalytical investigation that transposes the supposedly “mad” woman into a mode of symbolic, i.e. patriarchal, refusal, see Todd McGowan’s *The Feminine “No!”: Psychoanalysis and the New Canon*.

7. I venture fully into her dive below, in section 3.

8. Compare with Stephen Dedalus’ out of body experience of thinking:

   “Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Sotogreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. (Joyce, *Ulysses* 31)

9. It is here that Bloom’s theory of poetry (the anxiety of influence) perfectly coincides with psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s theory of subjectivity (the relation between self the discourse of the other):

   This discourse of the other is not the discourse of the abstract other, of the other in the dyad, of my correspondent, nor even of my slave, it is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am absolutely condemned to reproduce—that’s what we call the super-ego. I am condemned to reproduce them because I am obliged to pick up again the discourse he bequeathed to me, not simply because I am his son, but because one can’t stop the chain of discourse, and it is precisely my duty to transmit it in its aberrant form to someone else. (Lacan, Seminar II 89)
For Bloom, the anxiety of influence means the death of individual creativity; for Lacan, the discourse of the other means an always already alienated subjectivity. While Rich is anxious about the discourse of the other, see Chapter 5 below for a consideration of a poet, Barrett Watten, and a poetry, Language Poet, that accepts the discourse of the other as its prime mover.

10. See, for instance, Bloom’s essay on Wallace Stevens, “Reduction to the First Idea” in which he argues that the poet strips back the accumulated layers of poetically constructed reality in order to know the primary real.

11. By inwardness, I mean that existential relationship between subject and world born of the anxiety of being in the world as explicated by Walter A. Davis in Inwardness and Existence (see especially Chapter 2, pages 131 and 141). Inwardness knows the world “as it is lived and suffered, not as it is cognized. Such forms are not ways of knowing, but modes of engagement which are fully implicated in their issue” (141). Inwardness takes what is out there in the world and lives it on the inside, remaining forever anxious over the origins and actions of subjectivity.

12. For an excellent illustration of how this eventuality played out for key modernists, see Leslie Fiedler, “The Death of the Old Men” (Critical Essays on American

13. As Nietzsche states in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, “Spirit is the life that itself cuts into life; with its own agony it increases its own knowledge” (104).

14. The phrase is from Beat generation Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s first volume of poetry, specifically [Reading Yeats I do not think]:

Reading Yeats I do not think
of Arcady
and of its woods which Yeats thought dead
I think instead
of all the gone faces
getting off at midtown places
with their hats and their jobs
and of that lost book I had
with its blue cover and its white inside
where a pencildhand had written
HORSEMAN, PASS BY!

15. For a full discussion of the traumatic kernel of the real see Slavoj Žižek, Looking Awry 1-47.

16. We will discover in our discussion of Maurice Blanchot in Chapter 4 that all true poetic knowledge is impossible knowledge.

17. The phrase is Barrett Watten’s; see Chapter 5, 263.

18. Such a tragic awareness of the subject doomed to surface play of psychological understanding looks forward to the deconstructive rhetorical theory of Paul de Man and the self-reflexive (but notably not reflective) poetry of John Ashbery explored in the next chapter.
19. Referring to Rich’s “Transit” in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, Sabine Sielke writes that the poet sublimates self-alienation into self-unification:

> It is the awareness of the difference within, the very skepsis toward integrity, that creates the need for recognition, for remembrance, the desire for wholeness and identity. Unlike Dickinson’s “haunted house”—sense of self and her paradoxical projections of wholeness, Rich’s sense of doubleness and identity is being translated from writing into experience. (207)

20. This essentialism is hardly surprising for Adrienne Rich is after all an Anglo-American feminist who leans toward the humanism of identity politics, not a French one who leans toward the deconstruction of all prior categories of subjectivity, femininity included, as illustrated in the underlying conflict between the approaches of, for example, Sandra Gilbert’s “Literary Paternity” and Julia Kristeva’s *On Chinese Women* in Mary Eagleton’s *Feminist Literary Criticisms*.)


CHAPTER 3

1. Qtd. in Alfred Corn, “A Magma of Interiors” (81).
3. I am borrowing here from Jacques Lacan’s understanding of metaphor as psychological identification and metonymy as unending desire. Though Lacan discusses both throughout his work, see Dylan Evans’ *An Introductory*
Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis (111-4) for a succinct explanation of the two terms.

4. Compare primary and secondary process thought with Roland Barthes on connotation, denotation, and the pleasure of the text. Barthes advances the notion of connotation, an open signification derived from denotative, closed signification. The pleasure of the text comes not from referential denotation of signified things but from connotation of purely shifting ideas inherent in poetic language: “The pleasure of representation is not attached to its object: pornography is not sure” (The Pleasure of the Text 55).

5. The phrase is from Jorie Graham’s “Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne”: “How he wanted, though, to possess her, to nail the erasures” (The End of Beauty 30). However, while Ashbery strives to gain access to his inner world, as we shall see in Chapter 4, Graham broaches the nothingness at the core of existence.

6. Archibald MacLeish, “Ars Poetica.”

7. My phrasing is indebted to Susan Howe’s Defenestration of Prague: “For we are language Lost / in language” (The Europe of Trusts 99).

8. De Man would never, of course, write on these poets, for he confined himself mostly to the Romantic era, save for analyzing the honorary German Romantic Rainer Maria
Rilke, see directly below; however, we shall use de Man to gain insight into the post-Romantic present.

9. Naked poetry, the movement of poetry from the 1970s, is so named because its practitioners sought to compose poems whose language was utterly transparent. They desired the readers to engage the ideas and emotions of the poem while taking no notice of the language.

10. De Man made an exception to his practice of writing on just Romantic thinkers, which suggests that the spirit of Romantic has indeed persisted into the twentieth-century. With Rilke we enter the post-Romantic age, but that is another discussion entirely.

11. In *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1963) the doctor diagnoses the mute actress Elisabeth Vogler with a breakdown of the soul.

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The hopeless dream of being. Not doing, just being. Aware and watchful every second. And at the same time the abyss between what you are for others and what you are for yourself. The feeling of dizziness and the continual burning need to be unmasked. At last to be see through, reduced, perhaps extinguished. Every tone of voice a lie, an act of treason. Every gesture false. Every smile a grimace.
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Bergman dramatizes for actors what I’m trying to dramatize for poets. Actors have roles and are sometimes broken by performing them so well that they completely internalize them; poets have language and are sometimes broken by its mastery over their lives. Rich takes her anxiety to heart; Ashbery dissolves his
anxiety with irony; and, as we shall see in the next chapter, Jorie Graham dissolves herself.

12. Ferdinand de Saussure offered that the sign is an arbitrary correspondence between word and thing which happened to catch on in daily speech (see especially Course in General Linguistics, 71-8). My argument here de Saussure’s theory of the sign to the poetic trope. One author created a metonym, “silver screen” for instance, to liven up an essay with a lightly subversive play on words. The phrase, being alliterative and addictive, entered the mainstream of common speech and lost all its poetic value: it became part of the common lexicon. The task of the poet is to revivify language from its systematic zombification. The task of a poet like Rich is to resurrect herself from internalization of the dead language while the goal of a poet like Ashbery is to simply find himself over against the tropes he employs.

13. Compare this sight with an earlier poetic vision, Emily Dickinson’s from poem 465:

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—
1. Martin Heidegger argues that being simultaneously lies concealed in and in a clearing of the work of art, or, for our purposes, the poem.

    Truth establishes itself as a strife within a being that is to be brought forth only in such a way that the conflict opens up in this being, that is, this being is itself brought into the rift-design. The rift-design is the drawing together, into a unity, of sketch and basic design, breach and outline. Truth establishes itself in a being in such a way, indeed, that this being itself occupies the Open of truth. ("The Origin of the Work of Art," Poetry, Language, Thought 63)

The poetic language hides being, but the poetic language also constitutes the very thing which can clear a space for being to shine. The truth of one’s being is the very conflict of light and dark.

2. Jean-Paul Sartre offers us an image of how being can be hollowed out to the point of nothingness, yet still remain fully present in the real.

    In any case it is impossible to throw these negations back into an extra-mundane nothingness since they are dispersed in being, are supported by being, and are conditions of reality. Nothingness beyond the world accounts for absolute negation; but we have just discovered a swarm of ultra-mundane beings which possess as much reality and efficacy as other beings, but which enclose within themselves non-being. They require an explanation which remains within the limits of the real. Nothingness, if it is supported by being, vanishes qua nothingness, and we fall back upon being. Nothingness can be nihilated only on the foundation of being; if nothingness can be given, it is neither before nor after being, nor in a general way outside of being. Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm. (Being and Nothingness 55-6)
The impossible real of subjectivity is the nothingness that the poet exposes when she peels back the very language that composes her psyche.

3. The phrase comes from Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*: “The Other as a look is only that—my transcendence transcended” (352). When the Other looks upon the self, the self loses all sense of transcendent, metaphysical being and is plunged into the depths of self-difference. However, at the same time, the self, down but not out, fights for the position of the look of the Other. So commences the never-ending dialectic of existence. The very quest for being is forged by the introduction (or discovery, depending on which existentialist you ask) of nothingness into consciousness. Anguish over the possibility that the self is only an object for the other’s regard pushes the self into a state subjectivity in which being and nothingness is always at issue.

4. As a footnote let us explore the existentialist underpinnings of the very title “Region of Unlikeness.” Graham herself provides this passage from Augustine’s *Confessions* in a Foreword composed entirely of epigraphs:

> And being thus admonished to return to myself, I entered into my inner-most being. I was able to do this because you were my helper. I entered into myself ... and by my soul’s eye, such as it was, I saw above the eye of my soul, above my mind, an unchangeable light. ... I trembled with love and awe, and found myself to be far from you in a region of unlikeness. (n.p.)
The association becomes specificallyexistentialist when she employs Friedrich Nietzsche to explain the soul’s eye: “It is a sad, hard but determined gaze—an eye that looks out . . .” (64). The reference to Nietzsche brings us back to *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, the title of which is taken from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and employed as an epigraph to her volume of poetry: “But he who is wisest among you, he also is only a discord and hybrid of plant and of ghost” (n.p.) My present examination endeavors to work through Graham’s poems via the lens of Sartrean/Blanchotian existentialism; however, Nietzsche and even Heidegger provide another fertile line of understanding.

5. Adrienne Rich and Jorie Graham have completely different relationships to hollows and voids. Rich is anxious of the invasion of the other’s language that would hollow out her subjectivity. In the final analysis, she is terrified that her specifically feminine creativity would be negated and replaced by patriarchal discourse. By contrast, Graham welcomes the anguish and abjection of revealing, or even creating, the void within. In the final analysis she valorizes an absolute self-difference that resists any covering over by any language whatsoever, even what some would call a specifically feminine discourse.
6. The thought of post-structural psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has appeared intermittently in these pages. I offer him now because he draws on just as much existentialism from Sartre and Hegel as he does structuralism from de Saussure and Lévi-Strauss. More importantly, Lacan provides a taste of things to come in the Chapter 5 on Barrett Watten. The endless drive is here much like Bergman’s hopeless dream of being. The subject wants to attain the real of his being but is split open by the encounter. She loses her symbolic identity and dumbly repeats the process in a repetition-compulsion turned drive toward subjective destitution. In Lacan’s view, the real and the drive are as one:

That is why it is necessary to ground this repetition first of all in the very split that occurs in the subject in relation to the encounter. This split constitutes the characteristic dimension of analytic discovery and experience; it enables us to apprehend the real, in its dialectical effects, as originally unwelcome. It is precisely through this that the real finds itself, in the subject, to a very great degree the accomplice of the drive—which we shall come to last, because only by following this way will we be able to conceive from what it returns. (Seminar XI 69)

The poet drives toward the real of being by flagellating her very symbolic relations (i.e., her language) asunder. It is a process that she must repeat because language is in the continual process of restoring itself and reifying the subject. We will leave the deeper psychological implications of our brush with Lacan for the next chapter.
7. Finally, as a preview to Blanchot’s utter negation of language and thereby the author, explained in the next section, consider silent speech:

There is also chatter and what goes under the name of interior monologue, which is [sic] no way reproduces, as one well knows, what a man says to himself, since man does not speak to himself and the intimacy of man is not silent, but mostly dumb, reduced to a few sparse signs. Interior monologue is a crude and superficial imitation of the uninterrupted and ceaseless flow of non-speaking speech, whose strength, let us remember, lies in its weakness; it cannot be heard, which is why one never ceases hearing it, and it is as close to silence as possible, which is why it destroys silence entirely. Lastly, interior monologue has a centre, the personal pronoun (‘I’) that reduces everything to itself, whereas the speaking that is other has no centre, is essentially errant, and is always on the outside.

Silence must be imposed upon this non-speaking speech. It must be returned to the silence that lies within it. It must, for a moment, forget what it is so that, by a threefold metamorphosis, it may be born to true speaking: the speaking of the Book as Mallarmé will say. (“The Death of the Last Writer,” The Blanchot Reader 155-6)

8. From Wallace Stevens’s “Of Modern Poetry”: “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice.” Recall the riddle, “How much dirt is in a 3’ by 3’ hole?” The poem of Graham’s mind is actually in search of nothing and nothingness as a state of being over against the paradoxical plentitude of language and speech.

9. For the Lacanian reader, this hole of nothingness and hollow of negation that I am attempting to explicate in Blanchot’s theory of open-ended existential possibility looks quite similar to Lacan’s unsymbolizable kernel of the real. This is due in large part to Lacan’s
existentialist roots, but it also speaks to the theoretical trajectory of my overarching examination. Part of my task in this chapter is to lay the (subtle) foundation for my transition into Lacan in the next chapter. There, I will fully differentiate between the Blanchotian open and the Lacanian real, between Graham’s hollowing out of language and Watten’s absolutist qua psychotic relationship with language.

10. See Slavoj Žižek’s *Looking Awry*, especially his discussion of the Hitchcockian blot (88-106) for an example of how one must enact a slanted gaze in order to acquire the monstrous reality of the situation that undergirds the symbolic order.

11. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

   But the Life of the Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject, which by giving determinateness an existence in its own element supersedes abstract immediacy, i.e., the immediacy which barely is, and thus is authentic substance: that being or immediacy whose mediation is not outside of it but which is this mediation itself. (19)

Consequently, when a poet such as Graham tarries with the negative, she rips off her language to reveal a core of nothingness which she simultaneously transforms into
the impossible real of subjective being via the very effort of self-annihilation.

12. Blanchot is of two minds, theory and praxis. He commenced his career as a theorist and eventually sought to put his theories into practice in the novel. The fragmentary *Awaiting Oblivion*, the labyrinthine *Aminadab*, and *The Death Sentence* for instance, both evoke the infinite conversation: the first employs snatches of conversations that talk around death; the second becomes lost in a (fun)house of obsessive language, doomed to die; the last tries to reconstruct a past death with an inner dialogue that cannot fully touch such a void. The different ways in which fiction and poetry work through the same issues requires a volume of its own, but suffice it to say here that the novel traditionally uses an outward social reality as a lens to inwardness while poetry in the Romantic tradition, which we have been discussing here, normally starts and ends always already in the inner reality of the mind, the use of any narrative only being only a loose figure to give affect sensical shape. In Blanchot’s fiction, the narrative of death is a metaphor for the death-in-life of the speaking subject, the nothingness which speaks through the protagonist. What I am attempting to illustrate in Graham’s poetry comes from the other side of language: her speakers unstitch
and undo themselves so that they to are effectively the representation/revelation of the void.

13. See also the discussion of “Untitled One” and “Untitled Two” in section 3 below.

14. In the next chapter, we will compare and contrast the Grahamian machine with Barrett Watten, for whom the poem is a machine that is broken yet perpetuating, and by extension, for whom being is broken yet persistent.

CHAPTER 5

1. As I will be quoting extensively from Progress, I should make clear that Watten concludes each and every stanza with an ellipsis. I am not leaving something out of his work, but preserving his work, whose use of ellipses suggests the unending and obsessive train of thought that comprises the poem.

2. Sartre would call Ashbery and de Man’s irony an act of bad faith because it plays games with the authenticity of the lyric. If language is by nature evasive, and if tropes are by nature self-deconstructing, then writing can never touch the truth of the psyche, but only falsely present it.

   And what is the goal of bad faith? To cause me to be what I am, in the mode of “not being what one is,” or not to be what I am in the mode of “being what one is.” We find here the same game of mirrors. (Being and Nothingness 110)
To write to be in Ashbery and de Man’s world means to be other in Sartre’s world.


4. I introduce to other Lacanian neologisms in endnote because, although we will not be discussing them at length, they do illuminate the subject. *Ex-sistence* suggests that a radical exteriority lies at the heart of the subject. Even one’s most primary and innate unconscious is form from external discourse: “I do not base this idea of discourse on the ex-sistence of the unconscious. It is the unconscious that I locate through it—it ex-sists only through a discourse” (*Television* 14). *Extimacy* also radicalizes the relationship between inside and outside. What is most intimate is also most exterior, “as the intimate exteriority or ‘extimacy,’ that is the Thing” (*Seminar VII* 139).


6. See especially “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” in *Écrits* 1-7. I understand the mirror stage, with Watten’s help below, as the institutionalization of both the imaginary and the
symbolic. The mirror stage is that point in which the image in the mirror is valorized by the psyche as being a coherent and consistent symbol to be emulated in order to give the incoherent, inconsistent subject coordination and unity. The image is at once imaginary, meaning that it installs the realm of primary, essential unity in the subject, and symbolic, meaning that to the psyche which gazes upon it, it stands for something beyond itself, i.e., the lack of sovereignty of the psyche. The image in the mirror is what makes the gazing psyche subject to the symbolic order; the image in the mirror is the subject’s first word, looked upon but not uttered—a silent scream for command over one’s being and a scream silenced by the look of an-other’s command. It is the installation of the ego, and also the ego’s desire for command of the subject. What appears in my reading below is the supersedure of the first image, which founds for the subject the symbolic order as a realm of alienation and desire, by the word as such, which is what we normally think of when we contemplate the symbolic order. Language is ubiquitous, but before the word, there was the image of the real which was just as alienating.

7. This comprises a paradoxical, if not impossible task. The poet’s foremost sensitivity is to language, while
the call of the world, according to Heidegger, is silent:

The call is lacking any kind of utterance. It does not even come to words, and yet it is not at all obscure and indefinite. Conscience speaks solely and constantly in the mode of silence. Thus it not only loses none of its perceptibility, but forces Da-sein thus summoned and called upon to the reticence of itself. (Being and Time 252-3)

Put in Lacanian terms, the poet must attune himself to the call of the real, which by definition resists symbolization. Again, how does a poet of the symbolic order read the language of the real?

8. This section quotes each and every use of the italicized I in Progress. I take the use of the regular I in the poem to suggest the traditional, lyrical speaking subject while I interpret the italicized I to imply the poetic subject’s dissolution and subsequent reformation in the realm of the other-machine. The italicized I superceding the conventional I and the poet becoming the machine that he is constitutes the progressive throughline of the poem. I emulate this self-transformation by eschewing critical convention and denying the typical paragraph structure. I purposively mirror my prose to Watten’s obsessive, unending poem.

Many critics today talk of the post-human, which implies the death of the subject. What if the post-human is merely the post-Romantic, the loss of self-
expression to the expression of the other, the symbolic order?

9. No thank you, M. H. Abrams, I do not exude knowledge of myself, nor do I reflect the knowledge of the world. I am the evacuation of all symbolic identifications. I lose myself in the text and the text loses me.

10. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom equates the “Muse” with the “Covering Cherub” of “creative anxiety,” stating that “he only appears to block the way, he cannot do more than conceal” (36). Compare this with our previous discussion of Heidegger’s concealment and clearing. Watten’s writing cannot be theorized by a reaction to anxiety or a search for being. What I am suggesting here is that Watten evacuates himself of being, thus making the issue of creative anxiety and the question of what the poem might mean moot.

11. As we defined Lacan’s neologism earlier, our most intimate thoughts, the cohesive bonds of subjectivity, exist external to us, that is, outside of our conceivable grasp, in the realm of the other language.

12. For a complete discussion of deterritorialization, see Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. For the relationship between deterritorialization and the symbolic order of the abstract machine, see especially pages 142-5.
Moreover, the poet’s existence is a footnote, a citation.
GLOSSARY

anguish: the suffering and abjection rendered by one’s own flailing within oneself, most notably over against the very language that constitutes oneself

anxiety: the distressing apprehension that one’s being is in peril, especially the apprehension of language’s constitution of the self

being: living, conscious existence, valorized as a unified and transcendent state in the Romantic period but subordinated to language and altogether put in question in the post-structuralist period

death: the final, outer limit that comprises a state of being which one can neither know nor even grasp; in terms of our discussion, the poet internalizes this external limit as language such that language in the post-structuralist period becomes synonymous with the death of the subject

inwardness: the experience of one’s inner world as an anxious and existential relationship between that private insight and the outer world at large

irony: the opposition between what is intended and what is, here used as a state of mind, if not an emotion, in
which the mind really wants being but effects only language

language: a system of communication which associates words with things; language purports to allow subjects to express themselves by using certain words to stand for particular things like real world objects or innerworldly states of being, however, when one uses a conventional language that exists prior to one’s feelings, one feels not only expressed but also engendered by language, thereby the struggle to create a literary/poetic language is born

obsession: the domination of one’s thoughts and feelings by a persistent and haunting idea that threatens one’s existence, here the idea that language constitutes subjectivity

the other: that which opposes and threatens to bring death to the self, here understood as language, also known as the language of the other, the rhetorical other, and the symbolic order

nothingness: the void from which being bursts; here employed as an idealized state which is devoid of language and thus subjectivity

the real: at once the outer, external reality and the inner world of one’s contemplative existence; here, the paradoxical space which resists symbolization but is impossibly drawn from language
self: that principal which unites experience, distinct from being in that the self is now typically considered a immanent (not transcendent) construction and may be divided into fragments by the work of the other subjectivity (the subject): the self sans sovereignty, i.e., the self as subordinated to another and, here especially, the self is the subject of language and the symbolic order

the thing: an uncanny and ineffable oneness that exists for itself in spite of the other of which it clears a space; here used as an aim of the subject of language to help to find itself
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