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The Maker's Role: or, the Limitations of How Conversation is Idealized in Poetics Now

> We have but held to our ancient Church, where there is an altar and no pulpit … turned away from the too great vigour of those who, living for mutual improvement, have a pulpit and no altar. … Painting had to free itself from a classicalism that denied the senses, a domesticity that denied the passions, and poetry from a demagogic system of morals which destroyed the humility, the daily dying of the imagination in the presence of beauty.[1]

Almost every poet since Wordsworth has at least nominally rejected the pulpit for the altar: the work would have to offer its own testimony by which the religious values that might be asserted possess actual numinous presence. And almost every critic has fallen into line, elaborating the dangers of public rhetoric in the fundamentally private domain of lyric expression.[2] Socially rhetoric had come to seem dependent on the poet's seeking the approval of an obtuse and righteous society.[3] And psychologically taking the role of rhetorician had come also to involve embracing the role of spokesperson for the values that held this society together, which in turn implicated the poet in that righteousness. The cost of rhetorical stances may be greatest in poetry because according to philosophers like Bergson that mode of activity had the capacity to mold language to the shapes of concrete experience.

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[1] William Butler Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961): 351. Cited hereafter as *E&I*.

[2] I summarize Modernist critiques of "rhetoric" in my "What Theory Can Learn From New Directions in Contemporary American Poetry," *New Literary History* 43 (Winter 2012): 65-88.

[3] Yeats again: "The English hymn-writer, writing not as himself but as the congregation, is a rhetorician; but the Indian convention, founded on the most poignant personal emotion, should make poets" (*E&I*, 434).

Now this critique of the rhetorical has reached a new level of intensity because it allies with the critiques of identity thinking as an idealization of mastery basic both for the Frankfurt School and for Poststructuralist theory. From this perspective any idealizing of the author as defining shapes and purposiveness for texts traps us in two kinds of rhetoric—those resulting from authors' inevitable seduction by their own projects and from the temptation to treat these projects as effective responses to social problems. And now what had been confined largely to theory is shaping very intelligent and eloquent work in both poetics and in transformations of lyric projects.[4] So I am going to give one name to a variety of positions—"relational poetics"—in order to make two kinds of arguments against it: that this poetics runs into serious problems making conceptual connections among the range of claims it asserts, and that while this poetics opens significant opportunities for writing, it has a limited and limiting relation to literary history. Relational poetics fails to honor the kinds of values that can emerge from a poetics that stresses quests for the exemplary roles authorial identity can play when it imposes demands on an audience to subordinate itself to the purposiveness of the text.

I

I think Lisa Robertson's book of essays *Nilling* is the best theoretical statement we are likely to get from relational poetics, so despite the variety I just mentioned I will concentrate only on its arguments, then set against her case what late Yeats via Hegel stages as the values in pursuing modes of self-consciousness deriving from how poems are produced.[5] But first I have to state some limitations on my own argument. I will not be concerned with the practices of contemporary poets, in large part because the practices often contradict the theory, even while the theory leads us to interpret those practices as instances of

[4] The demand for attention to event rather than structure is sustained in contemporary poetics primarily by figures like Geoffrey G. O'Brien elaborating the indeterminacies cultivated by both John Ashbery and the Language poets into a dynamic sense of text as conversational event bringing author and reader into intricate collusion. And this sense of conversation takes on the possibility of sustaining radical democratic ideals of political participation in the work of poets like Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr as well as Robertson.

[5] Lisa Robertson, *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, the Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias* (Toronto: Book Thug, 2012).

its authority. I want to test Robertson's positions as practical justifications for specific critical attitudes. And I will not deal with the sources of Robertson's ideas, in part because they are obvious. She is a major theorist and deserves to be taken seriously for what she formulates, even if in the process she has to go against Hegel.

Robertson's arguments in *Nilling s*eem grounded in two related principles—the undoing of any fixed personal identity and a corresponding emphasis on the "you" and the "here" as addressees who determine what a text can accomplish. She calls on writers to pursue "the indeterminacy of identity" on every level: "The inchoate state I crave … is a timely dallying and surge among a cluster of minute identifications. I prefer to become foreign and unknowable to myself in accordance with reading's audacity."[6] For then once identity is negated one can experience the liberation possible when one embraces rather than resists contingency:

> It is the refusal to be defined (as, for example, a woman, as a painter…), which is the basic liberatory gesture; this refusal opens a fantastic negative space—the not-yet, which rests beside and other than the question of an identity designation, without entirely eclipsing it. (43)

Even the will cannot be experienced simply in positive terms but always contains also its antithesis or "counter-will, an affinity for "nilling" and for various kinds of refusal including the complex Freud identified as the death drive (27-8). So Robertson borrows from Hannah Arendt the notion that thinking is a kind of tracking, a way into the labyrinth rather than the instrumental means for producing order and utility (23).

Not surprisingly, Robertson's understanding of negativity shares Deleuze's hatred of dialectic: the second person or the "here" is not recuperable as a stage of the first person's deepening sense of identity. Instead the full presence of what manifests itself as "here" destabilizes any authority for the vision of the world produced by the individual ego: think of Sartre's image of one's being suddenly sucked out of a room when one recognizes one is being observed. When one

[6] Robertson, *Nilling*, 13.

encounters another person, or even the otherness of a strange situation, a full response requires allowing the situation itself to produce what constitutes subjectivity for the various agents. Subjectivity becomes not what one projects but what one finds as effective means of continuing a conversation—literally with other people and figuratively with elements whose presence consists in their directing attention away from the self. The statement "I am I" is only a tautology constituted by imaginary objects for both referring pronouns.

Instead of being locked into this tautology, Robertson emphases our possibility for entertaining different subject positions as we pursue our capacity for constant "co-creation." From this perspective, "the unresolved, often frictive, relationship between conditioning environments and desiring mind is itself thinking's energetic resource" (14 n3). Multiplicity of selves allows us the articulation of multiple worlds:

> Sometimes "here" has no walls. …Value moves between us or is foreclosed. The conversations are conditioned by profoundly ancient and constantly reinventing protocols—protocols we enliven, figure, and transform with our bodies and their words, by beginning. This beginning is what anyone belongs to. … Any subject is supported, spoken, and carried or disallowed and foreclosed by others, in a matrix of reciprocity, empathy and power that conditions the very possibility of embodiment. (73)

Embodiment then becomes a central figure for Robertson's developing the implications of these transformations of lyric speakers and lyric situations. Embodiment as a felt condition depends on foregoing a sense of unified body as well as mind. For embodiment is not exhausted by the overt materiality of physical bodies but is a condition of atmospheres where feelings and thoughts and observations form a literal composing matrix: "The occupied space is sensual intuition, whose rubbing against contingent things opens them and itself" (52). Everything for Robertson is imagined in spatial terms because embodiment ultimately produces a state of complex proximity. And the science of proximities is not economics with its dreams of causal explanation but ecology, where regulation is local and variable and infinitely subtle. An abstract version of ecology provides "the circulatory model of a mutually embodied and temporally

vulnerable power-in-relationship, as long as one considers ecology in terms of complex processes of disequilibrium and emergence" (76).

The figure of ecology also provides political implications for what can happen in lyric writing. For Robertson the city, not the nation state, plays the primary role because the city models aspects of relatedness that are "digressional not causal," "ephemeral not monumental," and "commodious not commodity" (69). The figure of the city allows us to imagine public forms of embodiment vibrant with conflicts generating matrices of concrete possibilities for action and for co-creation. The figure of the nation, on the other hand, cannot escape constant strategic efforts to gain and wield power. Against such efforts Robertson posits the city as soliciting the figure of constant "noise." Noise has two important dimensions. First it represents the *demos* aspect of the polis. It is unregulated speech, with semantic folds that have potential significance even in those instances where noise appears non-communicative (65).[7] One must dwell in this noise and appreciate some of the energies it negotiates and rhythms it sustains before this communication does take place. But once the semantic folds become bearers of possible sense, the city constitutes its speakers as "co-determining participants in a collective valuing" (81).

Finally Robertson's vision of value gives a significant role to poetry. She makes superb use of the Modernist principle that the work itself demonstrates what it speaks of—in this case by providing an actual "commodious" site (12)[8] "where the I and the you create one another for the pleasure of stately co-recognition" (87). I and you collaborate to have contrary fields of energies interact to produce an emergent matrix of semantic and affective possibilities.

Poems do not mean or just "be." "Meaning" and "being" are conditions specific to ideal entities. Because poems are embodied they have to the power to stir up aspects of situations so as to allow self-reflexive participation in qualities of

[7] I cannot resist citing this brilliant sentence even though it makes no contribution to my argument: "Noise permits the subject's sense of interiority to figure as silence at the same time that it constitutes the outer limits of that interiority in terms of the tactile" (65).

[8] Robertson's understanding of this commodious site replaces the making subject by the complexly dwelling subject: "This object furnishes hospitable conditions for entering and tarrying; it shelters without fastening; it conditions without determining" (12).

relation to environments and to other people that endlessly fold in on themselves while at the same time folding out into significance-bearing shapes. The following long quotation states Robinson's redefinition of the space of poetry far better than I can:

> Let us suppose here that poems are those commodious anywheres that might evade determination by continuously inviting their own dissolution in semantic distribution. … Only here speech still evades quantification, escapes the enumerating sign, and follows language towards its ear, toward natality, which is anybody's. … The poem is the speech of citizenship. … This shaped speaking carries the breath of multiple temporalities into the present, not to protect or sanctify the edifice of tradition, but to vulnerably figure historicity as an embodied stance, an address, the poem's most important gift to politics (83-4).

II

Let me summarize by reducing Robertson's intricate prose to six simple statements that I think form the core of much "innovative poetry" and poetics today.

> 1) Above all, poetry is that field devoted to destabilizing all categorical thinking, especially claims about the ego as ground of identity and arbiter of values.
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> 2) Then the poem cannot be an ideal identity for which we seek coherently formulated meaning and identifiable authorial intentions. Rather the poem is a site or a field of relations which continually demand various subject positions for adapting to what seems other to the ego's demands. The effect of honoring this site is that our model of creation has to change to one of co-creation, stressing how the subject and object calling forth possibilities from one another.
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> 3) The poetic field provides a powerful figure for a new understanding of embodiment. Embodiment is not the spirit assuming bodily form but a figure for the materiality of imaginative activity as that activity gets engaged in how both the worlds of subject and object dissipate into one

another. That dissipation creates uncanny states of indecipherable but affectively engaging situations. Embodiment is the figure for how what are considered mental states like imagining, feeling, and willing, share in the lives of what generates them as establishing actual force in the world.

4) The will is not that power that tries to bring order to this sense of folds upon folds of emerging relations. Rather the will is also an embodied element within this field. It is typically divided between the feeling that it is necessary to act and the feeling that action would destroy what becomes available to the nilling involved in purely contemplative attitudes or other states of engaged passivity.

5) The city becomes that form of embodiment that affords a political extension of the space of co-creation. Its many noises destroy single identities and result in no specifiable identity beyond this name for what cannot be further named. But in destroying identities noise provides myriad paths to possible sense because it solicits conversation about what might be needed to produce provisional sense for creatures stripped of their power to assert the armor of moral and practical identity.

6) The poem is the city figured in contemplative space. The poem is inseparable from how it is embodied. It is not about anything, although it refers to many particulars in many voices. Its force depends on literal struggles both to maintain and to transform noise. So both writing and reading have to be seen as co-creation—not so much the creation of meaning as the creation of matrices of possibility for further reflection and conversation.

III

It is difficult in our intellectual culture not find relational poetics very suggestive and moving in its sense of how we can restructure our understanding of agency in poetry. This is especially the case with Robertson's prose because she effectively establishes a distinct mode of writing that gorgeously hovers somewhere between the figural and the referential, between suggestiveness and argument, as if deliberately to suspend what she calls "the will to know." So there is something seriously reductive in the way I will treat her ideas simply as

propositional claims, especially since she makes such rich use of "here" in her poetry. Yet not to impose this projected severity would be unfair to Robertson because in this prose the poetic dimension seeks a discursive anchor.

Let us begin then with what seems to me problematic in Robertson's assertions about the importance of destabilizing identity, as in her statement that she prefers "to become foreign and unknowable to myself in accordance with reading's audacity" (13). Is that foreignness really being unknown to oneself? There are simply too many considerations collapsed into the notion of knowing the self here. Robertson is surely right that people want variety in their lives by working to feel that they are not predictable. Yet the notion of surprising the self seems to me to depend always upon a background of generally knowing the self, then allowing or entertaining the competing pulls of repetition and variety. A thorough effort to be unknowable to oneself would not be to enter into a world of co-creation but be stuck in madness—utter uncontrollable change. And there would be no locus for pleasure or judgment, only chance and luck. Robertson wants us to be more open to chance and luck, but I suspect she does not want to have these completely control other aspects of imaginative and practical life. But what can she do, given the enabling power of the binaries on which she relies? These binaries preclude intricacy and foreclose on the powers of the mind to entertain at once what seem incompatible notions.

Ironically, binary thinking runs deep in Robertson, perhaps because she is so deft at generalization. While Robertson is very good on envisioning how the "here" of the text is open to multiple possibilities, those possibilities tend to be always those that contribute to citizenship and a sense of community. She is not very good at envisioning possibilities for how we might participate in and value diverse experiences that do not fit into this oppositional politics. Think of her passage on how the city as "digressional not causal; as ephemeral not monumental" (69), and also of how often she employ the rhetoric of "this not that." There is not much use of "also" in her prose, although there are many lovely, balanced antithetical phrases.

The problems get more pressing when Robertson tries to develop the possible political implications of such non-identity. Take as an example her use of Hannah Arendt's claim that the "beginner" is the "guarantor of political

freedom" (74): "the presence of subjects, beginners always, is antithetical to violence, because the discourse that inflects subjects also dismantles the tenure of authority." It is interesting to ask under what conditions this statement might be accurate and adequate. I think it could be true only if all violence were motivated by defences of identity and authority. Yet this seems patently not the case. Many cases of violence derive from sheer anger or greed or hatred or (as *The Sopranos* had it) from lack of impulse control. This last possibility is especially illuminating because one might think that lack of impulse control is not a question of too much insistence on identity but insufficient effort to be certain kinds of persons as opposed to others. We will see that Robertson systematically simply ignores those cases where a concern for identity might prove beneficial to society, despite the fact that most societies build concerns for individual responsibility into their social fabrics.

Co-creation is a great figure for what loosening the bounds of identity can establish. But it is difficult to rely on the co-created, precisely for the same reason that the notion is so attractive. Co-creation dissolves the self in the moment, apparently freeing the moment from concerns for ownership. But to build on this argument, or to put the spatial fluidity into time, may require asserting ownership and responsibility, even for how the ideas of co-creation may play out—as in the creation of most works of art. Otherwise we have all the benefits of fluid imaginary identifications without any of the obligations that we tend to invoke by reminders about chosen and proclaimed identities. And we have rich pictures of what embodiment can become, but unsatisfying accounts of how we might put these embodiments to work influencing modes of behaviour. She has no language for the closing off of possibilities to secure a firm decision about what belongs and what does not belong to the presentation of a complex of experiences within art. She has a language for responsiveness but not for responsibility, or at least for what has traditionally been addressed by that concept.

This problem is clearest where Robertson's intelligence is perhaps most distinctive—in her understanding of how poems literarily instantiate the conditions of becoming that she proposes. Hers is among the strongest statements of the notion, increasingly popular in contemporary poetry, that "in the poem language is not object it is subject," so the poem gives us a record of

subjectivity's movement in language" (86). Releasing the poem as object from the subjectivity of the maker encourages the possibilities of co-creation and the radical freedom of reading against one's sense of one's own character. But if the poem is object built on the construction of subjectivity, there is no difference between readers' and authors' subjectivities. Then the reader can still experience difficulty, but no resistance. Any resolution of the difficulties will be measured only by how interesting the possibilities are that emerge for the reader. This I think conforms to the worst features of consumer society—that the consumer is always the centre of value. Then the poem can be given the status of object only because it must take that form to enable consumption.

In a reader-centric environment there is simply no sense to the possibility that the object may have particular forms of coherence imposed upon it, so that coherence becomes one principle by which the work gains intensity. In Robertson's world there is no language for objecthood. And there is not much opportunity for responsible subjecthood unless it can attune itself to a mode of co-creation that is likely to dissipate the individual subject's particular urgencies and intensities. Nor is there a concern for the ways subject status can be constructed and staged as earned. There is no model for how the making of the text may impose its own negation of what the subject thinks it wants in order to pursue what can be made and what can be willed at that dialectical level of self-consciousness.

IV

Unfortunately my kind of conceptual analysis rarely achieves any kind of cultural currency because it is not addressing the actual force of the critic's arguments. If these kinds of arguments achieve any significant popularity they are addressing something more fundamental than argument: they offer the possibility of making articulate new sets of cultural values that promise relief from a culture become sclerotic and insensitive to its own contradictions.[9] On this level I think relational poetics will do a good deal of good, even without

[9] This is why we need a distinction between the space of argument—where we try to find out what we can say without contradiction about the structures that define ordinary experience—and the space of imaginings that is enriched by plural speculative figures showing us what might be involved in particular ways of approaching the world.

really compelling arguments that ground its experiments. But on this level too, there is a strong reason to hesitate and to ask what is the cost of invoking theoretical binaries that reject identity thinking without fully examining what might be achieved culturally by the strongest art devoted to pursuits of identity.

In a longer version of this paper I provide substantial passages of modernist prose defining how self-consciousness about making provides distinctive psychological states linking the act of composing, the taking of responsibility, and the possibility of producing communities of readers shaped by identifying with what takes shape as the activity defining the internal relations basic to our reading experience.[10] But now I must move directly to defending the ultimate

[10] Here I can only provide the citations to relevant passages so interested readers can pursue what modernist artists and writers saw as the roles of the pursuit of self-consciousness by virtue of composing works of art. For Yeats see especially *Essays and Introductions*, 404-10, 434, 442-43, 461, 518-27 and *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1962): 330-35, 373, 396-97, 428-30. On how Malevich and Picasso imagine what making involves I still recommend my own chapter on them in my *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 201-221.

T. J. Clark's superb recent book *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) is bracingly attentive to Picasso's investments in the process of making. Yet I need to engage Clark here because he insists on reading Picasso as a materialist, and so a relational thinker partaking in ideals of art quite close to those Robertson describes. Clark grounds and defends Picasso's art because it preserves the love of intimate places in a society committed to callousness about particular loves—from the violent changes Capitalism inflicts on anything that stands in the way of profit to the violences of the political order, often in the name of abstract justice and love. But I think Picasso is less interested in any object of painting than in how painting can preserve what it means to pursue the power of artificiality that regathers and redistributes those aspects of emotional life capable of taking form in an image. Revelation or "realization" (Cézanne's term) occurs in most of Picasso not directly as access to fresh truths about the world but depends on how the making positions us to infer why the world is being reconstructed.

Let us take for example Clark's discussion of Picasso's *Nude on Black Armchair* (1932). Clark offers a brilliant close reading of the painting, especially in his attention to Picasso's various ways of insisting on the "I" of the painter (6). But he almost turns Picasso into a figure who seeks bondage to situations rather than the figure I see who wants to stress the will's capacity to work on those situations. Clark is always superb on what there is to see—especially the grimness of Picasso's determination not to be deluded by sentiment. But Clark cannot let himself imagine how the encounter with grimness becomes an aspect of the strength of the maker's ability to measure history as a condition of his will to power. Picasso does not stress seeing so much as call attention to how the making of the work affects our sense of our capacities to see. Therefore any defense of his

ideal of identity thinking—the possibility of dialectical knowledge producing versions of "I am I" that are very much more than tautology. This seems to me the strongest way of resisting the Deleuzian aspects of Robertson's critique of identity thinking, since Hegel's insights on dialectic do not require the ontological system that Deleuze rejects. And that in turn should open the way to using Yeats's later poems as exemplary: these poems establish how composition becomes the fundamental source of agency providing dialectical experiences that are not possible if we surrender author functions to communal bacchanal.

Let us begin with an alternative version of cultural history proposed in a range of Modernist texts in poetics and in art theory. There is everywhere the critique of rhetoric as the effort to occupy the social pulpit. But there is no critique of rhetoric when the artists' art reflects on their own efforts to build identity positions, both for the artist and for the work as reflecting powers of concentration and synthesis. Art was not merely embodied sensation or situated moral wisdom. It had to be treated as deriving from a person's choices establishing and controlling the flow of experience. Then we could see how art might claim to use the phenomenon of choice as modelling for the energies of self-consciousness. This is why many modernists realized that they had to reinvent what they inveighed against. Mediation and artifice were not to be evaded, but they could perhaps become absorbed into modes of making that did not seek to speak with the authority of society nor sustain the values of any recognizable polis. One could then imagine the conversation in reading as trying to participate in the choices of the author and to test their significance for an individual's life. Reading the numinous depends on honouring how the author's craft manipulates experience, and on attending to where such manipulation places the psyche as it tries to appreciate the forces to which it finds itself submitting.

There are two basic Modernist models for justifying the foregrounding of artifice. The first option continued the Romantic sense that it was ultimately the freshness and the depth of experience that called out for the modes of responsiveness art had the capacity to muster. Hence the now traditional

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art must focus less on the objects eliciting that work than on the kinds and qualities of self-consciousness the work produces.

expressivist understanding that art is the presentation of what in the world honours, reflects, and provokes a dynamic sense of our own subjective capacities for responsiveness to what can transcend the ordinary modes of getting and spending. There is a clear affinity between the intensified attention to what emerges in experience for Keats and for Wordsworth and the cult of what becomes present for subjective passions in Imagism and Objectivism, in the dynamics of Cézannean space, and even in Eliot's and early Stevens' far more bitter sense of how subjective energies complete (and displace) the forms of attention an objective world can elicit. Let us call this model of imaginative encounter the dream that expressive acts could fuse subject and object with a minimal sense that the dynamics of such encounters were directly mediated by any sense of audience.

A second Modernist model (derived by Yeats from Blake and from Shelley but also dependent on Symboliste and theosophical ideas) insisted on retaining an emphasis on the role of the maker almost entirely for the states of self-consciousness that this ideal might produce. Subject matter was not unimportant. But the art engaged the subject matter as a stage for recognizing who the self could become in such engagements. Since persuasion was not in question, all the maker's energies could be devoted to shaping the relationship elicited for self-consciousness by the stimulus for the work.

From this perspective making can only justify itself if it is willing to forgo the language of discovery for claims that what matters in art is giving a shape and so visibility to the creative will trying to establish substance for its own active powers. The maker abstracts away from recognizable narrative or argumentative content so that the work simply consists in the effort to purify and to ground its own intensities—not because of what works discover in the world but because of how they have the strength to hold off any contents not purely driven by the artists' sense of what is demanded by the work's own compositional energies. The world comes literally to depend on what can endure beyond any particulars doomed to dissolution by time. And the mark of the endurance is the capacity of the object to make palpable the nature and the strength of the will of the subject. This for example is Yeats on Bishop Berkeley: "it is plain from his later writings that he thought of God as a pure indivisible act, personal because at once will and understanding." All joy comes to "depend on the act of the agent himself,

and his election, not upon an external object. The greater the purity the greater the joy" (*E&I*, 408). But I am also interested in how this focus linked the writers to the painters who were discovering the joy of making their own minds the focus for their creative energies. One thinks immediately of abstract imagery like Kandinsky's and the non-iconic inventiveness of Malevich's Suprematism. However we should not forget how Picasso might have claims to be the painter most insistent on how making for an artist can become an exercise in clarifying for oneself the powers of one's will to pursue the implications disclosed by its activities:

> The goal I proposed myself in making Cubism? To paint and nothing more. And to paint seeking a new expression, divested of useless realism, with a method linked only to my thought—without enslaving myself or associating myself with objective reality. … It is my will that takes form outside of all extrinsic schemes, without considering what the public or the critics will say.[11]

V

Both Modernist perspectives I have commented on offer versions of Idealist expression theory—one focusing on how the subject is modified by writing the object into a sense of co-presence, and the other focusing on how the subject of the making makes articulate a grasp of his or her own powers. In both cases the subject stages how it is modified by the object.[12] And the subject stages how the awareness of that modification produces another dimension of subjectivity that we can treat as dialectical because of how that action dramatizes a process of turning a lack or an inchoate condition into something that produces a new state of awareness. This modernist sense of the dialectical does not rely on Hegel's ontology. It needs only an image of how self-consciousness gets modified as it labors to understand and to express that understanding. So at the least such a version of dialectic need not be subject to the Deleuzian critique of Hegel that underlies Robertson's resistance to identity thinking.

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[11] Dore Ashton, *Picasso on Art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 59-60.

[12] Here I build on the chapter on "Expression" in my book *Reckoning with Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

For Robertson, "I am I" is the deadliest possible tautology since it idealizes an identity that is inseparable from treating the subject as object to itself and so binding it to a closed circuit. I think Hegel escapes this critique by substituting the = sign for the copulative verb: his formula is "I = I."[13] Then the sign of identity is fluid and dynamic: each pole of the equation can be modified, or modify itself, to try to maintain equivalence with how the other can be developed. Hegel wants his equation to serve as an emblem for how the self comes to own, and to own up to, what has been exposed as other than itself. "I = I" marks the moment when the self opens itself to its own lack and tries to take in what had been alien to it.

If one is leery of Hegelian abstraction, the same point can be made through an elegantly simple parable developed by the philosopher John Perry because a practical sense of dialectic would substantial modify his conclusion.[14] Perry's parable offers the tale of a shopper who notices that someone's bag of flour must be leaking because there is a trail of flour on the floor of a grocery store. Because our hero is a cross between boy-scout and truth-seeking philosopher, he sets out to find the culprit and inform him that he is the leaker. Of course it is the

[13] I offer two quotations from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). The first clarifies the role of the equals sign in the relation between subject and substance:

> Only after it has externalized this individuality in the sphere of culture, thereby giving it existence, and establishing it through the whole of existence …only then does it turn the thought of its inmost depths outward and enunciate essence as 'I' = 'I'. … In other words, the I is not merely the Self but the identity of the self with itself; but this identity is complete and immediate oneness with Self, or this Subject is just as much Substance (par. 803).

And the second defines how the equals sign indicates constant readjustment:

> The whole is only complete when the two propositions are made together, and when the first is asserted and maintained, it must be countered by clinging to the other with invincible stubbornness. Since both are equally right, they are both equally wrong, and the mistake consists in taking such abstract forms as 'the same' and 'not the same' 'identity and non-identity, to be something true, fixed and actual, and in resting on them. Neither the one nor the other has truth; the truth is just their movement … (par. 780).

[14] I used this story taken from a lecture by Perry almost thirty years ago in my *Painterly Abstraction*, but I see its possible relevance much more clearly now to the artists I dealt with in that book.

philosopher whose bag of flour is leaking. And the philosopher must have a moral to the story so he argues that there is no difference in reference between the "I" seeking the leaker and the leaker. "I" continues to equal "I." There is only an emotional difference as the scene changes from one of quest to one of embarrassed discovery. Robertson's argument about tautology holds up.

But is this entirely true? Certainly the physical person remains the same referent. But is the knower of his guilt or shame the same person as the eager philosophical boy scout who set out on the quest to know. I think we have to say that we are speaking about the identical person yet we are not referring to the same identity in terms of that agent's capacities as a subject. In other words, we cannot avoid the realm of dialectic as soon as we ask about how knowing something about the self changes the self's capacities for action. That subject is not likely to search again for a leaker without first checking his own bag—a small step for human kind but a major improvement in John Perry's repertoire of self-referring actions. More important, that subject has the opportunity at least of coming to will his identity as a less judgmental and more self-aware agent looking out for his own complicity in what he is tempted to judge. He has the vital example of his own blindness turned visibly and objectively into knowledge. The philosopher informed by this example then becomes ready to try to induce an audience to take seriously how his shift in self-consciousness may offer exemplary power.

VI

Of all the modernists Yeats at the end of his career was most obsessed by a dialectical version of identity thinking capable of establishing versions of "I am I" that are very much more than tautology. Many of the poems of this period dramatically and self-reflexively make present dialectical experiences that are not possible if we imagine the author conversing with an audience rather than making something he or she invites us to enter. Yeats's "He and She," for example, provides a drastically different version of discovering identity than does Perry's interpretation of his tale:

> As the moon sidles up
> Must she sidle up,
> As trips the scared moon

Away must she trip:
"His light had struck me blind
Dared I stop."
She sings as the moon sings:
"I am I, am I;
The greater grows my light
The further that I fly."
All creation shivers
With that sweet cry.[15]

This "I" is not quite dialectical, since it does not manifestly incorporate its opposite presented in the opening lines (except perhaps by the implications of the contrast). Nonetheless "I" here is not bound to tautology: it does not seek self-possession as a static condition but as a means of generating increasing light, and so becoming more attractive as a potential lover to creation.

I want to stress the simple poetics of this far from simple idea of the powers of self-possession. Notice how the rhymes function quite differently in the two basic movements of the poem. The sidler's rhymes in the first six lines offer awkward accompaniments to the rendered state of agency objectified by the imposing power of the moon. But the building to "I am I" invites a very different set of quite strong rhymes. This sweet cry is part and parcel of an expression of will that masters the possibilities for rhyme—thus reinforcing the action of setting oneself apart from the world as one's means of lighting one's way. This action in fact makes the world become also a desiring agency, as if the satisfaction in the speaker's activity made the poet also sensitive to what elicits that sense of power.

Without the change in rhymes, this poem might be close to self-promoting bombast. With the change, the power of the maker's will becomes visible so that the assertion "I am I" functions as a self-referring action, intensified by the presentation that embodies it. The poem's contrast in rhymes echoes the larger contrast between being dominated and celebrating one's own freedom—a freedom largely visible just because it can dwell on what it can repudiate. The

[15] W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 559.

speaker can enter a state in which it is even possible to identify willing with thinking—there is no gap between the two, only complementary aspects of celebrating what the speaking also demonstrates. The brilliant repetition of "am I" embodies a precise act of self-consciousness. And that invites us to imagine becoming completely absorbed in memory or participating so intensely in a state that there becomes no distinction between agent and action: you are for the moment pure lover or sinner or even Kierkegaardian saint. The other can participate, but there is no need for it and no distractions caused by that need. Here Yeats would say "the mind partakes of pure activity" (*E&I*, 409) as it abstracts from any specific determining contexts. Abstraction then becomes not a movement away from the real but an engaging of the real within a completely concrete immediacy.

VII

Our makings rarely result in the level of satisfaction asserted in Yeats's poem. But "He and She" makes articulate the possibility of attending to how the productive force in the work can exemplify a process of focusing on the qualities by which the artist's act can make sense of its own intensities. Writing stages self-consciousness at work in such a way as to establish a plausible version of an embodied will. Self-consciousness is not paralyzing precisely because it can sponsor this mode of action, and can solicit a responsiveness to an earned sense of self-regard. Without this corresponding act of will self-consciousness necessarily wobbles into various ironic states because it has no means of making visible its full activity.

But such willing need not take place as sheer self-assertion. "I = I" is much more flexible than that, and much more open to identifying with and as substance rather than as pure activity. These identifications with and as substance are probably more striking in the work of abstract painters like Malevich or Nietzschean painters like Picasso. Indeed their insistence on the power of making goes a long way toward justifying the repudiation of various kinds of realism vying for authority in the arts. But I prefer the language of poetry so I will conclude with another late Yeats's poem, "Man and Echo," that turns self-consciousness outward, so that it achieves a set of relations to errancy and incompleteness like those idealized by Robertson. Yet for Yeats what takes the experience beyond language depends on the speaker's own dialectical processes

for its significance. That final conversation in effect honours the unique nature of lyric because it converts a terror of radical passivity into a triumph of will, without at all denying the undoing of the speaker's quest for articulate self-knowledge. Willing becomes simply the speaker's conversion of identifying with passive victimage into something like self-recognition of what has to be faced.

For Yeats, dialectic ultimately ends in Nietzsche's tragic joy. If knowledge of necessity can be sufficiently intense, the terms of acceptance burn off all that is merely personal and focus on how concentration itself brings self-awareness within transpersonal domains. For at this point the person is less an originator of meaning and significance than a witness to intensities that have very little to do with subjectivity, but are only visible through it. The audience can only witness and try out identifications. The focus of attention is not on establishing *demos* but on defining states of individual psyches that can find identity in the failure to achieve projected ideals.

Because "Man and Echo" is lengthy I will summarize most of it, citing crucial passages along the way.[16] The poem begins with the speaker, "now that he is old and ill," haunted by practical questions of what he could have done differently in his life. He simply wants to be able to realize the possibility of identifying the subject of consciousness with the object that is his remembered life. But all this mental work produces only an echo of his last phrase in the first stanza, "Lie down and die." Yet the speaker is not defeated. He uses this echo to change course, seemingly energized by his awareness of failure in recuperating anything about his practical life. In the second stanza he turns to the work of spiritual intellect:

> Waking he thanks the Lord that he
> Has body and its stupidity
> But body gone he sleeps no more …
> Then stands in judgment on his soul,
> And, all work done, dismisses all

[16] Yeats, *Variorium*, 632-33.

Out of intellect and sight
And sinks at last into the night.

But the shift to spiritual work cannot evade the echo: only the last line is returned to him from the walls of the cave where he thinks. Neither thinking nor making can free the mind from these bleak reminders of inescapable mortality.

But perhaps the making can find terms by which it identifies the agent's will not with the mind per se but with the demands of the situation. Perhaps there is a kind of freedom that can be realized not by will but by the discipline to give way to all that chance involves as a condition for coming to self-consciousness:

O Rocky Voice,
Shall we in that great night rejoice? …
But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream;
Up there some hawk or owl has struck,
Dropping out of sky or rock.
A stricken rabbit is crying out,
And its cry distracts my thought.

Here there is no echo, presumably because the subject has been led beyond the circles of self-absorption to identification with the painful nature of ongoing life (rather than his idealized self-pity). There is no individual self left to be reminded of its pathos.

On one level this poem presents failed dialectic: even recognizing the self's initial failure to pursue the spiritual intellect's great work cannot avoid the echo's ultimate negation of all human effort. Yet the dialectic succeeds on another level because the speaker recognizes that he has to address a very different kind of voice—that of the cave—if his questions are to be answered at all. And then the poem twists the dialectic once more. For it is not the Rocky voice who answers: the speaker is still insisting on his own questions and therefore incapable of hearing any other voice. But having opened the self to the Rocky Voice prepares the speaker to appreciate what can be heard simply in the cry of the rabbit, a reality beyond articulate language for which Rocky voice

speaks. This cry "distracts" the speaker's thought in every sense, displacing what had been a sequence of statements and putting him in another kind of relation to what can be signified for the mind having gone through this process. Distraction provides the way to stop trying to identify with the history of the self so that one can identify with the sheer facts of mortality and of contingency. These facts cannot be altered, but the self can alter their significance by recognizing the need to accept all of the limitations on human power that they produce.

The making here produces a dialectic that results in an awareness of profound relationality very close to the ontology that Robertson elaborates. But in my view there are two significant differences from Robertson's values. First, the body of the poem does not submit itself to conversation. Instead it is absolute in its insistence on giving a distinctive shape to the speaker's experience. A full understanding of how we relate to other beings depends on the reader yielding to this sequence of mental events and opening the self to its own capacities for appreciation and recognition of what is coherently and provocatively structured. Second, this cry is emphatically not democratic noise, although it is a noise that opens into a collective plight. The cry manifestly replaces formulated thought—not to be submitted to reconstruction so much as to be meditated upon as initiating specific structures of meaningfulness for which no other language is available. Here poetry makes mastery and the pursuit of identity the means by which we recognize the possible limits of all human endeavour. The poem's own identity resides in its capacity to locate and to affirm a domain where there are no echoes, only cries of need and of terror that can be acknowledged but not understood. I think the sufferings from war and poverty in our world may at least occasionally warrant having this imaginative resource to fall back upon.