I, Peter C. Keates, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in Voice.

It is entitled:  
John Harbison’s Songs for Baritone: A Performer’s Guide

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John Harbison’s Songs for Baritone:  
A Performer’s Guide

A document submitted to

The Graduate School  
of the University of Cincinnati

in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

in the Performance Studies Division  
of the College-Conservatory of Music

2011

by

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Abstract

This document is a performance guide for *Words from Paterson* and *Flashes and Illuminations*, John Harbison’s song cycles for baritone. It confronts the issues of text interpretation and musical style one must address in order to give the most informed performance of these songs. It provides a synthesis of information about the poems and readings of the poetry Harbison set to music, offers insight into Harbison’s interpretations of the text, and demonstrates how Harbison’s atonal style and unique compositional techniques provide a successful musical setting for the chosen texts. The guide also discusses performance issues based on personal experience as well as the experience of the composer and other performers. The poetic style of William Carlos Williams, Michael Fried, Czeslaw Milosz, Elizabeth Bishop, and Eugenio Montale are examined. A transcription of an interview with John Harbison is also included.
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Introduction

American composer John Harbison (b. 1938) has emerged as one of America’s most important composers. He has found success in many musical genres including opera, symphony, choral music, chamber music, and song. He has won numerous awards and has been commissioned by some of the most prestigious organizations in the country. His music has been performed by many of the finest artists throughout America and in Europe and has been recorded by several major recording labels. John Harris Harbison was born in Orange, New Jersey, in 1938 to parents Elmore Harris and Janet. Dr. Elmore Harris Harbison was a professor of history at Princeton University. His interest in history and religion greatly influenced his son John. Janet Harbison was an accomplished pianist who was involved in the Presbyterian Church as well as politics.¹ As a child, Harbison was constantly surrounded by music. It was Harbison’s father who first taught him the basics of music and introduced him to many of the major composers. Harbison’s first musical training was on the piano. He also took violin lessons at a young age. While in high school, Harbison formed a jazz band that played regularly. He also composed music for the high school choir. During these years in high school, Harbison continued learning various instruments including the violin, piano, viola, and tuba. He also studied harmony, counterpoint, and composition with Mathilde McKinney, whom Harbison describes as a “first class musician, a good composer.”²

Harbison experienced success early in his life as a composer. In 1954, he won the B.M.I. composition prize for composing “Capriccio for Trumpet and Piano.”

After high school, Harbison attended Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where

² Ibid.
he studied music. He also majored in English during his early years at Harvard and won the Hatch Prize for lyric poetry. During his time at Harvard, Harbison became an accomplished conductor. His energies were split between conducting, composing, and performing jazz music.

After graduating from Harvard, Harbison won the John Knowles Paine Travelling Fellowship, which allowed him to study at the Hochschule für Music in Berlin with teacher Boris Blacher. After his time in Germany, Harbison returned to New Jersey where he attended graduate school at Princeton. He continued conducting and studied composition with Roger Sessions, Earl Kim, and Milton Babbitt. While at Princeton, Harbison met and married his wife Rose Mary who was also studying music. After graduating from Princeton, Harbison pursued his career as a composer instead of pursuing a Ph.D.

Harbison’s experience during his formative years is clearly reflected in his musical style. The influence of jazz music shows up often in many of his pieces. His familiarity and training with several instruments is manifested in his many chamber pieces. His father’s writings about religion and history are reflected in his choices of text for his songs. His work as a conductor shaped the way he understood singers. Over the past 50 years, Harbison has become a prolific composer. His largest output has been his chamber music. After that, songs have been his largest musical contribution. He has written over 20 song sets. He has also composed five symphonies and three operas as well as many choral pieces and solo piano works.

This document is a performance guide for Harbison’s song cycles for baritone, Words from Paterson and Flashes and Illuminations. The purpose of this performance guide is to

3 Ibid., 30.
confront the issues of text interpretation and musical style one must address in order to give
the most informed performance of Harbison’s songs. It will provide a synthesis of
information about the poems and readings of the poetry Harbison set to music. It will offer
insight into Harbison’s interpretations of the text and will demonstrate why Harbison’s
atonal style and unique compositional techniques provide a successful musical setting for the
chosen texts. The guide will also discuss performance issues based on personal experience as
well as the experience of the composer and other performers.

Harbison’s songs vary widely in style, ranging from his challenging atonal works to
his songs influenced by popular and theater idioms. While many of his songs were
composed for soprano or medium voice, Harbison has written two sets of songs specifically
for baritone. The first set, *Words From Paterson* (1989), is a chamber piece for baritone and a
six-piece chamber orchestra. Harbison’s more recent cycle, *Flashes and Illuminations*, was
written for baritone and piano and premiered in 1996. Harbison decided early on in his
career that he would make an effort to compose songs for tenor and baritone singers. He
believed that this was important because these voice types had been largely ignored by
American composers.

It is helpful to understand these two song sets within the broader context of
Harbison’s total song output. While Harbison’s largest musical output has been his chamber
music, his second largest output has been works for solo voice. He has composed over 20
song sets. Some of his most noted works include *Mirabai Songs*, *Mottetti di Montale*, *North and
South*, *Simple Daylight*, and *Milosz Songs*. While Harbison is recognized for his diversity of
approach and inventiveness of form, there are several common textual themes and musical
features among his works. Harbison himself has been resistant to labels and classifications of
his work. Though it is difficult to assign a label to Harbison’s compositional style, one can
clearly see a variety of the composer’s musical influences manifested in his work. There are elements of jazz, neoclassicism, serialism, and baroque music in his writing. There is always lyricism in Harbison’s music that is often paired with rhythmic complexity. Harbison believes that a variety of form is critical in his work, saying, “Composers who go dry, do so because they repeat their forms, not because they repeat their melodic or harmonic idiosyncrasies.” Both *Words from Paterson* and *Flashes and Illuminations* display Harbison’s procedure of using unique forms that arise from the poetry. Harbison also uses the poetry to motivate his harmonic language and rhythmic structures. For example, in *North and South* (a cycle of six songs of Elizabeth Bishop poetry), the poetry is written from the perspective of an African-American woman. Harbison uses both jazz and blues-derived harmonies throughout the piece. He also creates rhythms meant to imitate jazz music being played on the radio. In *Mirabai Songs* (a cycle of six songs from texts by the 15th century poet, Mirabai), Harbison uses ostinato patterns based on poetic rhythms combined with atonal harmony and through-composed forms to depict the exotic poetry. The procedure of allowing the texts to influence the rhythms, form, and tonality of the music explains how and why Harbison employed such unique compositional methods in *Words from Paterson*. It is the poetic structure of William Carlos Williams’s text that determines the rhythms and form of the music. It is the meaning of the poetry and the need to depict the past, present, and semi-imaginary that motivated Harbison to find a unique tonal language for the piece; one that he has not since used in his writing.

It is also Harbison’s musical depiction of the text that makes *Flashes and Illuminations* a unique song cycle that even stands out among his own works. Because Harbison uses the

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44 Claire Olanda Vangelisti, “John Harbison’s “Mirabai Songs”: A Poetic and Musical Analysis” (diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1997), 35.
poems of five different poets, each piece presents a different philosophy and poetic style that requires a diversity of approach. In many ways, the individual songs of *Flashes and Illuminations* are more connected to Harbison’s other song cycles than they are to each other. The eclectic nature of the poetry gives this cycle its unique variety of music and philosophical meanings. “December 1,” the final song in the cycle, is even somewhat contradictory to the previous songs as it questions the value of philosophy. Clearly, the variety of approach in all of Harbison’s music directly corresponds to the variety found in *Flashes and Illuminations*.

John Harbison composed *Words from Paterson* as a commission from the New Jersey Chamber Music Society. The piece was written in 1989 and premiered in 1990. The text for the piece is by the American poet, William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). Harbison set some of Williams’s text from his epic work, *Paterson*, which was named after the New Jersey town that also provided the setting for the poems. *Paterson* is considered to be William Carlos Williams’s most important work and was published over several years in five volumes. The first clear challenge for the performers of *Words from Paterson* is to understand the meaning of the text. The text that Harbison set centers around a description of the Unicorn Tapestry at The Cloisters in New York City. There are several main themes within the text along with an alternation of two time frames, the present and the ancient. Williams writes in an associative form. The poetry often seems to suddenly interrupt itself and randomly change or digress. What also makes *Paterson* unique is the visual style of William Carlos Williams. More specifically, Williams experimented with new types of poetic lines and developed the step-down staggered tercet. Williams was particularly interested in the visual effect of the text as
well as aiming to show the truly American rhythm present in everyday American speech.\(^5\)

Harbison was inspired to come up with an equally unique compositional style for the piece using voice-leading procedures found in medieval music. This procedure allowed Harbison to create subtle cadences. Harbison also employed the use of two orders of harmonic symmetry that are intended to give the piece an “exotic” color.\(^6\) This compositional technique provided a way for him to represent two alternating timeframes: the present and the ancient. While both harmonic axes are present throughout the piece, Harbison emphasized sonorities from one axis of symmetry to represent the ancient themes and sonorities from the other axis to represent themes of present day New Jersey. While a complete theoretical analysis is outside the scope of this project, musical examples that demonstrate Harbison’s use of tonal symmetry will be used to show how his unique tonal palette created the tonal colors he desired to support the text.

John Harbison composed Flashes and Illuminations as a commission by Reader’s Digest/Meet the Composer. The set consists of six songs with text from five different poets. The set was written for baritone Sanford Sylvan and pianist David Breitman.

The title comes in part from the “Flashes and Dedications” section of Eugenio Montale’s book La Bufera (The Storm), in which the poem “Sulla Greve” appears (the Greve is a small river near Florence). For Montale, the “flash” is a momentary perception of the natural world or a human interaction that brings sudden insight.\(^7\)

Like most of Harbison’s vocal writing, Flashes and Illuminations shows a “preference for tough-minded writers who produce strong, clean lines.”\(^8\) Harbison chose poets for this set

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\(^7\) Harbison, \textit{Flashes and Illuminations}.
\(^8\) Mike Seabrook, “John Harbison and His Music” \textit{Tempo} (July 1996): 8.
who were often concerned with the metaphysical. Their texts require careful reading that should be informed with knowledge of the poet and his or her philosophy and style. All of the poets for this work are poets that Harbison set in other works. Italian Nobel Prize winner Eugenio Montale (1896-1981) wrote the text used for the first song, “On the Greve” (translated by Harbison). Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1978) was one of the most celebrated and distinguished poets of the 20th century. Harbison set her poems “Chemin de Fer” and “Cirque d’Hiver” as the second and fourth songs of the cycle. Harbison used a poem by art historian and critic Michael Fried (b. 1939) for the third song, “The Winds of Dawn.” “To Be Recited to Flossie on Her Birthday” is a William Carlos Williams poem that is used for the fifth song of the cycle. The final song of *Flashes and Illuminations* is “December 1” by Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004). Milosz was also a Nobel Prize winner, and this song inspired Harbison to later compose *Milosz Songs* in 2006 for Dawn Upshaw and The New York Philharmonic.

While the separate poems are not dramatically related, each of the poems suggest “a Montalean flash: sudden, muted lightning on the horizon” 9 to Harbison. These poems “explore the inscape of the mind and its workings.” 10 The performers must be able to present the set with the knowledge of each poet’s philosophy and a developed understanding of the text.

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9 Harbison, *Flashes and Illuminations*.
10 Carmen, 273.
I.

*Paterson*

When asked where to begin in the preparation of *Words from Paterson*, John Harbison said that the performers should start with the text when preparing this piece for a performance. He believes that the text should first be understood separately from the music.\(^1\) The text Harbison chose for *Words from Paterson* is representative of Williams’s *Paterson* as a whole; it is fragmented, complex, and unique in form. The following will provide performers insight into William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, which will help clarify Harbison’s selections for his cycle.

Like John Harbison, William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) was a native of New Jersey. This common connection to New Jersey is what initially drew Harbison to set this poetry to music. Williams was one of the most important American poets of the 20\(^{th}\) century. He was able to maintain a successful full-time practice as a physician while he was writing constantly. Many of his poems were written on the prescription pads from his medical office.

Williams’s style has been described as being that of an imagist, objectivist, and most often a modernist. Some critics would say that he belongs to no particular school. A hallmark of Williams’s style is that he did not believe in the use of traditional forms. In fact, he was constantly experimenting with various poetic forms in his work. In *Paterson*, Williams constantly shifts from one poetic form to another. He moves from unique poetic forms to prose and sometimes even uses traditional forms to show irony or disdain. His main purpose in his exploration of new forms was to find one that was representative of everyday

\(^{11}\) John Harbison, interview by author, 21 November 2010, digital recording.
American speech. In 1951, Williams wrote, “This seemed to be what a poem was for, to speak for us in a language we can understand. But first before we can understand it the language must be recognizable. We must know it as our own, we must be satisfied that it speaks for us.”\(^\text{(12)}\) It is this desire that has drawn comparisons of Williams to Walt Whitman. By the time Williams wrote Book V of *Paterson*, he had achieved a polished and unique form with his stepped down triadic line. The stepped down triadic line was meant to imitate the rhythms found in everyday speech. It was made up of a variable foot verse combined with lines that were displaced or indented to show visual emphasis. According to Williams in his essay on “Free Verse” in the *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, “The bracket of the customary foot has been expanded so that more syllables, words, or phrases can be admitted into its confines. The new unit thus created may be called the ‘variable foot,’ a term and a concept already accepted widely as a means of bringing the warring elements of freedom and discipline together . . . Thus, as in speech, the prosodic pattern is evaluated by criteria of effectiveness and expressiveness rather than mechanical syllable counts.”\(^\text{(13)}\) Further, “the tapestry like effect of the staggered lines serves to unite both thought and movement.”\(^\text{(14)}\)

Williams’s philosophy was that poetry could serve a social function. He thought that his poetry would serve as a commentary on separation of classes. He describes his poetry as “no ideas but in things,” meaning that “the ideas at stake [would] be grounded on things present in actual experience and actually described in the poem.”\(^\text{(15)}\) The things that Williams focused on were things that were most familiar to him and were a part of his everyday life.

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14 Wagner, 429.
*Paterson*, like his other works, focused on the idea of the “local.” In Williams’s case, the local was Rutherford, New Jersey. He believed that he could use the elements of the local to relate common truths of mankind. This idea is summed up with his phrase “anywhere is everywhere.” Many have criticized Williams for his use of the ordinary and it even became “cliché in criticism of Williams as did the judgment that Dr. Williams was not philosophical. Because of emphasis on the things of his culture, critics felt that Williams was against thought. The inference was that because his work was not obscure, weighty, or involved, it deserved no serious consideration.”16 Williams, however, used the idea of the local surroundings as a means to communicate larger truths rather than simply emphasizing his community for its own sake.17

Some believe that the desire to find an “American” language is a response to the question of whether America as a new world could truly become a real civilization given its troubled past.18 Stephen Tapscott believes that Williams’s attempt is a commentary on democracy saying that even though Williams “accepts the American idiom as the medium for his own work, Williams at the same time does not fight the terrible fight to become completely democratic . . . . A galvanizing language must precede such an institution, and Williams’s[ ] effort in *Paterson* is to lay the groundwork for that language.”19 It seems most likely that this epic work was meant to serve as social as well as political and autobiographical commentary. Williams himself has commented that *Paterson* was meant as a “resemblance between the mind of modern man and a city. The thing was to use the multiple facets which

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17 Ibid.
18 Sankey, 7.
a city presented as representative for the comparable facets of contemporary thought, thus to be able to objectify the man himself as we know him and love him and hate him . . .”

While Williams’s career spanned over fifty years and produced many books, Paterson is widely considered to be his greatest work. Williams originally conceived Paterson as an epic made of four separate books. Book I was written in 1946, Book II in 1948, Book III in 1949, and Book IV in 1951. While Williams was writing Book IV, he was already planning a Book V, but he did not complete it until 1958 at the age of 75. Williams’s health prevented him from finishing Book VI although he had started writing it.

As the title suggests, Paterson is named after the city of Paterson, New Jersey, which is located on the Passaic River near New York City. Williams chose to write about the city of Paterson instead of his own Rutherford because he felt it possessed more of the distinguishing qualities that would suit his idea of the poem. Paterson is also the name of the main character, Edward Paterson. The poem is written as an analogy between Edward Paterson, the man, and Paterson, the city. The poem is full of symbolism and allegory without a straightforward narrative. The main symbolism used in the poetry is that of a sleeping male giant (the city) resting against a sleeping female giant (the mountain) with the river (life) running through to form the falls and then out to sea. These symbols are constantly overlapping and intertwining throughout the poetry.

The overall theme of the epic poem is often described with the first line of Book I, “Rigor of beauty is the Quest. But how will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?” According to Richard Gustafson, each of the books in the poem has an overall theme showing how man tries to unlock his mind to find beauty and that the

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20 Sankey, 1.
21 Ibid., 10.
overall themes progress from negative to positive.

Book I. Schemes and plots of the past have become dead history.
Book II. Present tries to find beauty in self-indulgence.
Book III. Present seeks to escape in history and philosophy.
Book IV. Present finds beauty in its posterity.
Book V. The only beauty that persists is art.  

Because Harbison’s text is all taken from Book V, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the meaning of Book V and its context within Paterson as a whole.

Book V is a commentary on the previous four books rather than a continuation. Since much of Paterson was autobiographical, Williams felt that the poem should continue as long as the poet was alive. Of the five completed books, Book V is the shortest in length at 31 pages. It was written in three sections. Williams dedicated this book to the memory of Henri Toulouse Lautrec, a painter whom Williams admired.

Most of the poetic form used in Book V is the stepped down triad. It also contains some more traditional quatrains, a mix of free verse, prose, and several letters by various people. There is a letter from Paterson native Allen Ginsburg in section one. Ginsburg was considered to be a “literary son” to Williams Carlos Williams.  

Section two ends with a portion of an interview Williams had with journalist Mike Wallace. The appearance of random sections of text such as the Ginsburg letter and the Wallace interview are typical Williams’s method. His poetry often interrupts itself and digresses.

The overall themes of Book V are as follows: first, art is what remains after the life of the artist, and second, the only beauty that persists is in art. Much of the descriptions in Book V are of unicorns (both male and female), specifically the unicorn tapestries located in

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23 Ibid., 533.
The Cloisters Museum across the river in New York. There are seven tapestries dating from 1495-1505. They depict scenes of a unicorn being hunted in nature. The tapestries were acquired by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and are now housed in The Cloisters with the museum’s medieval collection. In Paterson, the unicorn represents life, and the unicorn tapestries represent the permanence of art. Other strong themes in Book V are birds and flowers, which sometimes represent women. There are recurring themes of virgins and whores, which represent life and the persistence of the force of life. In the second section, there is a translation of a poem by Sappho, which defines poetry as “words, rhythmically organized.” Section three contains a detailed description of the unicorn tapestries and ends with the conclusive line, “We know nothing and can know nothing but the dance, to dance to a measure contrapuntally, Satyricaly, the tragic foot.” This closing line answers the question posed in the opening of Book I.

Chapter two will provide reflections on the text Harbison chose for Words from Paterson and discuss his musical setting.

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24 Ibid.
II.

*Words from Paterson*

John Harbison chose to set approximately one-fourth of the text from Book V of *Paterson*. *Words from Paterson* is written in two parts. The first part features text from sections 1 and 2 of Book V. The text for the second part is all from section 3 of Book V. Harbison considers *Words from Paterson* “a premature meditation on old age, the conflict between ‘art’ and ‘life.’”¹ The piece was commissioned by the New Jersey Chamber Music Society and written in Nervi, Italy, in March of 1988. Harbison spoke about his choice of the *Paterson* text, saying:

“I was working actually with a different text for this piece, and then I don’t know why I happened to pick up the Williams poem, which actually I had read once before, . . . the piece had a New Jersey theme, the original commissioners were the New Jersey Chamber Players. And I liked the specific quality of the references to Paterson for the occasion of the commission. And then the interesting thing to me became how to make a musical text in which the basic proportion and occurrences would somehow fit the scheme, which I could hear of kind of an alternation of two time frames, you know, of the present and the ancient.”²

Harbison wanted to preserve the main themes of Book V in his text, specifically the unicorn description, the flowers, and the birds. Most of the text was taken as large, continuous sections, but some of the lines are taken out of the context of the original poem. Harbison began with the opening page of Book V and ends the piece with the final page. In between are generally self-contained verses that translate musically into what Harbison describes as “inner songs” or “ariosos.” Overall, he wanted to create a structure that would

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² John Harbison, interview by author, 21 November 2010, digital recording.
resemble a musical suite.  

Words from Paterson begins with the opening lines from Book V. This section describes both Edward Paterson and William Carlos Williams. They have both grown older and time has passed since Book IV was published. Paterson recognizes his old age and reflects on his memories. In line 18, Paterson the man becomes Paterson the city, waking from a winter’s sleep. Spring is arriving and bringing things to life. Paterson looks out the window, sees the birds, and knows he is still alive.

The next section of text is taken from the fifth and sixth page of Book V. In Paterson, the poet is travelling through the country in Kentucky and describes what he is seeing. Harbison does not include the mention of Kentucky from Williams’s text; instead, he begins this section with the description of the unicorn in a field. There is also an allusion to the unicorn in the tapestries and then a comparison of the unicorn and the artist, “The Unicorn has no match or mate, the artist has no peer.”

The description of the unicorn, which represents art, leads to a thought about death. This section of text is well summarized by Benjamin Sankey as, “The unicorn has no peer; nor does the artist; nor does death. Flowers rot and die: the artist dies, and so do the individuals he celebrates. Still, there is a ‘hole’ in the bag through which we escape, by virtue of the imagination; and in that sense the artist wins out.”

The next two lines of text are unique as they are the only two lines that are taken out of context. It seems that Harbison is linking the “lady with the tail of her dress on her arm” and the “lady’s brow” with the “woman in our town” who is the focus of the next section, 

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3 The full text of Words from Paterson is included at the end of this document.
5 Sankey, 215.
and perhaps with the “woman in the woods” mentioned later in Part II of the piece.

The final section of Part I of *Words from Paterson* is a lengthy description of an anonymous woman walking in the town of Paterson. All of this text is from section two of Book V and is typical of Williams’s style as it provides many specific details without much context. In Williams’s text, we see the questions he would ask her if given the chance. Harbison does not include any of these questions in his musical setting. We do know that the nameless woman is important as Edward Paterson dedicates all of his writings to her. The end of this section makes a seemingly random reference to Mezz Mezzrow, the jazz musician from New Orleans. Williams’s *Paterson* contains a section of prose written by Mezzrow describing the search for living beauty. Harbison does not use any of the Mezzrow letter and simply ends Part I with Mezzrow’s name. This addition of Mezzrow’s text is an example of how random ideas, phrases, and words can appear in Williams’s writings. These words may or may not have meaning. Harbison commented on this, saying,

. . . there is something about the associative form of Williams. Sort of the way that almost anything can turn up. That was very much a part of the pleasure of working with his words. In fact, a lot of the places where [there were] digressive or interruptive places in the text, I wound up keeping most of those things in. I tried not to interrupt too often once I was dealing with a substantial segment, and I like the way that sort of private things turn up in his work.\(^6\)

All of the text from Part II of *Words from Paterson* is taken from section three of Book V. The first part of the text describes how Paterson (and Williams) has accepted his age and continues writing (it also seems reasonable to assume that Harbison himself may identify with this text). Richard Gustafson notes that dogs generally represent people.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) John Harbison, interview.

\(^7\) Gustafson, 532.
the young to “foreshorten their errors” refers to Paterson’s role as a mentor for younger writers.

The next section of text is a description of flying birds that calm the poet. Flowers represent a woman or several women. Finally, the next section begins the description of the unicorn tapestries. The description of the image of a virgin represents the natural forces of the course of life. The following text describes the tapestry including many of the non-visual details such as the stench of the horses and the yelping of dogs. Harbison then includes the catalogue of flowers. There is a great amount of care and detail in the description of the flowers.

After the description of the flowers comes a line of text mentioning a woman in the woods and a hunter’s horn and is similar to the text in part one that occurs in nearly the same place.

The final section of text is the last 17 lines of Book V. The text summarizes that the poet has learned with age to sleep his life away. The final line of text says that we can know nothing but one thing, “to dance to a measure contrapuntally, Satyricaly, the tragic foot.”

Gaining a complete understanding the overall structure of Words from Paterson can be difficult due to the subtlety of the cadences and form. As Harbison said, “its articulation level is very subtle. It’s a long piece, which does not have many peaks and valleys. It’s meditative which is really what I intended but I think it makes it very hard for the performers to get the feel of it.” Harbison’s intent for the basic musical form of the piece is that of a musical suite. Each of the sections of text corresponds with a musical “movement” within the suite. As Harbison notes, the text of Words from Paterson indicates an alternation

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8 Williams, 236.
9 Harbison, interview.
between two time frames: the present and the ancient. Harbison employs a variety of musical devices that guide the listener between the alternating time frames depicted in the text. Along with the musical journey between past and present throughout the piece, Harbison also uses musical means to clearly depict the varying perspectives of the poet as well as the changing forms found in Williams’s text.

*Words From Paterson* begins in the present tense as the poet is reflecting on his old age. Harbison frames the opening movement of the piece with a distinct musical prelude played by the flute, oboe, viola, and cello. The changing meter combined with the homophonic accented chords provide an unsettled energy to begin the piece. This same material is presented as an interlude in the middle of this first section and also serves a postlude at the end of the section. The first half of the first “movement” describes the awakening of Edward Paterson, the man and poet. Harbison sets this opening text to piano with accented chords in the harp. There is a clear transition as the text shifts from the description of Edward Paterson, the man, to Paterson, the city. Harbison creates this transition in the music by reintroducing the opening material, this time accompanied by a flute solo, indicating the arrival of the birds and the awakening of Paterson to spring. The description continues as the flute and piano, reach a climax with the text “NOT prophecy! But the thing itself!” This musical arrival marks the end of the opening musical movement and highlights the text that sums up Williams’s philosophy of no ideas but in things.

The fermata at the end of measure 80 provides a pause before the listener is transported to a musical/textual medieval time frame. Harbison writes a distinct musical figure for the viola and cello to introduce the description of the “horned beast,” which is repeated throughout the description of the unicorn. The motive is distinguished by a repeated rhythmic figure. This fixed rhythmic pattern recalls the rhythmic modes associated
with the music of the medieval period. Each of the six rhythmic modes is characterized by different ternary divisions of the beat that were meant to correspond to French and Latin poetic verse. Harbison’s choice of this long-short rhythmic pattern closely resembles Rhythmic Mode I, which was representative of the trochee, a metrical foot commonly used in Latin poetry of the medieval period. Along with the fixed rhythm of this musical motive, Harbison directs the strings to play *sul ponte* on open strings. Coupled with the accented, repeated rhythms, this technique creates a dry, straight-toned sound that effectively creates a musical context for the listener to experience the ancient time frame. Harbison also employs the use of harmonics in the string parts, creating a straight tone, adding to the medieval sound world he associates with the unicorn tapestry.

Words from *Paterson*, Part 1: mm. 81-87.
By John Harbison
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The description of the tapestry is eventually interrupted as the poet abruptly transitions from describing the tapestry to contemplating the meaning of what he has seen. Just as in Williams’s text, this second movement has several shifts of poetic perspective as the poet freely waivers between observation and contemplation. Harbison follows suit. This first occurs in measure 110 as the poet leaves the description of the unicorn to compare the tapestry, art, and the artist, to life and death. Harbison leaves his ancient world, shifting to a homophonic, staccato texture in the piano and harp. This transparent musical texture, filled with short rests, invites contemplation and represents a moment of philosophical clarity.

As the text suddenly shifts back to the description of the Unicorn, the medieval music returns as quickly as it left in the strings and winds. Harbison emphasizes the return to the ancient frame by writing secco, open-fifth, dissonant chords for the strings, once again transporting the listener into the world of the tapestry.

Measure 132 marks another shift in time and poetic focus as the text turns to a philosophical verse describing the immortality of the artist through art itself. Again, the music changes to a transparent homophonic texture with the voice and strings. Harbison gives the direction of ben accentato, cujo to the voice and the strings to ensure this text is delivered with gravity and weight.

As the end of the movement approaches, there are two more poetic shifts between description of the tapestry and philosophical contemplation (measures 172 and 182), leading to a musical climax at measure 192 and new musical material in measure 197. The following music and text might best be described as transitional. As the poet has shifted between the past and present in the previous sections, Harbison seems to be connecting the woman in the tapestry to the woman from modern-day Paterson described in the final movement of Part I. In the tapestry, the woman is standing next to the unicorn while the huntsman is
blowing his horn nearby. The “lady” (representing life) and the “huntsman” from the
medieval times could be analogous to the “woman” and the poet in the present time. The
following text describes the unrequited love of the poet who is clearly consumed by the
woman he has never even met, so much so that he even dedicates all his writings to her. This
final movement of the first section (measures 210-316) is an energetic description of the
nameless woman walking in town. The music is dominated by repeated canon-like figures
played by the viola and cello, with sustained bass notes by the harp, and alternating short and
sustained accompaniment figures by the flute. The section moves quickly like the woman in
the crowd. In measure 289 the poet exclaims, “I'll speak to you.” Just as any lovesick
medieval troubadour, this modern poet dedicates all of his work to the nameless woman, or
the birds, or Mezz Mezzrow, bringing Part I to an end.

Part II of *Words from Paterson* is a contemplation of the past that becomes an
acceptance of old age and death. Part II begins in the present tense as Edward Paterson is
contemplating the past. The “dog of his thoughts” symbolizes the people and relationships
that are no longer important. Instead, Paterson dwells on the woman he never met. The
opening text ends with the phrase “trying to get the young to foreshorten their errors”
referring to the poet’s role as a teacher and mentor. This mention of the poet tending his
garden sends him into a time of reflection of the past. Paterson is remembering past
relationships that are represented by the birds. Harbison writes a bird motive in the flute
and oboe to indicate the arrival of the birds in measure 48. The flute and oboe briefly stop in
measure 92-111 as the sun prevents Paterson from seeing the birds clearly, but return in
measure 112 as their description continues to the end of the “bird movement” in measure
194.

The following music transitions from the bird movement to an intense description of
the medieval tapestry. Harbison first uses a viola and cello motive and then adds piano to create an energized texture with the marking *furioso*. The text describes the intense hunt of the unicorn, comparing it to the pursuit of sex. Harbison maintains the musical intensity through the phrase “Paterson, keep your pecker up” and then transitions to the “flower movement.” A beautiful and lush texture accompanies the catalogue of flowers (measure 255-338). As the flower catalogue ends, there is a transitional passage (as in Part I) as Paterson again refers to the young woman lost in the woods. This transitional passage takes the poet out of the past and leads to the final movement in which the poet accepts his old age and eventual death. Harbison marks *Alla danza* at the beginning of this final dance-like movement as the poet mysteriously concludes, “We know nothing and can know nothing but the dance, to dance to a measure, contrapuntally, Satyrically, the tragic foot.”

The form of *Words from Paterson* is similar to a suite with self-contained movements. Although the piece is separated into two through-composed sections, both sections contain several movements that correspond with the sections of poetry without clear breaks and tonal cadences, making it necessary to understand the subtle textual and textural changes. Harbison also maintained the various poetic forms of William Carlos Williams in his musical setting of the text. When asked about his setting of Williams’s unique forms, Harbison said,

> the degree to which [Williams] would alternate a nonsymmetrical patchy rhythm was the very rough thing with the three stressed lines that offered an altered meter feel . . . The vocabulary is really a lot of single syllabic words which I think are quite an advantage in writing vocal music . . . I like the way that Paterson didn’t seem very much like a vocal music text of the kind that we usually run into when we hear something sung.\(^{10}\)

Harbison was sensitive to the form of Williams’s text. Harbison’s musical setting of

\(^{10}\) Harbison, interview.
the text is intended to maintain Williams’s form within a musical context. Harbison’s setting of Williams’s staggered verse can be seen on the second page of Part I. Harbison distinguishes each line by using note duration or rests in the vocal line. This procedure maintains the rhythmic emphasis of Williams’s text, which was intended to imitate American speech patterns.
Words from Paterson, Part I: mm. 9-21.
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Harbison’s text setting reflects the poetic rhythm of Williams’s text as well as the form of the verse. Williams wrote his philosophical poetry about art and death using traditional quatrains of verse. Musically, Harbison sets each quatrain as a unit, distinguishing each poetic line with short rests between the lines. He then separates each quatrain by several measures of music (Part I, measures 133-151). This technique allows the music to serve the text and preserve Williams’s overall form.
Words from Paterson, Part I: mm. 133-151.
By John Harbison
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Along with the form of the piece and an understanding of Harbison’s text setting, one should have a basic understanding of Harbison’s tonal approach to the piece. Though Harbison himself finds this to be more informative for the instrumentalists, it can inform the singer as to what gives the piece its unique sonorities. In Harbison’s article “Symmetries and the New Tonality,” he describes this compositional technique as one that provides “exotic” colors for the piece.  

Harbison’s method in *Words from Paterson* was to use two “orders of harmonic symmetry, the one around a single tone (which produces intervals with allegiance to the whole-tone scale), and the one around two adjacent semitones (which produces intervals with allegiance to the chromatic scale), [offering] an all-interval harmonic palette.” When discussing this technique, Harbison said that it is more prevalent in certain parts of the piece, but actually it is never absent, as a kind of a guiding method for the piece. And one of the reasons is I wanted some way to define cadences essentially coming to stable intervals. Kind of a made-up version of medieval voice leading so it was very, it seemed to me, to be important for it to be fairly pervasive so you could always hear that prevailing vocabulary certainly defining the piece . . . And then the interesting thing to me became how to make a musical text in which the basic proportion and occurrences would somehow fit the scheme which I could hear a kind of alternation of two time frames, you know, of the present and the ancient. And often the ancient one, for instance the scene with the birds associated with more diatonic elements I could pull out of the symmetry, which would be the generally the symmetry around a single pitch. And there are places where instead of employing the two symmetries at once, I either did one or the other for a change in the harmonic color.

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12 Ibid, 77.

13 Harbison, interview.
This compositional technique is what guides the sonorities throughout the piece. While the use of symmetry is never absent, there are times when the symmetry is very clearly seen and heard. On page two, for example, one can see the symmetrical figures in the piano part. The treble clef is written with a tonal symmetry around C, while the bass clef has a tonal axis between the pitches B and C.

Words from *Paterson, Part 1*: mm. 9-13.

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Harbison sometimes employed the use of only one of the symmetrical orders to draw specific sonorities to support the text. In the “flight of birds” movement, Harbison uses this technique with the double canon played by the flute and oboe.
Words from Paterson, Part 2: mm. 42-47.

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Harbison wanted to achieve an exotic color that would help depict the unicorn
description. He also was looking for a sound that would help distinguish the alternating time
frames. In part I, measure 81, Harbison used two separate axes of symmetry from the same
order for the strings and the winds. This technique is used to give the unique sonorities
introducing the unicorn. This sonority is also representative of the ancient timeframe
depicted in the tapestries. The flute and the oboe are centered around an axis of D, which
provides the A-flat tonality. The strings are playing around the axis of E-flat, providing a
tonality of A. This technique creates specific tensions between the winds and strings and
provides a unique and exotic effect as the unicorn is being introduced. The baritone enters in
measure 85 with an emphasis on A-flat that connects the voice to the wind instruments.
Words from Paterson, Part I: mm. 81-87.
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III.

Performing Words from Paterson

There are many issues that must be considered by musicians wishing to perform *Words from Paterson*. As discussed in the previous chapters, the text presents a unique challenge for the performers as well as the listener. Musically, the baritone must possess a large vocal range as well as a developed technique in order to execute Harbison’s highly specific dynamic markings. The intricate rhythms and unexpected, atonal harmonies present a challenge to even the most seasoned performers. These complexities raise the issue of whether or not the ensemble requires a conductor. The sum of these challenges makes it clear that the performers of *Words from Paterson* must be of professional quality in order to successfully communicate the music and text. This chapter discusses these issues and offers some solutions for the performers, where appropriate.

When preparing to perform the piece, it is helpful to have a clear idea of the context of the poetry as it relates to Book V of *Paterson* and to *Paterson* as a whole. According to Harbison, it is important to get some sense of the way the elements of the text are—how they break down. What are the themes, you know, the themes, the continuity of the poem. And in the case of *Words from Paterson*, there are various strands: the physical place, the sort of semi-imaginary, the town of Paterson, which is described in various ways, and then its link across the river to the unicorn tapestry. And the visualization of the unicorn tapestry as it is really happening. And the projection of the narrator into that historical setting.¹

The singer must also understand the symbolism used by Williams. Examples of this include the use of dogs to represent people, women to represent life, the unicorn tapestry to

¹ Harbison, interview.
represent art, and the Passaic River to represent life.

It should be noted that there is a textual error on page 14 of the score. Measure 138 reads “Gentile or Jew,” but should read “Gentile and Jew.”

Along with communicating the text, there are technical vocal issues that should be considered by the singer. The range of the piece is challenging, not only the range of the pitches but the specific dynamic demands. John Harbison is detailed with his musical markings and fully expects the performers to follow them precisely. In Part I, measure 22, Harbison sets the word “remember” on an F4 with a dynamic marking of piano and dolce. This type of writing is common in Harbison’s songs for baritone. There are also several G4’s throughout the score for example in Part I, measure 73 on the word “thing.” The singer should be comfortable singing these notes and have the ability to execute the dynamic markings. While the text setting in the upper register may not present a problem for many high baritones, the low register may prove otherwise. Harbison has several F#2’s written throughout the score. This tessitura can be a challenge for many baritones. One example of this issue occurs in Part I between measures 182-194. Harbison writes several F#2’s (and G-flat 2’s), sustaining a low register. Just a few measures later, the singer must ascend to G4.
The instrumentalists should be aware of the possible difficulty the baritone may encounter in executing these low notes throughout the piece, and be sensitive to the overall balance. Harbison cautions that this type of writing can be a problem for the singer, saying, “There are a couple of other problems which are practical that I hadn’t really thought about. For the baritone, dotted through the whole piece there are places where the low voice has to suddenly function. And I learned along the way, actually since I wrote this piece that, coming back to the low register if they’ve been singing in a different register is going to be taking
some chances.”

When recording the piece, Harbison remembered that “we had some difficulties early in the session, so that what is on the recording is a through take, essentially. We really didn’t edit much within it, but the few things that we did try to fix were a couple of low notes from earlier in the session when Sandy [Sylvan] had more access to the low notes.”

Harbison went on to tell the story about Janice Felty recording all of the low measures of *Natural World* before recording the rest of the piece. Though at the time this seemed odd, these pre-recorded tracks ended up being edited into the recording. While the singer must be able to negotiate the low register throughout *Words from Paterson*, Harbison is sensitive to the balance of the ensemble and presents few occasions where the singer should be concerned about audibility.

*Words from Paterson* also presents specific challenges to the ensemble. Because the harmonic language is complex, it can take some time for the performers to learn the music. According to Harbison, “What we’ve found in performing the piece, it’s actually a piece that looks very simple on the page, it takes a lot of preparation time there are places where the vocal line and the harmony have a very difficult relationship with each other.” He advised

> The times I worked with it myself, what I’ve found really most necessary was that the instrumentalists have time to work their parts out very carefully before the singer is even is there. A great deal of the piece, the bones of the piece are being carried by the harmony of the instruments. There are a bunch of little ritornellos, which I did base on medieval music. Where the vertical harmonies are resulting from the progress of the symmetries and it means that the harmonies are not, at least to my ears, they are not very familiar. That adds to the absorption time that is necessary on that piece.⁴

The *Words from Paterson* score indicates that a conductor is optional for the

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² Harbison, interview.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
performance. After experiencing the piece performed both ways, Harbison maintains either option is valid,

  it’s been done both ways, and I think it’s been done well both ways, but obviously the conductorless version has its advantages. It takes some time for the instrumentalists to really secure themselves. In fact, all of the early performances with the New Jersey chamber players were all without conductor. It takes really a while. Also it’s much better if the singer has some experience with the piece. I’ve conducted it and I’ve heard unconduted performances, there is clearly much to be said for both ways. The advantage of an unconduted performance if it’s really been worked out, is that the ensemble is much better. It is a hard call. The one time I did it in San Francisco, [the singer] had only been working on the piece for a short time and it was very important to have some organizing effect from a conductor.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Ibid.
IV.

Poetry in *Flashes and Illuminations*

When choosing the poetry for Flashes and Illuminations, John Harbison knew that he wanted to use poetry from poets he already set to music, or poets with whom he was planning to have a future relationship. Harbison noted,

I was actually trying to assemble, I was very conscious of being headed towards a lot of engagement with Milosz and Bishop, both poets which I hadn’t tried to set before, and I was also trying to find a few new ways to think about Michael Fried, and Williams and I suppose Montale. All three of those poets I had written very big pieces involving their work. In fact, I had only just a little bit before finished a big soprano set called *Simple Daylight* on Michael Fried poems. And the poem I set of his here would fit into *Simple Daylight* in terms of the tone, in terms of the drama of it. But I knew that the effect of *Flashes and Illuminations* would be very much like that part of the Montale book, rather fragmentary, moving off in a lot of different directions at virtually every piece.¹

Harbison chose six poems for this song cycle “from poets who invite sustained reflection.”² The title of *Flashes and Illuminations* is based on a section of Eugenio Montale’s *La Bufera*, which has the section “Flashes and Dedications.” “For Montale, the ‘flash’ is a momentary perception of the natural world or a human interaction that brings sudden insight.”³

The six poems Harbison chose for this cycle were “On the Greve” by Eugenio Montale, “Chemin de Fer” by Elizabeth Bishop, “The Winds of Dawn” by Michael Fried, “Cirque d’Hiver” by Elizabeth Bishop, “To Be Recited to Flossie on Her Birthday” by William Carlos Williams, and “December 1” by Czeslaw Milosz. These poems and poets

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¹ Harbison, interview.
³ Ibid.
represent a varied range of styles and philosophies. Harbison felt that using the different poems together in one musical cycle would require a diversity of approach and make the cycle unique: “What I was hoping for is that the personality of the poets would enforce upon the piece quite a diversity of approach that in a way the character of the cycle is determined by how different the poets are. I don’t know to what degree that is the result but certainly is what I was looking for.”4 The unifying element in the poetry is that each poem suggests “a Montalean flash: sudden, muted lightning that brings sudden insight.”5 It is important for the performer of Flashes and Illuminations to have an understanding of the poetry when interpreting and performing the set.

“Sulla Greve” (On the Greve) by Eugenio Montale

Now I feast no longer in your look as I did then,
When, at my whistle,
you leaned out, barely visible. A rock, a blocked furrow,
the swallow’s black flight, a covering for the world..

And now for me, bread is that velvet bud which opens unclosing
with a slide from a mandolin.
Water is that rustling current,
your deep breathing wine.

“Sulla Greve” is the first song in Flashes and Illuminations. The poem is taken from Eugenio Montale’s La bufera e altro (1956). Eugenio Montale (1896-1981) is considered to be one of the most important Italian poets of the 20th century. He is often noted for his anti-fascist writings in the 1920’s. His great early work, Ossi di Seppia (cuttlefish bones), was published in 1925 and helped to establish Montale as an important literary figure. Although Montale is linked with the anti-fascist movement and his works were clearly regarded as such, there has since been much discourse as to what Montale’s intentions really were.

4 Harbison, interview.
5 Harbison, Flashes and Illuminations.
Montale’s later works have been classified as being “metaphysical” or “existential.” Others believe that Montale was mostly concerned with religion. Regardless of the debate on how to classify Montale’s work, there are several clear elements present in his writing. Many of his works, for example *Ossi di sepia* and *La Bufera*, are concerned with subjects in nature. They seek to discover truths about the human experience. They are often about love. Anthony Hecht noted that “The poet’s task, Montale observed, ‘is the quest for a particular, not general truth.’ His poems almost always deal with fragmentary experience, the meaning of which is either obscure or, possibly, terrifyingly absent.”

“*Sulla Greve*” is a poem that seems fragmentary, and the meaning is not easily accessed. There are several fragmented elements presented in the eight short lines. The title of the poem provides an initial context for the reader that the poem takes place on the Greve River. The Greve River is located in Chianti, Italy, about 20 miles from Florence, and the poet makes reference to its “rustling current” in line seven. There is also a love interest indicated in the first line. The last four lines of the poem describe the intimacy of the couple using the metaphors of Christian sacraments, “bread is that velvet bud, . . . your deep breathing wine.”

While there are several translations of Montale’s works into English, Jonathan Galassi has successfully published Montale’s poetry into English. He notes that this poem centers on a couple at a trattoria located along the Greve River. The “mandolin” mentioned in line six is being played at the restaurant. Montale uses the act of breathing to represent vitality of life. The couple dines and dances and engages in a “carnal communion.”

While there have been several translations of Montale’s “*Sulla Greve,*” such as

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Jonathan Galassi’s, John Harbison chose to use his own translation of the text. He had worked with Montale’s poetry before, with great success. When he composed *Motetti di Montale*, he used Montale’s original Italian text. Harbison said that he had wanted to work with a translated version of Montale’s poetry and found this to be a suitable occasion.  

When asked if his musical ideas affected the translation, Harbison responded, “I did make some adjustments of the translation to sort of work better with this obbligato concept. And I had set a lot of Montale before in Italian. In my head the idea of the selection of text for the whole cycle was to refer to poets that I had spent a lot of time with and add into that, poets I knew I was going to spend a lot of time with. I had wanted to do something with Montale that I hadn’t done before, which is work with it in translation.”

“Chemin de Fer” by Elizabeth Bishop

Alone on the railroad track  
I walked with pounding heart.  
The ties were too close together  
Or maybe too far apart.

The scenery was impoverished:  
Scrub-pine and oak; beyond  
Its mingled gray-green foliage  
I saw the little pond

where the dirty hermit lives,  
lie like an old tear  
holding on to its injuries  
lucidly year after year.

The hermit shot off his shot-gun  
And the tree by his cabin shook.  
Over the pond went a ripple.  
The pet hen went chook-chook.

“Love should be put into action!”

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8 Harbison, interview.  
9 Ibid.
screamed the old hermit.
Across the pond and echo
tried and tried to confirm it.

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) is considered to be one the most important American poets of the 20th century. She was a Pulitzer Prize winner and Poet Laureate of The United States. Harbison chose her poem “Chemin de Fer” for the second song in Flashes and Illuminations. “Chemin de Fer” is the sixth poem in her first great collection of poetry, North and South, published in 1946. “North and South,” according to Lloyd Schwartz, “is a book about coming to terms with the alternatives with which the real world confronts us; and the alternatives Bishop chooses to inspect in her microscopic, understated way come to embody her profound statement about the kind of world we live in and what it means to be living in it.”10 Bishop’s poems are filled with detailed observations and descriptions and there is usually double meaning of the text. She is often concerned with themes of travel. Some of the names of her works include “North and South,” “Questions of Travel,” and “Geography.”

“Chemin de Fer” contains several themes common to Bishop’s writing. It begins by describing the scene of the traveler who is walking alone on the railroad tracks. According to Harbison, the railroad tracks represent a self-generated anxiety.11 The traveller encounters a dirty hermit living near a little pond. The word “little” occurs in many of Bishop’s poems, including “Cirque d’Hiver.” The idea of a hermit is also a common theme in Bishop’s work. According to Margaret Dickie, “her interest in social misfits and political victims may not have been grounded in social consciousness at all, rather it may have come out of her

10 Lloyd Schwartz, “The Mechanical Horse and the Indian Princess: Two Poems from North & South” World Literature Today 51, no. 1 (Winter 1977), 41

experience as a person marginalized by her own sexual preference, her alcoholism.” Bishop likely identified with outsiders as a result of dealing with her own sexuality. She was also orphaned as a young child when her father died and her mother was committed to a mental institution. “Whatever knowledge Bishop owned, it was the knowledge of the homeless and migrant.”

The “tear” in line ten is another common term used by Bishop to represent the soul, although Bishop does not use this in a religious sense. Bishop likely identifies with the traveller and the hermit in the poem. The hermit shoots his shotgun and screams that “love should be put into action.” While “Chemin de Fer” could be interpreted as a political poem of protest, Harbison views it as “a kind of a parable . . . about the hermit who has chosen this disconnected life, but his message is quite the reverse.”

“The Winds of Dawn” by Michael Fried

(Original)
Never mind who, or what:
let the dawn answer those questions
As it may, let the winds of dawn level their fierce gusts
Across the reeking blackness
Until all is swept away.
In my dream, overlooking a plain of slaughtered bodies
Not yet stripped of their bright armor,
I am at last the warrior
I have always wanted to be.

(revised)
Never mind who, or what:

14 Ibid.
16 Harbison, interview.
let the dawn answer those questions
As it may, let the winds of dawn level their fierce gusts
without favor or compunction
until all is swept away.
Within sight of the ships, clothed in solar fire
As I caroled home the bronze spearheads, I was at last the poet
I have always wanted to be.

Michael Fried’s “The Winds of Dawn” is the third song in *Flashes and Illuminations.*

Michael Fried is a Humanities Professor at The Johns Hopkins University. He is also a personal friend of John Harbison. He has had success as a poet as well as an art historian and critic. He has published several works about art as well as his three books of poems. The original version of “The Winds of Dawn” was set to music by Harbison even though Fried had decided not to use the poem. After Harbison wrote the song, Fried decided to rework the poem and eventually he included “The Winds of Dawn” as the last poem in his book “The Next Bend in the Road,” published in 2004. Fried acknowledges and thanks John Harbison in the book.

Fried’s poetry has been described as intensely lyric and haiku-like. This poem is both short and intense. The poem creates an image of a dream about a battlefield. It is interesting to see that Fried changes the word “warrior” from the original poem to “poet” in the revised version.

Harbison commented that for him, “The flash element in the Michael Fried poem is that there is this wild imagining of some battle in the ancient world. Though what it’s really about is some sort of self-realization moment of personal arrival. But the poet seems to be imagining himself in the middle of some battle for Athens or something like that.”

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“Cirque d’Hiver” by Elizabeth Bishop

Across the floor flits the mechanical toy,
fit for a king of several centuries back.
A little circus horse with real white hair.
His eyes are glossy black.
He bears a little dancer on his back.

She stands upon her toes and turns and turns.
A slanting spray of artificial roses
is stitched across her skirt and tinsel bodice.
Above her head she poses
another spray of artificial roses.

His mane and tail are straight from Chirico.
He has a formal, melancholy soul.
He feels her pink toes dangle toward his back
along the little pole
that pierces both her body and her soul

and goes through his, and reappears below,
under his belly, as a big tin key.
He canters three steps, then he makes a bow,
canters again, bows on one knee,
canters, then clicks and stops, and looks at me.

The dancer, by this time, has turned her back.
He is the more intelligent by far.
Facing each other rather desperately-
His eye is like a star-
we stare and say, “Well, we have come this far.”

“Cirque d’Hiver” is the fourth song in Flashes and Illuminations. The name of the poem comes from the winter circus in Paris, which was known for its ponies. Lloyd Schwartz noted, “The poem is obviously formal, arranged in regular stanzas with rhymes of subtle consistency and variety. Metrically, it is one of Elizabeth Bishop’s most regular poems, syntactically one of her most direct. But the whole sense of formality and understatement

18 Schwartz, 41.
that dominates this poem makes the few deviations, when they come, devastating.”\textsuperscript{19} Harbison stated that “both of the Bishop poems are almost like outlines for a story, but you don’t really get the whole story. Or they may be analogies to another story. “Cirque d’Hiver” is a kind of a parable about the relationships between men and women. But it masquerades as just a description of a little toy.”\textsuperscript{20}

The first three stanzas are used to describe the mechanical toy. Bishop uses great detail to describe the horse and the dancer with alliteration. The focus of the description alternates between the dancer (the woman) and the horse (the man). There is a new dimension added with the line “he has a formal melancholy soul.”\textsuperscript{21} The third stanza describes the dancer and the horse unified by the pole that pierces the dancer’s body and soul. The last stanza indicates that the dancer is unable to confront anything and the horse is the more intelligent one. The poem ends with the melancholy statement, “well, we have come this far.” This indicates the recognition by the horse and the dancer of how little has been accomplished but acknowledgement that the two will continue on together. Schwartz insightfully sums up “Cirque d’Hiver”:

\begin{quote}
The particular poignance of the poem is that Bishop chooses this childish, trivial object in which to see reflected her own “formal” and “melancholy” soul. Coming “this far” assumes the actions of a whole life, a life seen in the image of a toy—one with a capacity for intelligence, insight, vision, self-awareness—yet unable to detach itself completely from frivolity, artificiality and the sad necessity of endless mechanical repetition of the only action it is capable of. In its understated way, the moment of identification and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Harbison, interview.
\textsuperscript{21} Schwartz, 42.
self-awareness in this poem seems one of the most touching and painful in modern literature. 

“To Be Recited to Flossie on her Birthday” by William Carlos Williams

Let him who may
among the continuing lines
seek out

that tortured constancy
affirms
where I persist

let me say
across cross purposes
that the flow’r bloomed

struggling to assert itself
simply under
the conflicting lights

you will believe me
a rose
to the end of time.

“To be recited to Flossie on her Birthday” is the fifth song in Flashes and Illuminations.

The poem was one of William Carlos Williams’s later poems published in Pictures from Brueghal and Other Poems, in 1962. Williams posthumously won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for this book in 1964. The poem is written to Williams’s wife Florence, who was known as Flossie. Ann Fisher-Wirth writes that the poem “speaks eloquently of a difficult, lasting marriage, and attests to the poet’s abiding love, describing it as a flower that has struggled against all conflicts to bloom ‘simply.’” Fisher-Wirth also notes that the poem is egotistical in that it does not address Flossie for who she is but who she allows Williams to be.

Harbison reads the poem as one that was difficult for Williams to write, saying “This

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22 Ibid, 43.

poem of Williams always seemed to me a poem that he could barely write. . . . Almost everything in it is almost parenthetical, this thing about cross-purposes struggling. It’s like it won’t . . . just . . . doesn’t get out.”

Like Williams’s other poems, the meaning of *To be Recited to Flossie on Her Birthday* is not direct or easy to understand. Linda Welshimer Wagner believes that “because the flower symbolizes man, poet, virtue, love, and many less easily defined identities in Williams’[s] work, this poem is less concrete than it may seem.”

“December 1” by Czeslaw Milosz

The vineyard country, russet, reddish, carmine-brown in this season.
A blue outline of hills above a fertile valley.
It’s warm as long as the sun does not set, in the shade cold returns.
A strong sauna and then swimming in a pool surrounded by trees.
Dark redwoods, transparent pale-leaved birches.
In their delicate network, a sliver of the moon.
I describe this for I have learned to doubt philosophy
And the visible world is all that remains.

“December 1” is the final song in *Flashes and Illuminations*. *December 1* was written by Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004). Milosz was a Polish poet who was championed for his political writings. His work was eventually banned by the communist, Polish government. Milosz left his native country in 1951 to seek political asylum in France. He later moved to Berkeley, California, where he became a Professor of Slavic Languages.

Throughout Milosz’s long career, his views of poetry changed greatly. As he became older and as he experienced many difficult circumstances, his ideas about what poetry could and could not accomplish became the subject of much of his writings. His later poetry reflects his ideas as even his poetic forms became more like prose than poetry. He

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24 Harbison, interview.
25 Wagner, 427.
continually questioned the role of the poet with his “Poetic anti-poetry.”26

This poem is perhaps the most accessible and challenging of the *Flashes and Illumination* poems. The first six lines very clearly describe the scenery of his new California home. The final two lines question the philosopher and the artist noting that the physical world is all that remains. Milosz realized the limits of poetry and the poet as being flawed. Harbison recognizes the significance of ending his song cycle with this text. When describing “December 1” in the context of *Flashes and Illuminations*, Harbison said,

> the philosophical poem that is at the end of the set which is the Milosz [poem], which is really, I think a very rich but a very muted kind of California meditation. The whole point of which is to say that the poet can no longer say anything because all that really means anything is the visible world. So in a way, the attitudes of the poets are extremely in variance with each other too, which certainly was part of the intention.27

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27 Harbison, interview.
V.

Musical Setting of *Flashes and Illuminations*

John Harbison’s choice of diverse poets for *Flashes and Illuminations* is matched by his unique compositional approach to each of the six pieces in the cycle. Harbison’s intent was to create a song cycle that relies equally on the pianist and the singer to bring full expression to the text. Harbison commented on this aspect of his composing, “In terms of my attitude to song composition in general, I don’t know too many songs in the traditional song literature that require the pianist to have such a share of the action. . . . In terms of the actual foregrounded detail, I guess my first basic connection would be in Schumann the way there is kind of a complete level of information in the piano part.”\(^1\) Along with the prominent role of the piano, each of the pieces in *Flashes and Illuminations* share Harbison’s atonal harmonic language. This cycle was written for baritone Sanford Sylvan and pianist David Breitman to honor their musical partnership. Each piece suggests what Harbison describes as, a “Montalean Flash: sudden, muted lightning on the horizon.” Harbison employs a variety of compositional devices to musically depict the various poetic images in the cycle

“On the Greve”

“On the Greve” depicts the scene of a couple dining at a restaurant on the bank of the Greve River in Italy. Along with the image of the river, Williams’s poem compares the relationship of the man and woman to the communion sacraments, bread and wine. Harbison’s piano part combined with changing meters and detailed dynamic markings create a musical depiction of the Greve, setting the scene for this carnal communion. To imitate the free flow of the river, Harbison wrote a variety of rhythms in the vocal line combined

\(^1\) Ibid.
with mixed meters and did not set any vocal entrances on strong beats, thus avoiding a strong rhythmic pulse. Although he is usually specific with his rhythmic markings, he gives the marking of *rubato*, to allow the performers more freedom to depict the image of the water. He also establishes this image with a syncopated rhythmic figure played as an introduction by the piano. The syncopated sixteenth note motive in the right hand is repeated throughout the piece.
To further depict the setting of the poem, Harbison is detailed and liberal with his dynamic markings. He wants to maintain an intimate, restrained dynamic with few variations, limiting the song to piano or mezzo piano markings. This range of dynamics effectively prepares the climax of the piece with the text, “And now for me, bread is that velvet bud which opens unclosing with a slide from a mandolin.” The vocal line ascends over the six measures of this phrase to an E4 with a mezzo forte dynamic. The only other departure from the soft dynamic is the forte marking in measure 29 on the word “rustling,” and the forte in the piano at measures 18 and 30, both during moments when the singer is tacet. In the 33 measures of this song, Harbison wrote 27 dynamic markings for the singer and gives the pianist 80 dynamic markings. This song must maintain the restrained dynamic to properly depict the intimacy of the text.

A distinguishing characteristic of this song is Harbison’s use of melisma. Most of Harbison’s text setting is syllabic. He does make use of melisma in two of the other songs in the cycle, but they occur in places that seem to be more musically or textually significant. “On the Greve” has two melismas that occur on the second page with the words “swallows black flight” and “world.” The melismas in the vocal line imitate the piano part and reinforce
the connection of the text to the music, which can be difficult to hear in this song.

Flashes and Illuminations, On the Greve, mm. 11-17
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While the melismas do imitate the piano, they do not come at significant textual moments and therefore are unusual in this context. This is likely the result of the difficult and unique process Harbison used in composing the piece, which he describes below.

The piano part of “On the Greve” not only supplies an equal share of music with the voice, it is in many ways independent and self-sufficient and, at times, not obviously related to the vocal line. Harbison commented on the compositional process for this song.

That piece I had a lot of difficulty with, because the way I actually wrote the piece was I sketched in the rhythm of the words and next made the whole piano part. And I think it’s the only time I ever worked to that extreme degree in that manner, that the voice part then has to fit into the piano part in sort of an obbligato manner. Even though I took a couple of tries at it, it still is a difficult role for the singer to find the
harmonic link to the piano part. And I know that the pianists that worked on the piece did notice that their part was sort of a self sufficient piece in the way that the Pierrot instrumental parts are when the singers are not there sounds complete, which is one of the tricky things about assembling Pierrot.²

When listening to “On the Greve,” one may notice the clear similarity to Arnold Schoenberg’s “Mondestrunken,” from *Pierrot Lunaire*. In Schoenberg’s song, the high-register piano figure in the right hand is meant to represent the moonlight. Otto Erich Hartleben’s text in “Mondestrunken” describes the light of the moon as wine that is poured down in waves and drunk by the eyes. Harbison’s similar music is coupled with the left hand eighth-note figure at a lower pitch. This seems to represent the flow of the Greve River. When asked about this apparent quotation of Schoenberg, Harbison commented that his piece does have the same harmonic texture as Schoenberg’s.³ “Mondestrunken” also contains some of the same textual elements as “On the Greve.” Hartleben’s text combines the elements of sacred and sexual. Though his text does not explicitly refer to the sacramental elements as Montale’s does, there are clearly allusions to these elements with phrases such as “Berauscht sich an dem heiligen Tranke” (made drunk by the holy drink). Schoenberg opens *Pierrot Lunaire* with “Mondestrunken,” making this distinct piano motive the first thing heard by the listeners. Harbison’s *Flashes and Illuminations* opens with “On the Greve” with this similar motive. While Harbison does not necessarily call his work a “quotation” of Schoenberg’s “Mondestrunken,” the similarities are easy to hear and see.

“Chemin de Fer”

“Chemin de Fer” describes a traveller who is walking along the railroad tracks and has a harrowing encounter with a hermit. Harbison creates tension at the onset of the song

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
with the rhythmic motive introduced in the opening measures. The piano part is mostly chordal, playing on the strong beats of each measure with the fifth and sixth eighth-note of the measure leading to the next chord. This jazz-inspired figure permeates the song in its steady representation of the railroad tracks or perhaps the steps of the traveler. The vocal line begins in measure 13 in a high tessitura and a quiet dynamic marking of *mezzo piano*.

Harbison creates a clear contrast between the first and second halves of the piece as the text changes from describing the journey and the scenery to describing the actions of the dirty hermit. This transition begins in measure 44 with the *poco ritard* marking on the text “like an old tear.” The *poco piu mosso* marks a dramatic change in texture as the dirty hermit abruptly interrupts the scene by firing a halting shot into the air. Harbison uses alternating chords in the left and right hand, displaced by sixteenth rests. The high *tessitura* in the voice and piano part create the intensity and tension brought about by the actions of the hermit. The accented chords are echoed from left to right hand representing the echo of the shotgun blast, leading to the hermit’s message, “love should be put into action.”
Harbison sets the hermit’s climactic line at the top of the baritone’s range with the word “screamed” set on a G4 with a crescendo and a fortissimo dynamic marking. The piano part is also written entirely on the treble clef with much of the right hand above the staff.

This musical climax leaves the listener to reflect on the meaning of the hermit’s message for the traveller. The final page of the piece resolves much of the tension that was built up from the previous pages as the traveler’s music resumes, and he continues his journey. Harbison uses a chromatically descending line in the left hand that is syncopated over the final 16 measures of the piece. This descending line gives the piece a sense of defeat and Harbison marks morendo (to die away) in the final measure to reinforce this feeling. There are also diminuendos and a direction of molto rit. al fine as the piece winds down with an anticlimactic
energy.

“The Winds of Dawn”

“The Winds of Dawn” describes the scene of an epic battle and is easily the most intense and perhaps the most technically virtuosic song in Flashes and Illuminations. Like the previous two pieces, “The Winds of Dawn” begins with the pianist setting the scene with introductory material. Cheryl Denyse Cellon notes that this song is comparable to a two-part Bach invention or prelude. The relentless triplets in the right hand are similar to a baroque prelude and show Harbison’s baroque influence. Harbison gives a virtuosic marking of Tumultuoso with the quarter note value of 160. The fast triplets combined with the accented leaps in the left hand depict the tumultuous winds indicated in the title.

Harbison writes a declamatory vocal line filled with accents and intervallic leaps to

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4 Cellon, 59.
represent the strength of the warrior. The tumultuous piano part creates powerful musical dynamism as the piece progresses. The intensity of the piano increases as the triplet figure is transferred to the left hand leading to the climax of the piece, in which the triplets in the piano abruptly stop, highlighting the warrior’s final text “I am at last the warrior I have always wanted to be.” Harbison emphasizes this text with large intervallic leaps and high tessitura, to depict the victory of the mighty warrior.

“Cirque d'Hiver”

“Cirque d'Hiver” is one of Harbison’s most distinct songs. *Moderato* tempo and lengthy text make it the longest song in *Flashes and Illuminations*. Its transparent texture and musical complexity make it perhaps the most difficult piece to successfully perform in the cycle. Unlike the first three pieces of and *Flashes and Illuminations*, “Cirque d’Hiver” has no piano introduction or postlude. Throughout the song, the voice has several unaccompanied measures used to highlight poetic changes between the horse and the dancer. Harbison uses the piano part to present the dramatic elements of the song, while the voice serves a purely narrative function, presenting the text in an arioso-like fashion.

The piece relies on two separate musical motives presented in the piano part. These two motives are representative of the two characters in Bishop’s poem. The piece begins with the description of the mechanical toy with the horse’s music, which is played by the left hand.
Harbison uses steady quarter notes on each beat with syncopated intervals occurring between each beat to represent the steadiness of the turning horse. While the piano part is in 4/4 meter, the voice is written in 12/8. The *moderato* tempo and *piano* dynamics help to create the sense of melancholy described in the text. The horse’s music continues until the text introduces the little dancer on the horse’s back. The dancer’s music is built on a sharp, angular rhythm, which is then followed by a tremolo.

This rhythmic figure is written in a *piano* dynamic in a high register and underscores
the delicate description of the dancer until the horse’s music returns. The two musical motives eventually come together as the text describes the physical connection between the dancer and the horse.

Flashes and Illuminations, Cirque d'Hiver, mm. 23-27.
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The introduction of a hypnotic triplet figure depicts the difficulty of the decision of the horse and dancer as they face one another desperately. The two motives return briefly for two measures as the horse and dancer resign to continue on together. Harbison ends the piece with the final two words on a crescendo from a mezzo piano to a fortissimo. The absence of the piano combined with the crescendo draws attention to the empty, melancholy tension characterizing the horse and dancer’s relationship.
“To Be Recited to Flossie on Her Birthday”

“To Be Recited to Flossie on Her Birthday” is a slow and lyric setting of Williams’s poem and is a fitting contrast to the other pieces in the cycle. Harbison wrote the song as a sort of passacaglia consisting of a repeated eight-measure melody repeated in the voice and the piano.\(^5\)

Flashes and Illuminations, To Be Recited to Flossie on Her Birthday, mm. 1-13.
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Williams’s text describes the struggle of a flower that is trying to bloom. Harbison

\(^5\) Cellon, 62.
gives an adagio tempo marking and recurring ritardandi to create the musical tension representing the persistent flower. The piano is closely linked to the vocal line. As the music is repeated, the passacaglia is varied, and the melodic line is transferred back and forth between the voice and piano. Like much of Flashes and Illuminations, Harbison writes in a number of soft dynamic markings throughout the song, reserving the use of forte or mezzo-forte markings for the most dramatic moments. Harbison uses a ritard at the end of each of the phrases and calls for a rit. al fine for the last repetition of the melody.

Along with the slow tempo, quiet dynamics, and repeated melodic figures, Harbison uses a melisma at the end of the repeated phrase. The melisma is repeated throughout the piece and then extended on the last word “time” to leave the listener with a sense that the flower will endure after it has bloomed.

“December 1”

The final song of Flashes and Illuminations is considered by John Harbison to be one of his best. He later orchestrated this song for by soprano and orchestra. This piece relies heavily on the pianist to provide what Harbison terms “the foreground of details.” The vocal part is mostly simple and subtle while the piano provides a rich texture. The cycle ends with a strong statement that in many ways contradicts the previous songs as the poet declaims the futility of philosophy, saying “the visible world is all that remains.”

“December 1” begins with introductory material characterized by syncopated rhythms combined with six meter changes in the first eight measures, creating a free-flowing feel to the piece. This helps to establish a sense of timelessness in this last song. Only when the voice enters subtly in the eighth measure does the rhythmic pulse become more

6 Cellon, 64.
established. The texture of the piano part changes with the text “cold returns,” introducing a triplet rhythmic figure that returns later in the song. This triplet figure returns in measure 32 in a short piano interlude before the summation of the piece.

The final phrase begins on a simple repeated note, as the song began. Harbison sets the word “philosophy” to an extended *melisma* while the piano sustains a dissonant chord comprised of three neighboring half-steps. The final phrase “And the visible world is all that remains” is highlighted with slow tempo and quiet dynamics. Harbison emphasizes this weighty text that calls into question the purpose of philosophy and metaphysical thought, challenging the meaning of the previous music.
Flashes and Illuminations, December 1, mm. 34-43.
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The cycle ends with a reference to time, as a distant, faint melody of a clock in the piano leaves the listener to reflect on the meaning of the text.
VI.

Performing *Flashes and Illuminations*

There are numerous issues to consider in preparing a well informed and expressive performance of *Flashes and Illuminations.* One must first be able to interpret the text and then make specific choices about the presentation of the dramatic elements. When discussing “Chemin de Fer,” Harbison said that “performers must communicate in rehearsals and make decisions regarding the reasons that the protagonist is stressed with a pounding heart?” This advice, that the performers must discuss and understand the poetry, is the central starting place for all of the songs in the cycle. While some of the text interpretation is left to the performers, much of the overall interpretation of the text is indicated and reflected in the music. Time must be invested in distilling Harbison’s readings of the poems as he expresses them musically. The primary consideration for the singer and pianist must be to closely observe and execute Harbison’s markings in the score. This is perhaps the most difficult and critical task when performing Harbison’s music. The singer must be willing to go to expressive extremes in order to fully execute the dramatic intent of the composer. This idea in many ways opposes the performance ideals of traditional art song. Harbison notes:

I always think of the role of the singer as being able to go literally from something that sounds just like speech to a very broad and extremely theatrical declaration and I usually kind of try to get that kind of range certainly into a larger vocal piece where the singer really has to go from doing something that is next to talking all the way out to something that is very sung out and perhaps very un-Liederlike in terms of what kind of a dramatic pose the singer is striking.”

The dramatic pose is, necessarily, different for each of the pieces in *Flashes and Illuminations.*

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7 Cellon, 57.
8 Harbison, interview.
Illuminations. If the performers approach no two songs alike, they will be realizing Harbison’s goal. He said, “I think each of the pieces really in some ways needs its own song vocabulary. The “Chemin de Fer” is really a dramatic narrative. And it’s a very declamatory song in the end. Probably in a really weird extreme vision too, and it’s like at the other end of the scale from the philosophical poem that is at the end of the set which is the Milosz.” The singer and pianist must be aware of this intention and not try to dramatically assimilate any of the songs to fit in with the others.

Another example of this concept is found in “To Be Recited to Flossie on Her Birthday.” Harbison describes the poem as one that Williams could barely write. He believes that the singer should present it in a suppressed manor,

I think one of the hardest thing for the singer, is to make it so inward as if . . . to resist the idea of projecting it in any normal way. Almost everything in it is almost parenthetical, this thing about cross-purposes struggling. It’s like it won’t, just doesn’t get out, and one of the things in the performance that I really had to coax from the singers is to really observe the dynamic markings and not over-project it.

There are other places where the music requires extreme attention to observing Harbison’s musical direction. In “Chemin de Fer,” at measure 78, the baritone sings a sforzando on a G4 for two measures, marked with a crescendo to a fortissimo dynamic. This type of vocal writing demands a solid technique as well as specific dramatic intent from the baritone.

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9 Harbison, interview.
10 Ibid.
Passages such as the one above require a high level of energy and physical commitment, but there are further places in the cycle that require a much different energy and dramatic intensity. The many *piano* dynamic markings must be carefully planned and executed by the singer in order to honor the music as well as balance the ensemble and remain technically relaxed.

The singer must be technically proficient in order to perform *Flashes and Illuminations*. Though much of the vocal writing is fitting for most baritones, there are several places that will challenge even the professional singer’s range and ability to sustain a high *tessitura*. The range is challenging enough that Harbison includes transpositions of the two of the songs in the publication of the cycle. The *tessitura* combined with the soft dynamics make “Chemin de
Fer” and “The Winds of Dawn” particularly difficult pieces. Harbison transposes both pieces down a minor third and includes both keys for the two songs in the published score. He also wrote several optional high notes to help the baritone avoid the need to access the very low range. Both “On the Greve” and “To Be Recited to Flossie on Her Birthday” have optional high notes.

In addition to a solid technique, the singer wishing to perform this cycle will face the challenge of processing Harbison’s atonal style. The amount of rehearsal time to acclimate one’s ear to the complicated sonorities found in the piano should not be underestimated. Harbison comments about the unique harmonies in “On the Greve” saying, “it still is a difficult role for the singer to find the harmonic link to the piano part.”

The piano part in *Flashes and Illuminations* is equally challenging, calling for advanced technical facility to execute the many virtuosic passages. The pianist for this piece must be technically capable, textually engaged, and completely committed to following Harbison’s score. According to the composer,

...clearly what I’ve found through the years about these pieces is that performances are much less inhibited by singer, than by pianists who don’t take to the idea that they need to work that hard just to be part of a song concert. I know with *Simple Daylights*, for example, I hear from sopranos quite often that “I really want to do this piece, but I can’t get someone to play it with me.” So there is something about this concept about what a song is that for the moment is not too practical and I think it’s even true of *Flashes and Illuminations* that the pianist has a lot of work to do, not to say that the singer doesn’t, but the pianist to play “The Winds of Dawn” is going to spend plenty of hours in the studio really figuring out how to play it; the kind of work that they are really used to putting into their own recital.12

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
Conclusion

Both *Words from Paterson* and *Flashes and Illuminations* are substantial pieces worthy of the investment required to prepare and perform them successfully. Both pieces challenge the singers and players equally. John Harbison realizes that many of his pieces are not frequently performed because of the high technical demands placed on the performers. During our interview, Harbison admitted, “My constant New Year’s resolution is to write some sort of set of songs with sight-readable accompaniment.”\(^{13}\) He also said that after receiving so many comments about the difficulty of his songs, he decided to do some performances of some of his own songs to try to better understand what the pianist was facing. He said of this experience,

> finally I decided that I had to in a way, take myself through the experience. I did do a couple of performances of *North and South*, myself, with Janice Felty, and those are hard piano parts, I spent a lot of time working on spots in that. So I did get a real first-hand sense of what the pianist has to go through. Some of the places were fun to work out; some of them were just very tough.\(^{14}\)

Harbison believes that it is especially difficult in our culture to convince musicians that they must spend so much time working out difficult music.

As one who has spent time to prepare and perform Harbison’s songs, I can easily say that his music is well worth the investment of time and energy. The music is thoughtfully written and full of innovation. His music stimulates one’s intellect as well as one’s emotion. The complexity of the score never takes away from the accessibility and transparency of the music. For these reasons, John Harbison’s music will continue to be performed and hold an important place in the future of American song.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
\(^{14}\) Ibid.
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Interview with the Composer

The following interview took place on Sunday, November 21st 2010. The interview was conducted over the telephone, between John Harbison and Peter Keates. Harbison was at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Keates was at his home in Dayton, Kentucky.

PK: How are you today?

JH: Ok.

PK: Is this still a good time for you?

JH: Sure

PK: I have a list of questions. Should we just go ahead and start?

JH: Yes, please

PK: Ok. From the perspective of a performer, I'm curious how you might advise a performer to analyze or approach your work?

JH: Well, it would have to do almost with which piece, because I approach it myself with not a very consistent perspective, working from the idea of the particular project.

PK: For example, \textit{Words from Paterson}.

JH: Yeah, well \textit{Words from Paterson}? Couple of things are going on there. Obviously, if it’s a vocal piece, I would expect that the performer, if it’s a singer, and also the instrumentalist, I think it’s good to look at the text without the music. Perhaps even before starting, just to get a sense first of all of what it’s about, what sort of musical opportunities are there, and then to get some sense of the way the elements of the text are- how they break down. What are the themes, you know, the themes, the continuity of the poem. And in the case of \textit{Words From Paterson} there are various strands: the physical place, the sort of semi-imaginary, the town of Paterson, which is described in various ways and then its link across the river to the unicorn tapestry. And the visualization of the unicorn tapestry –as it is really happening, and the projection of the narrator into that historical setting. All, that I think, make plain when you start to study the piece, that there are various vocabularies applied to the piece, one that is based on music that I imagine to refer to the early time of the tapestry. Kind of a medieval music strand which associates with the focus on the tapestry and then there is the more contemporary sense of the northern New Jersey semi urban landscape. Of course the very important, you know specific to Paterson in the fall. And then I devised, which is more important to the instrumentalist, I devised a kind of a way of thinking about the chords and intervals in the piece which is based on two symmetries. There are only two ways of thinking about harmonic symmetry. One is around two pitches a half note apart, and the other is around a single pitch. I often combine the two into one harmonic texture, very traceable around that texture. I don’t know if that helps the performer, it certainly explains what some of the sonorities are.
PK: I was curious about that topic. In terms of using the two axes of symmetry in creating an exotic color with this harmonic palette- I’m wondering if that applied to certain sections such as the parts referring to the tapestry or did it apply to the piece overall?

JH: Well it is more prevalent in certain parts of the piece, but actually it is never absent, as a kind of a guiding method for the piece. And one of the reasons is I wanted some way to define cadences essentially coming to stable intervals. Kind of a made-up version of medieval voice leading so it was very, it seemed to me, to be important for it to be fairly pervasive so you could always hear that prevailing vocabulary certainly defining the piece.

PK: I wonder if you might tell me a little bit about your relationship with Paterson the text in terms of chronology? How long you spent with the text. How did you come to choose that specific section of text when you were commissioned for this piece?

JH: Oh sure, I was working actually with a different text for this piece, and then I don’t know why I happened to pick up the Williams poem which actually I had read once before, and it was a, the piece had a New Jersey theme, the original commissioners were the New Jersey chamber players. And I liked the specific quality of the references to Paterson for the occasion of the commission. And then the interesting thing to me became how to make a musical text in which the basic proportion and occurrences would somehow fit the scheme which I could hear of kind of alternation of two time frames, you know, of the present and the ancient. And often the ancient one, for instance the scene with the birds associated with more diatonic elements I could pull out of the symmetry which would be the generally the symmetry around a single pitch. And there are places where instead of employing the two symmetries at once, I either did one or the other for a change in the harmonic color. But I also, I was picking, I was just going through the Williams text for the themes I wanted. I wanted a Prelude which is kind of descriptive of place, and then I wanted to introduce the unicorn with medieval motives and then I wanted to a few inner songs, ariosos, so I chose places in the Williams text that were sort of self contained versified songs. And I was very attracted from the beginning to the flower catalogue in the end, which is very Shakespearian. So really in a way I was choosing, when I came up with a form for the text, I was working with a sense of a suite of musical form I wanted to have in the piece.

PK: I’m curious about your choice of instrumentation. Was that a part of the commission?

JH: It was part of the commission, and I tried to adapt the sonority of it as much as I could to the sound concept I had for the piece. I think the only thing they weren’t offering was the harp, which I felt I very much needed for the medieval music.

PK: Your choice to include what you described as a mysterious quotation from the shadows poem. What did that add for you?

JH: I think it was partly that I knew that other poem and there is something about the associative form of Williams. Sort of the way that almost anything can turn up. That was very much a part of the pleasure of working with his words, in fact a lot of the places where digressive or interruptive places in the text. I wound up keeping most of those things in. I tried not to interrupt too often. Once I was dealing with a substantial segment and I like the
way that sort of private things turn up in his work. There were two pieces that I had conducted that dealt with this material. A piece by Donald Ferrel about the Unicorn tapestry, which is not a Williams text, but it’s the same visual imagery. And then a piece On this most voluptuous night in which a few moments of the same text are in that piece too.

PK: Speaking of the Williams form, I was also curious about your idea of setting the step down staggered tercet and his aim to recreate speech rhythms and how this carried into your music or if that was even in your thought process?

JH: Yeah it certainly was, but the degree to which he would alternate a non-symmetrical patchy rhythm which was the very rough thing with the three stressed lines that offered an altered meter feel. The flight of birds section actually has a more regular beat to it. I was definitely trying to react to that. Also, just enjoying the way that there is a kind of very natural rhythm, very unfancy kind of words. The vocabulary is really a lot of single syllabic words which I think are quite an advantage in writing vocal music. I also was quite interested in a lot of his themes through his poems, which I always wanted to engage with in terms of just taking an individual poem of his and I actually did that later on in a piece called the reawakening. I like being able to touch on them at least. The little scene where he sees the woman walk by and wishes he had spoken to her, there are versions of that in some of the shorter poems which are very intriguing or little addresses to his readers. It’s I guess sort of summing that up, I like the way that Paterson didn’t seem very much like a vocal music text of the kind that we usually run into when we hear something sung.

PK: Have you used the technique of two axes of symmetry much since Words from Paterson?

JH: I haven’t done the thing of really systematically combining the two symmetries into a harmony, which is a result of the two symmetries working on their own. I just did that in this piece and I got so that I had some fluency in it, and then actually the next piece that I began I found that I was using and so I had to stop work for a while until I could let go of it- ’cause I guess I really didn’t want to use it again.

PK: Do you have any words of advice for performers?

JH: What we’ve found in performing the piece, it’s actually a piece that looks very simple on the page, it takes a lot of preparation time there are places where the vocal line and the harmony have a very difficult relationship with each other. Something I don’t often do, but it’s partly a result of these symmetries, and in general the piece is extremely, its aesthetic is, in some ways, its articulation level is very subtle. It’s a long piece, which does not have many peaks and valleys. It’s meditative which is really what I intended but I think it makes it very hard for the performers to get the feel of it. The times I worked with it myself, what I’ve found really most necessary was that the instrumentalists have time to work their parts out very carefully before the singer is even there. A great deal of the piece, the bones of the piece are being carried by the harmony of the instruments. There are a bunch of little ritornellos, which I did base on medieval music. Where the vertical harmonies are resulting from the progress of the symmetries and it means that the harmonies are not, at least to my ears, they are not very familiar. That adds to the absorption time that is necessary on that piece. There are a couple of other problems, which are practical that I hadn’t really thought about. For the baritone there are dotted through the whole piece, there are places where the
low voice has to suddenly function. And I learned along the way, actually since I wrote this piece that uh, coming back to the low register if they’ve been singing in a different register is going to be taking some chances. Ever since Janice Felty recorded my *Natural World*, she recorded every low measure first and we all thought that was a little crazy, but when we got to the end of the session and listened to the takes, we plugged them all in.

PK: I noticed a section of low F-sharps

JH: Yeah, they come at tricky times in the piece and, because of a lot of peculiar things that happened during the recording session, the actual recording with Sandy Sylvan and the Boston Chamber players, Brad Leppin was conducting that piece, and he’s not credited on the recording for some reason, we had some difficulties early in the session, so that what is on the recording is a through take, essentially. We really didn’t edit much within it, but the few things that we did try to fix were a couple of low notes from earlier in the session when Sandy had more access to the low notes.

PK: Speaking of a conductor, in the notes, it seems to be an option?

JH: It’s been done both ways, and I think it’s been done well both ways, but obviously the conductorless version has its advantages. It takes some time for the instrumentalists to really secure themselves. And it works better in fact, all of the early performances in which the New Jersey chamber players were all without conductor. It takes really a while. Also it’s much better if the singer has some experience with the piece. I’ve conducted it and I’ve heard unconducted performances, there is clearly much to said for both ways. The advantage of an unconducted performance if it’s really been worked out, is that the ensemble is much better. It is a hard call. The one time I did it in San Francisco, [the singer] had only been working on the piece for a short time and it was very important to have some organizing effect from a conductor.

PK: Would it be okay to talk now a bit about *Flashes and Illuminations*?

JH: Sure.

PK: I had a chance to perform this piece. It was very challenging. I’m curious about the first thing I hear in the first piece, “Sulla Greve.” It reminded me of Schoenberg’s “Mondestrunken” and I was hoping you would comment on that.

JH: Yeah I think that’s right. It is that sort of harmonic texture. That piece I had a lot of difficulty with, because the way I actually wrote the piece was I sketched in the rhythm of the words and next made the whole piano part. And I think it’s the only time I ever worked to that extreme degree in that manner, that the voice part then has to fit into the piano part in sort of an obbligato manner. Even though I took a couple of tries at it, it still is a difficult role for the singer to find the harmonic link to the piano part. And I know that the pianists that worked on the piece did notice that their part was sort of a self sufficient piece in the way that the *Pierrot* instrumental parts are when the singers are not there, sounds complete, which is one of the tricky things about assembling *Pierrot*. I sometimes felt like *Pierrot* sounds a little bit better before the singer gets there. That is curious, the construction of that song is an unusual case.
PK: Did that hold any sway on your actual translation of the piece?

JH: Yeah I did make some adjustments of the translation to sort of work better with this obbligato concept. And I had set a lot of Montale before in Italian. In my head the idea of the selection of text for the whole cycle was to refer to poets that I had spent a lot of time with and add into that, poets I knew I was going to spend a lot of time with. I had wanted to do something with Montale that I hadn't done before, which is work with it in translation.

PK: I am curious about the cycle how it is linked together textually or musically.

JH: What I was hoping for is that the personality of the poets would enforce upon the piece quite a diversity of approach that in a way the character of the cycle is determined by how different the poets are. I don’t know to what degree that is the result but certainly is what I was looking for.

PK: Is there a common theme in the poems?

JH: The idea comes from a section of Montale’s *La bufera*, his third large book where he has a section called “Flashes and Dedications”. And each one of them seems to deal with almost incomplete and somewhat private images, which suggests something going on that is beyond what is in the poem.

PK: Would you be willing to share some of those insights or is that something you could articulate?

JH: Well, both of the Bishop poems are almost like outlines for a story, but you don’t really get the whole story. Or they may be analogies to another story. “Cirque d’Hiver” is a kind of a parable about the relationships between men and women. But it masquerades as just a description of a little toy. And the other Bishop poem is also a kind of a parable, but this one is about the hermit who has chosen this disconnected life, but his message is quite the reverse. And I like the fact that both of those seem to, in terms of Bishop’s own experience, stand for a lot of very real encounters, but both poems choose to work with sort of a surrogate story, sort of a foreground story.

I'm not quite sure of the chronology, but I think that this piece is quite a ways before, (hear him flipping through the score) yeah it’s about three or four years before I actually do two quite large pieces on Bishop’s text, so it would be my first encounters with her poetry.

The flash element in the Michael Fried poem is that there is this wild imagining of some ancient, some battle in the ancient world. Though what it’s really about is some sort of self-realization moment of personal arrival. But the poet seems to be imagining himself in the middle of some battle for Athens or something like that.

PK: In terms of presenting these pieces, you mentioned singer and pianist coming to terms with different ideas, for example in “Chemin de fer,” coming to terms with a motivation, is that something that you feel is required for each of these pieces?

JH: I think each of the pieces really in some ways needs its own song vocabulary. The “Chemin de Fer” is really a dramatic narrative. And it’s a very declamatory song in the end.
Probably in a really weird extreme vision too, and it’s like at the other end of the scale from the philosophical poem that is at the end of the set which is the Milosz thing. Which is really, I think a very rich but a very muted kind of California meditation. The whole point of which is to say, that the poet can no longer say anything because all that really means anything is the visible world. So in a way, the attitudes of the poets are extremely in variance with each other too, which was certainly part of the intention.

I was actually trying to assemble, I was very conscious of being headed towards a lot of engagement with Milosz and Bishop, both poets which I hadn’t tried to set before, and I was also trying to find a few new ways to think about Michael Fried, and Williams and I suppose Montale. All three of those poets I had written very big pieces involving their work in fact I had only just a little bit before finished a big soprano set called *Simple Daylight* on Michael Fried poems. And the poem I set of his here would fit into *Simple Daylight* in terms of the tone, in terms of the drama of it. But I knew that the effect of *Flashes and Illuminations* would be very much like that part of the Montale book, rather fragmentary moving off in a lot of different directions at virtually every piece.

PK: Can you comment about something I read in the Williams piece, a request to sing in a muffled manner? Would you elaborate on that?

JH: This poem of Williams always seemed to me a poem that he could barely write. I think one of the hardest thing for the singer is to make it so inward as if there is no, it’s like to resist the idea of projecting it in any normal way. Almost everything in it is almost parenthetical, this thing about cross-purposes struggling. It like it won’t just doesn’t get out, and one of the things in the performance that I really had to coax from the singers is to really observe the dynamic markings and not over-project it. At the same time, the pianist has to play the bass notes very strong or the passacaglia structure isn’t heard. And notes fade out too soon. I’ve often thought about this piece as one that would probably be clearer if it were scored for a different instrument. And actually I did score the Milosz poem for chamber ensemble at one point.

PK: What would you say because of the tonality use, what other musical elements were most important?

JH: In terms of my attitude to song composition in general, I don’t know too many songs in the traditional song literature that require the pianist to have such a share of the action. That is to say you could say of the Schubert and Schumann songs that the pianist is a partner, but in terms of the actual foregrounded detail, I guess my first basic connection would be in Schumann the way the piano parts are often, if the pianist plays them in the room by themselves, there is kind of a complete level of information in the piano part. But also that I always think of the role of the singer as being able to go literally from something that sounds just like speech to a very broad and extremely theatrical declaration and I usually kind of try to get that kind of range certainly into a larger vocal piece where the singer really has to go from doing something that is next to talking all the way out to something that is very sung out and perhaps very un-Liederlike in terms of what kind of a dramatic pose the singer is striking and I probably have gone further than that in some other pieces. In *Simple Daylights*, the piano part is a tremendous undertaking, clearly what I’ve found through the years about these pieces is that performances are much less inhibited by the singers, than by pianists who don’t take to the idea that they need to work that hard just to be part of a song concert. I
know with *Simple Daylights* for example I hear from sopranos quite often that I really want to do this piece, but I can’t get someone to play it with me. So there is something about this concept about what a song is that for the moment is not too practical and I think its even true of *Flashes and Illuminations* that the pianist has a lot of work to do not to say that the singer doesn’t, but the pianist to play “Winds of Dawn” is going to spend plenty of hours in the studio really figuring out how to play it; the kind of work that they are really used to putting into their own recital. My constant new year’s resolution is to write some sort of set of songs with sight-readable accompaniment.

PK: I had a similar situation with my pianist who is a brilliant sight-reader and is very musical as well, he came to me and said “Wow, I really had to spend some time with this.”

JH: And this can be a real obstacle because even very detailed piano writing-Duparc songs for (the) pianist but at least in the end, their vocabulary is very familiar or at least quite apprehendable and I’ve found that over the years that these pieces have been around, that the burden on the pianist has been reported to me a lot. The Montale songs for instance which are big, almost a program length for mezzo and pianist, but its always the pianist that report back at what a large undertaking and I know that somebody like Graham Johnson would say, you know, that it’s time for the pianist to really take the partnership more serious in the song world and for me, song recitals are about the most exiting concerts that I’m most happy to go to but, it’s very hard in our culture to convince the participants, in particular the pianist to make the investment to take on a program where there really is a total partnership. But I still find, I still keep resolving to figure out a way, finally I decided that I had to in a way, take myself through the experience, I did do a couple of performances of *North and South* myself with Janice Felty, and those are hard piano parts, I spent a lot of time working on spots in that. So I did get a real first-hand sense of what the pianist has to go through. Some of the places were fun to work out, some of them were just very tough.

PK: From a performer’s perspective, the pieces were challenging but far more rewarding.

JH: Well I’m really glad you are interested. I think we have a really, American composers have really been quite neglectful of tenors and baritones. There really should be much more song literature for male singers. Somehow everything got stuck on writing for female voices. Even chamber music, somehow *Pierrot* and new music ensemble use women’s voices. And quite early in my life I got the idea that I wanted to write for men singers, and one of my earliest song sets was a piece for harp and tenor, but right away I got the sense that I wanted to write for tenors, now obviously British music has been better particularly because of Britten, there is really some fabulous music for tenor, but in general the song literature a lot of it was recently slanted towards the female singers.

PK: Have you any plans to compose any more for baritone?

JH: Well I wrote a huge piece for baritone which actually, the title is somewhat camouflaged, but the fifth-symphony is just a giant cantata for baritone with a kind of secondary role for mezzo-soprano. That was in a way my biggest enterprise for baritone so far. And that was a Milosz poem, by Milosz.
PK: I really appreciate your time you’ve been very helpful and I can’t thank you enough for taking the time to answer these questions.

JH: Well you are very welcome.

PK: I will be continuing research. Would it be appropriate to send you an email?

JH: Yeah you could do that. I don’t know if you’ve thought of this, you could also email Sandy Sylvan. Sandy is a very smart guy, and has a lot of thoughts about these pieces I’m sure, and also about contemporary song literature. He’s up in McGill University in Toronto.
I.

In old age
the mind
    casts off
    rebelliously
an eagle
from its crag
   —the angle of a forehead
    or far less
makes him remember when he thought
he had forgot
   —remember
confidently
only for a moment, only for a fleeting moment—
    with a smile of recognition.

It is early...
the song of the fox sparrow
reawakening the world
of Paterson
   —its rocks and streams
frail tho it is
from their long winter sleep

In March—
the rocks
the bare rocks
speak!
   —it is a cloudy morning.
   He looks out the window
sees the birds still there—
Not prophecy! NOT prophecy!
    but the thing itself!

A horned beast among the trees
in the moonlight
following small birds
the chickadee
    in a field crowded with small flowers
...its neck
    circled by a crown!
    from a regal tapestry of stars!
lying wounded on his belly
    legs folded under him
the bearded head held
    regally aloft..
What but indirection
will get to the end of the sphere?
Here
is not there,
and will never be.
The Unicorn
has no mate
    or mate . the artist
has no peer .
Death
has no peer
wandering in the woods,
a field crowded with small flowers
in which the wounded beast lies down to rest

We shall not get to the bottom:
death is a hole
in which we are all buried
Gentile and Jew.

The flower dies down
and rots away
But there is a hole
in the bottom of the bag.

It is the imagination
which cannot be fathomed.
It is through this hole
we escape

So through art alone, male and female, a field of
flowers; a tapestry, spring flowers unequaled
in loveliness.

Through this hole
at the bottom of the cavern
of death, the imagination
escapes intact.

he bears a collar round his neck
hid in the bristling hair.

A lady with the tail of her dress
on her arm

The lady’s brow is serene
to the sound of a huntsman’s horn

There is a woman in our town
walks rapidly, flat belled
    in worn slacks upon the street
where I saw her.
   neither short
nor tall, nor old nor young
her
    face would attract no
adolescent.

Her
hair
was gathered simply behind the
ears under a shapeless hat.

Her
hips were narrow, her
legs
thin and straight. She stopped
me in my tracks—until I saw
her
    disappear in the crowd.
   if ever I see you again
as I have sought you
daily without success

I’ll speak to you, alas
too late!

have you read anything that I have written?
It is all for you
    or the birds
or Mezz Mezzrow
II.

Paterson has grown older

the dog of his thoughts

has shrunk
to no more than “a passionate letter”
to a woman, a woman he had neglected
to put to bed in the past

And went on

living and writing

answering

letters

and tending his flower

garden, cutting his grass and trying
to get the young
to foreshorten
their errors

A flight of birds, all together,

seeking their nests in the season

a flock before dawn, small birds

“That slepen al the night with open ye,”
moved by desire, passionately, they

have come a long way, commonly.

Now they separate and go by pairs
each to his appointed mating. The
colors of their plumage are undecipherable
in the sun’s glare against the sky

but the old man’s mind is stirred
by the white, the yellow, the black
as if he could see them there.

Their presence in the air again

calms him. Though he is approaching
death he is possessed by many poems
Flowers have always been his friends,
even in paintings and tapestries

They draw him
to witness them, to refresh himself
at the sight direct from the 12th
century what the old woman or the young
or men or boys wielding their needles
to put in her green thread correctly

All together, working together—all the birds together.

Now I come to the small flowers

that cluster about the feet

of my beloved

— the hunt of

the Unicorn and

the god of love

of virgin birth

— every married man carries in his head
the beloved and sacred image
of a virgin

whom he has whored

but the living fiction

a tapestry

silk and wool shot with silver threads

a milk-white one-horned beast

I, Paterson,
saw the lady

through the rough woods

outside the palace walls

among the stench of sweating horses

and gored hounds

yelping with pain

the heavy breathing pack

to see the dead beast

brought in at last

across the saddlebow

among the oak trees.

Paterson,

keep your pecker up

whatever the detail!

I cannot tell it all:

slippered flowers

crimson and white

balanced to hang

on slender bracts,

foxglove, the eglandine

or wild rose,
pink as a lady’s earlobe when it shows

beneath the hair,
campanella, blue and purple tufts

small as forget-me-not among the leaves.

Yellow center, crimson petals

and the reverse,
dandelion, love-in-a-mist,

cornflowers,

thistle and others

the names and perfumes I do not know.
The woods are filled with holly

(I have told you, this

is a fiction pay attention),

the yellow flag of the French fields is here

and a congeries of other flowers

as well: daffodils

and gentian, the daisy, columbine

petals

myrtle, dark and light

and calendulas

— a fragment of the tapestry

presents a young woman

lost in the woods

announced . . .

by the blowing of a hunter’s horn

— learning with age to sleep my life away:
saying

The measure intervenes, to measure is all we know,
a choice among the measures

the measured dance

“unless the scent of a rose

startle us anew”

Equally laughable

is to assume to know nothing, a

chess game

massively, “materially,” compounded!

Yo ho! ta ho!

We know nothing and can know nothing

but

the dance, to dance to a measure

contrapuntally,

Satyrically, the tragic foot.