

Aroused by unreadable questions:
Vico, Spinoza and the Poetry of Lisa Robertson and Catriona Strang

by

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Abstract

Virgil, sweetheart, even pretty fops need justice.

Lisa Robertson *Debbie: an epic*

This thesis investigates the ways in which two contemporary language poets associated with the avant-garde Kootenay School of Writing (1983-, Vancouver, Canada), can be read through the philosophical ideas of Giambattista Vico (1688-1744) and Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), as transmitted and transformed by James Joyce (1882-1941) and Louis Zukofsky (1904-1978), among others. For Vico, poetic language is constitutive of reality and humanity; for Spinoza, the human is a productive site of democratic relation. The works discussed here, Robertson's *Debbie: an epic* and Strang's *Low Fancy* constitute previously unexpressed linguistic subjectivities in correspondence with these philosophies. Robertson's epic figure, Debbie, is a Vichian "Giant," an epic heroine, a porn star, a débutante, and a radical break with all that these appellations imply. Strang's interlinguistic translation of the mediaeval Latin songs in *Carmina Burana* opens language up to the possibilities of error and constitutes new democratic subjects, stressing the music and contingency of meaning. These poems are sites of performance where history and the human subject are pried from previous and often injurious representations and expressed within metaphysical frameworks that offer radical and alternate possibilities of being.

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For Fenn and Haeden

For Catriona and Lisa

*Though the medieval way is still thought good enough,
what is to prevent some modern Girl from rising from
the Couch of a Girl as modern, with something new in
her Mind?*

— Djuna Barnes

Fig. 1 LF 6

Foreword

I know there are readers in the world [...] who are no readers at all, who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last . . .

Laurence Sterne *Tristram Shandy*

Dear Readers, there is no secret. There is not even a first to last. Readers, be readers. Let the modern Girl rise from the Couch of a Girl with something new in her Mind. Dear Readers, Submit. Submit to this gentle ink and interrupt its rife type.

The Welcome

This willingness to risk failure seems essential. To risk failure one needs an unfettered sense of play, the play that would allow a failure to become useful for the next attempt, that would in a sense recycle the disaster.

Ann Lauterbach qtd. by Jed Rasula in *Syncopations*

This thesis is a reading of two poems that engage in the production of textual and readerly subjectivities that compose themselves continually in relation to the textual world they inhabit: *Debbie: an epic* by Lisa Robertson (1997) and *Low Fancy* by Catriona Strang (1993).

For some readers these poems might pose difficulties. Their images are often dense and obscure, fractured and unformed. Their topics are precise and profuse, entangled within systems resistant to summary and ripe with decay. In some ways, reading them within an academic context is antithetical to their poetic purpose (and so excruciating). *Low Fancy* and *Debbie* are not meant to be spliced and documented. But they are meant to be read.

The question is how?

For me, the answer lies in the formal eccentricities of the first line in *Debbie*. In addition to various vagrancies (the pages have no numbers), the poem begins with a line of text strung along the top of the second and third page of the poem. The line invades the pages usually reserved for publishing information: underneath is a list of other books published by Robertson, the title of the poem in

stylized typesetting and the publishing information. Its odd placement and its cryptic text is instructive of how one might read what lies ahead:

imagine that an explorer is aroused by an unreadable question acts in undreamed-of bilingual events. clear away the rubbish. the visible remains. Good Luck!

We are told to imagine an explorer who encounters the arousal of her own curiosity in “unreadable question[s]” and “unreadable bilingual acts.” We are instructed to “clear away the rubbish.” In the imperative address, the narrative voice shifts and the reader is addressed directly. As we imagine an explorer, we begin to imagine ourselves reading. In a metaleptic narratological flip, we find ourselves reading ourselves reading: “the visible remains.” And the narrator wishes us luck. We are the explorer made aware of and aroused by our own unknowingness. We meet the poem the way one would encounter a warm lake on a dark night, laughter in heavy rain, or the ring of steel stairs in frozen air. The sensations are striking.

We have begun to read, to read ourselves reading (perhaps we are bilingual: in reading we are both read and written), and the narrator wishes us well.

In reading, we are written and welcome.

However, even a well-configured reader (reading, written and welcome) might not feel equipped to negotiate an “unreadable question” or “an unreadable question acts” or “undreamed-of bilingual events.” A reader may need more than luck for such an encounter. Even a willing reader may need a way in.

In order to address this possible need, I (a lucky reader by virtue of proximity and persistence) propose several means by which these poems may be read. That is not to say that they are secret equations for which I reveal hidden answers or codes. It is to say that *Low Fancy* and *Debbie* are textual sites of inquiry, performances that can be read on many different levels and in many ways.

Specifically, I am interested in how the *Debbie: an epic* and *Low Fancy* uproot the human from certain modes of representations and constitute new human subjects, or rather, subjects previously unexpressed. In "Language Consciousness and Society," Felix Guattari's call for action describes a central activity in the poems of Robertson and Strang: "the only goal acceptable for human activities is the production of a subjectivity that enriches itself in continuous fashion in its relation to the world" (115). That is, *Debbie* and *Low Fancy* mark the crisis and tragedy in the history of the human and respond by disrupting established subject configurations at the intersection of reader and text. These disruptions linguistically manifest alternate modes of being. The alternate subjects are necessary, relational, democratic, in process, local and temporary. Redefining both reader and narrated subject in the poetic process of reviewing and rewriting human subjectivity, the subject becomes a textual point of possibility, a "physics of change" (Robertson *Interview* below).

The rewriting of subjects that takes place in the poems draws the reader into a philosophical, political and poetic discussion about the nature of language and its relation and responsibility to being. Because *Debbie* and *Low Fancy* are

contemporary works that address older texts, the poems also participate in a discourse that extends over hundreds and even thousands of years. *Debbie* writes back to Virgil's classical epic the *Aeneid* (70 B.C.E.-19 C.E.);¹ *Low Fancy* is a phonic translation or transliteration of Helen Waddell's edition of the Latin *Carmina Burana*, (1938) a collection of secular and religious songs dating from circa 1150 to 1250.

Robertson's epic constructs an alternate hero, a glorious, powerful, ludicrous and tragic character named Debbie.² Contextualizing Rome and Virgil as both sites of patriarchal oppression and exemplary models of possible liberty, the text traces past and present formations and de-formations of human subjectivity. There is a focus on the identity of women in the text, but examples of female subjectivity do not solely work to re-identify women. They expand being into a temporary (local and particular) and generic (common) subject.

Strang's translation contains stanzas, prose paragraphs and musical scores. The text translates Latin into English using the principle of the interlinguistic pun (an interlinguistic pun happens when one pays more attention to the sound than the sense). The text is musical, rhythmic and rude. It is a condensed, interrupted and disjointed conversation that includes the history of representation of women, the power of language, and the strength of the multitude. However, what it does above all else is to drive the word as an object back to language, back to itself as a relational site of immanence, disruption and always imminent possibility. Despite

¹ Robertson worked from John Dryden's translation (in conversation Jan. 2003).

² In this thesis, I refer to the book as *Debbie*, the character as Debbie and the section as "Debbie."

my unease with the reductive aspects of this reading, I suggest that both these poets posit necessary and linguistic options of being in a global climate of dire uncertainty. I suggest that these poems both extend the possibility of the human because they must.

Thus, the poetic performances of subjectivity in *Low Fancy* and *Debbie* are specifically philosophical and political in nature. They do not bear a direct political message, but they participate in a political conversation in which they observe and critique distributions of social power. They are philosophical in the sense that they rework various traditional views of what constitutes the human subject. Within this context, I note that the poetic subjects of *Debbie* and *Low Fancy* are strongly influenced by the works of two philosophers: Giambattista Vico (1688-1744) and Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). The philosophies of Vico and Spinoza reach Robertson and Strang through the modernist writers James Joyce and Louis Zukofsky. Specifically, I argue for the influence of Spinoza in Strang's text and the influence of Vico in Robertson's poem. The consequences of these influences are diverse. However, they allow for the explication of a profound difference between the two texts. The Spinozist quality of *Low Fancy* explains its unflagging energy and motion. In *Low Fancy*, language is a persistent plane of immanence, not a site of infinite regress, or perpetual deferral. There is no loss, no negativity. There are only the shifting movements and relations of abundant word bodies that manifest a Spinozist universe. In *Debbie: an epic*, the subject is Vichian and so metaphoric. Loss is essential as identification rests on the metaphoric extension of the subject in a pattern of ecstasy, recognition and

decay. Language constitutes and dissolves. Meaning is an agonized abundance based in the constitutive nothingness of words. By investigating the philosophies of Spinoza and Vico, the results of their influence unfold.

CHAPTER ONE

Vico and Spinoza

verum-factum: truth is made.

Giambattista Vico

On the Most Ancient Wisdom

Although Vico and Spinoza are marginal figures in the canons of philosophy, their work presently attracts new interest. Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (2001), argues that Spinoza's philosophy constituted "the intellectual backbone of European Radical Enlightenment" (vi). Israel also claims that Spinoza is instrumental in the formation of Vichian thought. Thus he places both philosophers in the tradition of the *moderni* of the Early Enlightenment (1650-1750) that comprised the Radical Enlightenment (11). This group rejected traditional Judeo-Christian views of Creation, divine providence, miracles, the afterlife, ecclesiastical authority, God-ordained social hierarchy, the concentration of privilege or land-ownership in the nobility and religious sanction for the monarchy (11-12).

Certainly for Spinoza and Vico, the imaginative power and material presence of the multitude constitutes reality (Negri *Savage Anomaly* 112; Israel 668; Morrison 55; Stone, 302-304). However, for Vico there are two realities. One is God-made and the other is human-made. As a result of the transgressions

of the sons of Noah and their wives, humans no longer have access to God's reality. They are left to constitute their own real. For humans, truth is made and this is the basis of Vico's *verum-factum*. For Spinoza there is only one real and it is contained and expressed in the activity of being. According to Spinoza, the democratic state is an aspect of the activity of being. It is a natural and necessary entity comprised of the passions and reason of the multitude that manifests the metaphysical truth of being (*Theologico-Political Treatise* 191). Spinoza rejects the central ideas of René Descartes (1596-1650), and describes Cartesian dualism as "occult" (*Ethics* 162). For Spinoza, Descartes' mind and body split was absurd because the human is a composite unity that links mind and body by cause and effect. Like all bodies, the human exists on a horizontal plane of immanence that is called Nature or God (*Ethics* 114).³ All bodies (human or not) are distinguished by their state of motion and rest and it is this motion that constitutes Spinoza's ontological metaphysics. Each body on the plane of immanence engages in a state of natural antagonisms and relations through which a dynamic collectivity emerges and whereby absolute power is continually dislocated. As Negri puts it, Spinoza's politics is his metaphysics (*Savage Anomaly* 114).⁴ The democratic political system Spinoza envisions emulates the natural system of bodies. The collective constitution of reality that takes place "naturally" on the plane of immanence (God/Nature) is transferred to a political democratic system whereby

³ In order to denote Spinoza's important conflation of the two terms I will identify God and Nature as God/Nature.

⁴ Negri wrote the book in various Italian prisons where he was held on charges of subversion against the Italian State from April 1979 to April 1980 (xxiii).

individual power is continually transferred: “transferred to the majority of a society of which [one] is a member. Thus, all [individuals] remain equal as they are in the state of nature” (*Theologico-Political Treatise* 195).⁵ Strang’s linguistic proposition of a Spinozist system engages the self-organization of word-bodies within a dynamic physics of language. Each word carries with it its own history, the power of the collective imagination and its materiality. The result of these linguistic relations, their constitutive antagonisms, is the collective poetic constitution of reality.

Like Spinoza, Vico rejects the Cartesian physical and metaphysical dualism outright (*On the Most Ancient Wisdom* 56). Vico believed that Descartes’ obsession with eternal truth blinded him to the constitutive role of language, history and the imagination in human reality (L.M. Palmer “Introduction” 34). Descartes’ famous *ergo cogito, ergo sum* failed to offer a criterion for the truth, and his proof of existence of the subject and the existence of God presupposed the imagination’s capacity to produce a middle term within which the conceptual process could take place. That is, for Vico, Descartes’ dualism placed human truth outside of the human and thus alienated human society from itself (*On the Most Ancient Wisdom* 53-56). Consciousness does not account for the origin of thought, the ability of the human to constitute a genus by which “a thing is made” (55). The human’s incapacity to know things clearly and distinctly is the result of the

⁵ Spinoza not did believe in the emancipation of women. However, his philosophy led others to defend women’s rights to equality, for example Adriann Beverland (1650-1716), who “proceeds from a specifically Spinozist position” in his development of a philosophy that centered on the liberation of sexuality for both men and women (Israel 87).

human capacity to make what it sees. What the human sees is created by original, archaic speech which emerges from the human condition (Verene 53). The forms of ancient language are the original constructions of the real.

In *The New Science*, Vico argues that poetry, not prose, is the original, ancient language (§409, §460).⁶ Poetry is the “necessary [mode] of expression” (§409). He claims that its primary tropes—metaphor, metonym and allegory—are based on “a logic derived from the most particular and sensible ideas” (§406); that is, ideas that are sensed and not thought. Thus, the science of human reality is based in poetic wisdom: “the institutions having to do with human affairs are more real than points, lines, surfaces and figures are” (§349). In particular Vico argues that the metaphor constitutes the perceived reality of the early humans. In ancient times, the metaphor was the principle of identity and an epistemological event (§404). For the purposes of this thesis Vico’s most radical and important assertion is that he understands the human as metaphoric and thus, linguistic. Vico’s idea of the metaphoric human extends the anti-Cartesian position he takes in *On the Most Ancient Wisdom*: “I who think am mind and body” (56). In the *New Science*, Vico describes the human as consisting of mind, body *and* language (§1045). Now, language is both the human and the interactive, constitutive site of the human: “a man [*sic*] is properly only mind, body and speech and speech stands as it were midway between mind and body” (§1045). In the Vichian metaphysic, the linguistic, indeed the poetic is essential to civic equity. He writes, “all ancient Roman law was a serious poem . . . and ancient jurisprudence was a

⁶ From now on in the parenthetical documentation, I will refer to the *New Science* as *NS*.

severe poetry” (§1037). Vico’s understanding of the linguistic nature of the human and human society attributes enormous agency and potential to human society in the management and creation of its own affairs and indeed of its own reality.

Despite Vico’s assertion of the poetic origin of human institutions and the constitutive powers of language, he insists that divine providence is the ultimate principle of his science (§360). This assertion plus his support of absolute monarchy contribute to Vico’s reputation as a traditionalist (Lila 61-66).

However, although Vico is not specifically a republican or democrat, he is, as Israel states, a radical thinker and socially egalitarian (669). In the *New Science*, he defines the popular commonwealth as “naturally open, generous, magnanimous (being commanded by the multitude, who naturally understand natural equity)” (§953). When an order of civility is reached, society is ready for a monarchy in which the monarch administers the laws “according to natural equity and consequently in harmony with the understanding of the multitude, and thus make the powerful and the weak equal before the law” (§953). The monarchy exists only to tend to the public interests of the multitude; its rights are neither lasting nor secure without the universal satisfaction of the people (§951). Vico proposes an “enlightened” monarchy based on a rigorous social egalitarianism and linked to the cycles of history (Israel 669). Vico proposes three cyclical stages in the history of human kind: the age of the gods (the divine), the age of heroes (nobility) and the age of men (reason) and he explicitly describes the brutality of the age of nobility (§670, §671, §672). Israel reads these descriptions as a harsh

critique of the ruling class. He argues that no other thinker in “the entire corpus of Early Enlightenment radical thought produced so devastatingly a critique of nobility as Vico” (NS §669). Yet there is ambivalence in Vico’s descriptions of the heroes: like Achilles, the humans of the heroic age are ruthless and petty; they are also brave and generous (NS §950). There is similar ambivalence when Vico states that the “free popular states” emerge from a “love of ease, tenderness toward children, love of women, and desire of life” (§953). Life is good under civil conditions and yet it is also diminished. In comparison to the great concerns of the divine and of nobility, Vico claims that in the civil age we are naturally led to attend to “the smallest details” (§951). In *Vico’s Science of the Imagination*, Verene’s interpretation of Vico’s final “age of men” is negative (220). He pays little attention to the possibilities of Vico’s egalitarian civic society. Verene interprets Vico’s third age as petty, tragic, barbaric and sterile (220-221). Verene suggests that Vico’s age of heroism is the ideal because it is half way between the human and the divine and thus intimately associated with the origins of humanity (221). Verene believes that Vico’s most urgent message to society is that philosophy must act as a means to remember the heroic in order to save humanity from the “mental rust” of reason (221). This reading is certainly possible. However, Vico’s ambivalence also makes Israel’s’ more optimistic reading of Vico’s ideal of civic society viable (see Bergin and Fisch’s “Preface” to the *New Science* regarding Vico’s infamous contradictions, ambivalences and scholarly irregularities). It is true that Vico argues against the idea of natural theory at the expense of historical evidence of cultural custom in order to warn against the

complete replacement of tradition and belief, by reason (§313). However, Vico is often very optimistic about the possibility of the age of men in which “the citizens have command of the public wealth” (§951). He does not necessarily suggest that the heroic age is the ideal nor that the age of men is one of madness. He does, however, consistently argue that civic society must simply bring history into its midst, that the young must remember that the “robust giants” founded humanity (§1410). In order to take society into the future “with honour, glory and happiness,” the youth must be “brought to the true crossroads of Hercules” (§1411).

In Vichian thought, the monarchy provides the same service as divine providence; it provides a constitutive medium “by which [humans] may exist in the world” in accordance with their traditions and beliefs (§1109). The monarchy and divine providence provide the necessary scaffoldings, a kind of theatre for the historical narratives within which humans create community and meaning—a *sensus communis*. For Vico, language provides the narrative. Through words, humanity stays in touch with its collective self: its past, present and future.

Vico is concerned with the imaginative and rhetorical powers of language: “the wisdom of the ancients was that of the theological poets” (NS §367). He claims that human reality is formed through poetic wisdom, particularly through the metaphor and the creation of topics before the metaphor is brought into logical and cognitive terms: “[p]hilosophers and philologists should begin their investigations of the wisdom of ancient gentiles . . . [a]nd they should have begun with metaphysics which seeks its proof not in the external world but within the

modifications of the mind of him who mediates it" (*NS* §374). The "world of nations" was made by men (*NS* §332) and therefore, "its principles are . . . to be found within the modifications of our human mind" (§331). Because the first principles were poetic in nature, it is with poetic knowledge that we must understand the beginning of the human and society. Poetry precedes all other human sciences and of all the first tropes the "most luminous is the metaphor [because it] gives sense and passion to insensate things" (§404). The metaphor, "a fable in brief," is what makes truth and intelligibility (§404). In the *New Science*, Vico moves metaphysical study away from proof and argument toward a process of linguistic investigation. He is concerned with etymology because he believes that words reveal the origins of language and the origins of being.

According to Vico, the origins are linguistic due to the barbaric behaviour of Noah's offspring. Gentile humans have fallen twice from God's graces.⁷ As a result, Noah's sons produce a race of giants from their wild and lascivious behaviour, God's truth is unavailable to them and human reality is constructed from physical, sensuous experience in the world. Sensing is the necessary act through which the mind constructs what is to be known. Knowledge does not consist of absolute truths; it consists of imaginative truths. Thus the fable and the metaphor are the means by which the world takes place. Vico's maxim that follows from his hypothesis is *verum-factum* or "truth is made" (*On the Most*

⁷ According to Vico, unlike the Gentiles, the Hebrews preserved their memory "from the very beginning of the world" (*NS* §166). They did not abandon God like the Gentiles who fell from God's grace a second time when the wild sons of Noah lost God's truth (*NS* §167-168).

Ancient Wisdom 45). Vico's principle describes how the mind gives form to experience and constructs the world; that is, *verum-factum* permits the making of truth.⁸ He argues that in Latin *verum* and *factum* have reciprocal meanings which can be understood as *verum esse ipsum factum* : the true is precisely what is made (46).⁹ Verene notes that in the *Risposta* (1711), Vico answers to criticism of his work; he explains that the interconnection of the true and the made can also be seen in translation from Latin to Italian, in that *factum* (used as an affirmative answer) is equivalent in Italian to *È vero* ("it is true") (26). Although Vico's principle is translated variously, it is generally understood in the sense that what can be true or intelligible to the knower is what the knower makes.¹⁰

Joyce, interested in Vico's notion of the necessity of constructing a language within which being is expressed, removes Vico's notion of divine providence, what Weir calls the "god-term" (60). He claims that language is capable of expressing and constructing human truth and it is the medium by

⁸ Where Vico derived *verum factum* from is unclear. Verene suggests that it may have come from the Thomistic saying *ens et verum convertuntur* ("truth and reality are convertible"), connected with the Augustine doctrine that God creates by knowing (26). What the maxim means is also a matter of some debate. See Verene's *New Vico Studies* 6 (1988): 1-19 and Max Fischer's "Vico and Pragmatism" in *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, 408.

⁹ Palmer notes that the literal meaning of *Verum esse ipsum factum* is "the true is the thing made [or done] itself" (cf. 46).

¹⁰ See Verene's *The New Art of Biography: an Essay on the Life of Giambattista Vico written by Himself*, *Giambattista Vico: Signs of the Metaphysical Imagination*. and Max Fisch's "Vico and Pragmatism, in G. Tagliacozzo and H.V. White, eds., *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*.

which and in which all reality is made (60). Vico's sense of how language constructs a human world absolutely separate from the divine world is expanded in Joyce's belief that the power of the word can construct divinity as well (Weir 59-60).¹¹ Mary T. Reynolds suggests that Joyce was "intrigued by Vico's notion that the history of a people could be recovered from its language" (110).¹² Vico's rejection of Cartesian dualism and his particular interest in the Etruscans rather than the Romans as the originators of Italian culture and language resonates with Joyce's rejection of the imposition of English culture and language on the Irish (NS §529). Although much is written about Joyce's reading of Vichian history, Vico's notion of the human as a linguistic metaphoric entity is also essential to Joyce. The Vichian metaphor is quite unlike the more commonly understood Aristotelian model; Vico's metaphor is not based in similarity; it is the embodiment of the act of perception, not cognition. Vico's metaphor works against Aristotle's definition in *Poetics* where "[m]etaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else" (*On the Art of Poetry* 63). It brings difference together into intelligible relations and is not based on sameness. If

¹¹ There is a much discussion regarding Vico's idea of divine providence. The power of the Inquisition was well known to Vico and his Italian contemporaries. Weir, Israel and Verene consider Vico's steadfast loyalty to divine providence suspect. Verene finds Vico to be quite pagan (*Vico's Science*), Israel understands him as politically radical (*Radical Enlightenment*) and Weir notes Vico's timidity in formulating the notion that the world is human made (*Writing Joyce*). Weir suggests that Vico was very aware of how precarious his situation was in light of Bruno's death at the stake.

¹² Reynolds also cites Joyce as having claimed that "Vico anticipated Freud" (118).

metaphor is the basic function of perception, then the identity and recognition of the human and the world are primarily and fundamentally linguistic. This affords enormous power to a poetic project that sets out to re-write a world and the human.

Like Joyce, Robertson seeks to retrieve a history buried under linguistic systems of power. In *Vico's Science of Imagination*, Verene extends Joyce's reading of thunder as the first thought. He assumes that Joyce's notion of the productivity of thunder came from Vico's fable of the giants. In Vico's tale, it is the giants' first experience of thunder that incites them to think and to become a society. Verene's Joycean analysis of Vico's giants and his understanding of the Vichian metaphor is central to my reading of *Debbie*, where I trace the constitutive force of the Vichian metaphors.

Spinoza's and Vico's radical sense of the constituted and egalitarian nature of reality and the human, and Vico's notion of the role of the linguistic in human society make their work fertile ground for contemporary scholarly and poetic inquiry.¹³ Vichian and Spinozist thought are intrinsic to *Low Fancy* and *Debbie*. Working on the basis that the human is linguistic, both poems develop

¹³ Vico's understanding of the poetic/linguistic nature and the origin of the human allows him to understand other cultures as having laws, philosophies and histories expressed through verse. For example, he claims that the seventeenth century Aboriginal cultures of North America have historic, religious and linguistic systems through which they constitute the world and themselves. Although these aboriginal peoples, according to Vico, were at a different stage of development, they exist within the same recurring cycle of human history: rise, development, maturity, decline and fall (§89, §170, §375, §437, §470, §486, §517, §538, §542, §546, §658, §841, §1033, §1095).

linguistic systems through which egalitarian subjectivities emerge in both reader and text. Vichian philosophy is particularly crucial to the subjective formations in *Debbie*, as is Spinoza to *Low Fancy*. These poems are metaphysical systems that are constitutive, and thus become phenomenological events made manifest. That is not to say that the transference of Vichian or Spinozist thought into the poems is untrammelled. However, each text manifests its subject performances through poetic means.

The relationship of the human to language is intrinsic to Vico's notion of the constitutive power of the collective. However, this is not explicitly the case in Spinozist thought: Spinoza does not focus on language. But his theory of immanence finds a practical application in Zukofsky's writing and *Low Fancy* takes up Zukofsky's democratic project of poetics where the Spinozist concept of immanence and the potential for infinite productivity occur on the linguistic plane. For Strang and Zukofsky the natural state of democracy of the Spinozist metaphysics takes physical form within the context of poetic language. This transposition facilitates the textual performances of alternate forms of linguistic subjectivity and opens up the possibility of a democratic system in language. The activation of this system is the basis for the poem's musicality and its final destination. Starting with words as individual antagonisms, various potential dislocations move with great force within the constitutive project. The text manifests what Negri refers to as the "genetic rhythm of the social sphere" (112). *Low Fancy* finally does not move towards a conventional formation of a subject, but towards "speeds, slownesses [. . .] frozen catatonias and accelerated

movements, unformed elements, nonsubjectified affects” (Deleuze, *Spinoza* 129). This is the political activism in *Low Fancy*: the text functions by virtue of a relational, textual democracy. The unexpected encounter of words with words produces meaning based on the proximity of relations, not on a hierarchy of sense. These relations result in the positing of temporary subjectivities located in a musicality that is not based in thinking (not *cogito ergo sum*) but in the sound of linguistic bodies in motion, which is why one can perform interlinguistic translations based on sound. As Negri writes, “the [Spinozist] subject is the product of the physical accumulation of movements” (*Savage Anomaly* 226). And so it is: “I am, I am. Strident, prating / yammering a verge in so / dent or tear can / rid you (fact is)” (Strang *Low Fancy* 20).

Debbie is more Vichian, more committed to the enterprise of narrative and metaphor. As an alternate epic, *Debbie* critiques masculinist and imperialist constructions of the human, and by virtue of Vico’s theory, read through Joyce and his extension of Vico in *Finnegans Wake*, the text linguistically configures alternate and previously unexpressed subjects. In their engagement of older texts, Strang and Robertson expose the past as having provided limited means by which the human subjects attain expressivity, liberty and recognition. Robertson and Strang open the possibilities by proposing alternate modes of being. Vichian and Spinozist philosophies of being provide the metaphysical scaffoldings for their poetic subjects. My own reading of Strang’s text as a Spinozist poem and Robertson’s text as Vichian is meant to elucidate the formation of the linguistic subjects in these poems.

I note the philosophical proclivities in each text and provide two theoretical frameworks through which the manifestations of alternate modes of being may be apprehended. I do not claim that Robertson and Strang consciously engage the works of Vico or Spinoza. I argue instead that, by virtue of the influence of Joyce and Zukofsky (and others), they cannot help it.

Zukofsky's interest in Spinoza is based on the philosopher's sense of the activity and relation of being (Quartermain "Not at all Surprised" 84). Spinoza's philosophy states that all bodies on the plane of immanence that is God/Nature exist on a moving scale of being. Each body in its essence strives to be, to realize its power. As Jeffrey Titchwell-Waas points out, the terms "being, reality, power, perfection [. . .] are essentially synonymous for Spinoza" (1). Bodies are in a constant state of motion toward or away from the actualization of their being and the extent to which they move toward or away from perfection determines the amount of joy or pain they experience. However, a body's desire is not a matter of will or choice; desire is determined by its nature, which is identical with its full being, reality, perfection. The intrinsic democracy of Spinoza's system also determines that each body persists within the same horizontal, non-hierarchical plane of immanence. For Zukofsky, Spinoza's metaphysics proposes a democratic physics of being that can be enacted in language. As Quartermain states, in Spinoza, Zukofsky found a philosophy that valued production over product, was based in joy and revealed the object (the body) to be a verb (not a noun) (Quartermain 16, 20, 84).

For Joyce, the Vichian idea of the historic and linguistic human facilitated his own reconstruction of the Irish identity in the face of the colonizing enforcement of English language and culture. The interest that Joyce and Zukofsky had in Vico and Spinoza, respectively, predates contemporary interest in the two philosophers by over half a century. Working toward what poet Ron Silliman refers to as the “preconditions of a liberated language,” Joyce and Zukofsky recognized their own writing “as the *philosophy of practice in language*” (original emphasis *New Sentence* 17).¹⁴ Reading *Low Fancy* as a Spinozist poem and *Debbie* as Vichian, I suggest that Strang and Robertson also access poetry as a “philosophy of practice in language” in order to elucidate and posit alternate formations of the human subject. That is, rather than simply formulating and discussing philosophically perceived truths and possibilities of life, these poems practice the formulations and perform the possibilities of life. *Debbie* is Vichian because subjectivity forms as the result of a reconceived metaphorical system. *Low Fancy* is Spinozist because it constitutes meaning and subjectivity through a poetic and formal manifestation of Spinozist democracy.

Unlike the classical Aristotelian metaphor that achieves meaning as a result of shared intrinsic attributes, the Vichian metaphor signifies on the basis of relationships. For example, according to Vico’s linguistic model, the metaphor, *the river snakes*, tells us more about “the acquaintance” of the human mind with

¹⁴ Silliman adds that this practice necessitates the acknowledgement of the historic nature of meaning, placing language (as an object itself) at the center of the poem and placing the project within a conscious class struggle (17-18).

the things of the world than it does about the essential qualities of river or snake (§498). With metaphors we “hew out topics” and discursively make the world true for us (§497). For Vico, human thought is linguistic and inventive (§498). As a result, we can also discursively (metaphorically) remake a world that has become no longer true for us. Vico’s principle of the power of linguistic invention holds promise for the writer who works to return the real to the site of its maker—the human subject. It is for these reasons that Vico is essential to Joyce’s project of reconstituting an Irish non-imperialistic real.

Neither Joyce nor Zukofsky provide points of transfer for the philosophy of Spinoza and Vico to a particular avant-garde politics. However, recent attention directed toward Vico and Spinoza partly derives from contemporary conflicts endemic to advanced capitalist societies. Faced with the increasing world domination by corporate powers, many scholars in the humanities struggle to retrieve the human from political and social systems that deny history and bear little resemblance to common, collective realities. In scholarly communities this retrieval often contains a critique of essentialism (common to post-structuralism) and a deepening and broadening of democracy. In this climate, Vichian and Spinozist thought is viewed as providing possible solutions to serious problems. Like Israel, Verene notes Vico’s modern thinking. He views Vico as crucial in reconstructing the inextricable link between history, myth and language in the understanding of the human subject (*Vico’s Science* 221). Although Verene doesn’t identify himself a post-structuralist or identify Vico as an egalitarian, his work on Vico locates the human subject in language, particularly in poetic

language. Verene argues that the study of Vico makes clear that art is not art, but life, and that poetry is the basis for all philosophical thinking (33). That is, poetry precedes the sciences, logic and philosophy; humans are their own creative, poetic constructions, and imagination is the original power of the mind. The power of the imagination is available to us in our fables, extended metaphors that reflect back to us our own understanding of the world. For Vico, the fable ensures that the imaginative universe and the intelligible rational universe are one. Some scholars read Vico as a possible return to humanism. Verene cites Ernesto Grassi as linking Vichian thought to the views of such thinkers as Petrarch (27).¹⁵ Elio Gianturco uses Vichian thought to locate the foundations of social and humanistic knowledge and to reassert Renaissance humanism (ix). For Verene, Vico's age of decadence and barbarism in which humanity "goes mad and loses its substance" is reflected in contemporary technological life that has no cultural centre or perspective (Vico qtd by Verene, *Vico's Science* 28). Verene argues that the violence of contemporary society "indicates a loss of the human image of itself" (28) and that Vico's theory regarding poetry and the imagination as the origin for philosophical thought suggests a humanism whereby we might locate ourselves again (221).

However, as indebted as I am to Verene's reading of Vico, I am not positing a pro-humanist stance. In fact, my reading of Vico in *Debbie* is closer to that of Lorraine Weir who claims that in the *New Science*, Vico attempts to "heal

¹⁵ Grassi, Ernesto. *Macht des Bildes: Ohnmacht der rationalen Sprache*, Zur

Rettung des Rhetorischen. Cologne: M. DuMont Schauberg, 1970. 194.

the wound that is humanism" (3). That is, by proposing the role of the imagination and poetry in the construction of the human, Vico's text does not require that we return to previous ideas of humanism in which the human is a category that proscribes many persons. Rather, he provides the means by which the human subject might finally be capable of expressing its capacity for variance. Vico illustrates this ability in his fable of the giants, which describes a second beginning to the human world. Vico's giants are formally and contextually important to my reading of *Debbie*. In her use of metaphor and her inclusion of the heroic giantess, Robertson extends Vico's fable of the giants. Understanding this implicit relation permits the reader to observe consciously the poetic manifestation of subjectivities as they emerge in the poem as local and temporary coherences.

The reader is granted similar permissions by reading *Low Fancy* through elements of Spinozist thought. Spinoza's application of his theory of being onto the political scene suggests that humans are both ontologically democratic and capable of being politically democratic. Because of his philosophical affinity for democracy, Spinoza's work is presently read within the context of a perceived need for social change. In addition to Israel's work, Walter Montag's *The New Spinoza* (a collection of recent essays on Spinoza which contains work by Gabriel Albiac, Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Gilles Deleuze, Emilia Giancotti, Luce Irigaray, Pierre Macherey, Alexandre Matheron, Pierre-François Moreau, Antonio Negri and André Tosel) follows a philosophical trend that began with the publication of Martial Geroult's study of the *Ethics* in 1968 (Montag xiii).

Geroult's approach is similar to the structuralism of 1950s and 1960s (xiii).¹⁶

While Deleuze's *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* produces the movement of Spinoza's philosophy, both texts treat Spinoza's works as surfaces on which to work, not as hermetic texts to be decoded. The collected writers that follow Geroult's structuralist mode and Deleuze's dynamic approach, regard Spinoza's work as a philosophy that is characterized by an "inexhaustible productivity"(Montag x). Both Montag and Althusser note the generally unacknowledged evidence of his philosophy in important French thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida (ix, xvi, 10). The so-called New Spinozists in the collection read Spinoza as a source for dissolving hierarchies: linguistic, social and political (Montag xvi-xix).

In addition to his *Savage Anomaly*, Negri's essay "Reliqua Desiderantur: A Conjecture for a Definition of the Concept of Democracy in the Final Spinoza," focuses on Spinoza's expression of democracy in *Tractatus Politicus*. Negri's *Savage Anomaly* identifies Spinoza as the first philosopher to see "society as 'constituted' by the power of the masses (*multitudo*)" (Montag xix). In Spinoza's thought, the State is comprised of the multitude: the medium for collective and constitutive human power. The collective power of the State occurs because individuals form useful and desired connections that increase their power and the power of the collective group. These relations are based on reason and imagination. It is not absolutism that constitutes the collective power, but the

¹⁶ Foucault declares the influence of Geroult on his own work in the introduction to *The Archeology of Knowledge* (5).

self-organized power of individuals. The more relations constituted, the greater the power of the collective. The self-organized power of the individuals contains the active resistance of the *conatus* of each individual within the empowering relations. The *conatus* is the drive by which “each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its own being”¹⁷ (*Ethics* P6 75).¹⁸ Edwin Curley translates *conatus* as striving: “the striving by which each thing strives to persevere” (P7 75).¹⁹ The *conatus* is no less than the essence of each individual (P7 75). This essence is not transcendent. It is the universal material quality of all bodies. Because each individual is comprised of this persistent drive to survive, a complete transfer of power from the individual to the State cannot occur: “[i]n [a democratic State] no one transfers his [*sic*] natural right so completely that he [*sic*] has no further voice in affairs; he [*sic*] only transfers it to the majority of a society, of which he [*sic*] is a member” (*Theological-Political Treatise* 195). As Negri points out, in the Spinozist State, “individuality is represented as an absolute right” (*Savage Anomaly* 112). The *conatus* (innate to all individuals) is

¹⁷ Levinas challenges this point in Spinoza. The Levinasian subject does not contain a basic right to existence. The subject is an impressionable entity that achieves agency entirely through its relations (like the Vichian giant). Levinas' challenge marks a central difference that I read in *Debbie* and *Low Fancy*.

¹⁸ In the citations from Spinoza's *Ethics*, P= Proposition, Dem=Demonstration and D=Definition.

¹⁹ Samuel Shirley's translation retains the word *conatus*. In Proposition 7, Shirley writes “[*t*]he *conatus* with which each thing endeavours to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself” (italics original 108). I rely primarily on Curley's translation because it is the one that Negri uses.

the disruptive element that insures the stability of the democracy. Negri warns against conflating Spinoza's State with the Hobbesian "natural rights doctrine," because the Spinozist State is not an artificial construct created to impose social cooperation (111). Although based on the utility of relations and so contractual, the State is a natural aspect of Spinoza's metaphysics. It is a phenomenological manifestation of the basic constitutive dynamic of being, and a democratic government is the "most natural and consonant with the freedom that nature confers" on us (*Theological-Political Treatise* 195). As a result (like Vico and unlike Hobbes) in Spinoza's philosophy, there is no presocial human. Society, like the individual, is comprised of the constant interactive relations of bodies with other bodies. It always exists: individuals inescapably combine with other individuals in consensual praxis.

Certain bodies can have more power than others depending on the relations they constitute. Yet all bodies exist on a horizontal plane of being and God/Nature is the totality of that being. As a result, all bodies are equal. This equality is preserved because the drive to persist in being is fundamental to each body, and thus each body provides a disruptive mechanism to all relations that perpetually dislocates absolute power.

For Negri, Spinoza's philosophy of being opens the history of metaphysics to "a radical [political and democratic] alternative because it defines being within the collective where thought exists in a positive form, in a persistent and constitutive tension" (*Savage Anomaly* xix). This tension is the tension of being: "the thing and its striving to preserve its being," and, as Spinoza claims, there is

no distinction between the two (*Ethics* P7 35). For Spinoza, there are not two forms of being. Being is not mediation, nor is it transcendence. Being is only the thing, its activities and relations.²⁰ This marks the essential difference between Spinoza and Levinas. For Spinoza, being resides in the thing itself. For Levinas being only exists in relation. Negri's following description of the nature of Spinozist being importantly marks Spinoza as separate from the negativity of Western metaphysics: "between totality and modality there is no mediation, there is only tension" (Negri, *Savage Anomaly* 43). This tension is the democratizing core of Spinoza's philosophy and politics. Its disruptive potential guarantees against pure states, truth or true names; there are only "common names" made by the disruptive and active relations of the multitude (42).

In Spinoza's philosophy, the imaginative relations of the multitude, the constitutive capacity of thought "possesses the character of negation but transforms it into the activity of being" (Negri xix). This form of being demolishes "every transcendental illusion" (43), "the universal and [even] philosophy itself" (42). This transformation of thought into being is Spinoza's definition of freedom and contains the constructive power of transgression within every system that is not freely constituted by the masses (xix).²¹ Spinoza

²⁰ Shirley explains that in Spinoza the "thing" is the regular translation of *res*, but that Spinoza "gives it a much more extensive meaning"; he uses "thing" to describe inanimate objects, humans, God and sometimes occurrences (24).

²¹ Negri argues that the interruptions integral to Spinoza's system "demolish" the dialectic of Hobbes and Rousseau. According to Negri, in Hobbes and Rousseau, the dialectical transfer of

developed his metaphysics within the new order of capitalism in the seventeenth century and Negri extends the revolutionary possibilities of this metaphysics to the present. I graft Negri's analysis of Spinoza's politics of democracy onto the poetic project of *Low Fancy* in order to demonstrate the text's linguistic democracy and its potential for collective, productive and transgressive thought.

The unity and materiality of language is manifest in *Low Fancy*. The poem is a point of tension through which linguistic potency is expressed, where the subject is Spinozist and "the product of the physical accumulation of movements" (Negri, *Savage Anomaly* 226).

The power of Spinoza's multitude comes from our natural capacity to reason and to desire. The "concurrent dynamics of [our] individual passions" place us in unceasing and interruptive motion (Negri 110). The innate power and passion of the individual transfers to the State and occurs in a constitutive process of imagination. Our reason allows us to enter healthy, non-toxic relations and through these relations we create potent realities that increase our individual powers (*Ethics* 134). The State is resistant to absolute power because the persistent drive of individual passions creates a constant dislocation of power. The Spinozist State occurs at a potent intersection between passion and reason and that preserves its essential democracy (*Ethics* 110).

Negri's reading of Spinoza provides a means to read Strang's *Low Fancy* as a radically democratic text that results from consensual praxis and individual

power from the individual to the universal and to the absolute allows for bourgeois mysticism and the ideology of capitalism (42).

desire: “a collective constitution of reality” (*Savage Anomaly* 112). Just as Spinoza locates the idea of the State as a perpetually necessary site of mediation and production for the conflicting interests of individuals and groups, Strang locates language.

Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza illustrates the productivity of a Spinozist text and supports my linguistic version of Spinoza’s theory of immanence. In addition, Deleuze links Spinoza’s theory of motion and music. This facilitates my reading of the musicality of *Low Fancy*. For Deleuze, what Spinoza calls Nature, is a plane of productivity, potency, in terms of cause and effect (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 3). Deleuze understands Spinoza’s *Ethics* as such a plane (126). He refers to the text as a musical composition. The musical focus of *Low Fancy* opens language to itself as a compositional plane of democratically intersecting sound and sense, passion and reason.

Negri and Deleuze find radical sites of potential in Spinoza and Vico as did Joyce and Zukofsky more than half a century ago. Vico’s influence on Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* is well documented (as noted above) and the complex relation of Zukofsky to Joyce is noted in Quartermain’s *Disjunctive Poetics* and Barry Ahearn’s *Zukofsky’s “A.”* However, how Zukofsky and Joyce came to influence *Debbie* and *Low Fancy* is less obvious. The connection, though, is not fragile and its story reveals a community of poets that has emerged and sustained itself over the last twentieth century.

Language Poetry

Both Robertson and Strang are part of a contemporary poetry community in Vancouver—the Kootenay School of Writing (1984-present). At the centre of this community is a commitment to poetry that takes language itself as its primary subject matter and that understands poetry as a potent site for philosophical and political inquiry. That is, if language is the material and metaphysical site of the human, then poetry is the prime position from which to investigate where we have been, where we are and where we might go. This sense of language claims that social change is not possible outside of language, and thus social revolution requires that our language systems be scrutinized, investigated, disrupted and recomposed. Lyn Hejinian defines the central premise of such writing as one that makes a “turn to language” (170). Such poetry is referred to as language-centered or Language writing. What it should be called has often been a point of contention.

The term Language writing originally comes from the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1978-1982) edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews and “the first American journal of poetics by and for poets” (*In the American Tree* Silliman xvii). It served as one of the earliest published forums for language-centered poetry. George Hartley notes that Steve McCaffery first refers to writing as “language-centered” in “Death of a Subject” in 1976 (xii). For the purposes of this thesis, I use the term “Language writing” as used by Lyn Hejinian (161-176). The term Language writing is at once concise and excessive (what else could writing be but of language?) and its ambivalence seems a fitting

tag for a writing movement that resists definition. Megan Simpson uses the term “language-oriented writing” (*Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women’s Language-Oriented Writing* 1-29). This term was used in published essays and correspondence from the mid-to-late 70’s on.²² However, to me, the term suggests that the writer can inhabit a position outside of language And I don’t believe this is possible.

In 1978, the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, British Columbia, hired writers Fred Wah, Tom Wayman, David McFadden and Colin Browne and the school became an active writing community dedicated to working outside mainstreams of Canadian poetry. American writers Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan visited the school as well as Canadian writers, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Brian Fawcett and Steve McCaffery. In 1983 the school was shut down because of the Social Credit Provincial Government cutbacks. In response to the closure of David Thompson, the Kootenay School opened in Vancouver. Its aim was to continue the work begun in Nelson and to provide a venue for new writing and writers who were interested in challenging the status quo in Canadian poetry. On its departure from Nelson, the Kootenay School ceased to be a school. Instead it became a collective that, to this day, sponsors workshops, readings and residencies for poets. Over the past twenty years, writers Bruce Andrews, Dodie Belamie, Charles Bernstein, Hejinian, Susan Howe, Tom Raworth and Denise Riley have performed readings, held workshops and given talks at the school. The Kootenay School also publishes its own journal, *Writing*.

²² Charles Bernstein in correspondence, August, 2005.

The history of the Kootenay School of Writing and the development of its writing philosophies from its early days to the present is a topic of recent debate in the community. Recently several histories have been published detailing the evolution of the Kootenay School. They all vary. See Michael Barnholden and Andrew Klobucar's much contested anthology, *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing* (1999),²³ Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy's *Writing in Our Time* (2005) and Edward Byrne's essay "The Women (first reel)" (2005).

However, I write from a somewhat different position. I have known both Strang and Robertson for the past twenty years. We all became involved in the Kootenay School at around the same time, and when it was deeply involved with the Language writing movement and its influences: the Black Mountain Poets, for example, and the Berkeley Renaissance. For the purposes of this reading, my interest lies in how Strang and Robertson came to take part in a particular metaphysical discussion about the nature of being.

Their involvement with this conversation, was, in part, a result of their connection to the Kootenay School. Certainly, the Kootenay School was central to their poetics, and the presence of Robertson and Strang on the Collective altered the course of the school considerably. They both resisted what they felt were the male-centric poetics of the school at the time and tried to establish a more feminist perspective. Although they were familiar with and reading writers like Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky, they were also

²³ In particular, the history depicted in the "Introduction" has been contested by many of the writers affiliated with the School (in conversation).

following their own particular and idiosyncratic path of study. Both Strang and Robertson read and were strongly influenced by the women writers of the Left Bank, such as Djuna Barnes, Jane Bowles, Kay Boyle, Janet Flanner, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein. They also read Mary Oppen, Mary Butts, Lorine Niedecker and Vita Sackville-West. Robertson read Edith Sitwell and Vivian Westwood and Strang read a lot of Shakespeare and French social history authors. Both poets read Samuel Beckett, George Oppen and endless books on food, cooking, fashion and gardening.²⁴ I'm not suggesting that no one else in the community was reading these texts. While French social history, Shakespeare and Edith Sitwell were not necessarily 'in,' many writers affiliated with the Kootenay School were reading the women of the Left Bank and American women writers like Mary Oppen and Niedecker. However, there was also a conscious decision made by Strang and Robertson to read contrarily to what was being promoted by the Kootenay School at the time. Some of the male writers who were and are central to Language writing (like Bruce Andrews, Barrett Watten and Clark Coolidge) were avoided in an attempt to locate something else.

As their relationship with the School had its own particular dynamic, their developing poetics were also affected by their participation in other communities. After Strang joined the Kootenay School, in 1985, another writing group was formed by her and several other women writers affiliated with the school. This smaller group consisted of women interested in Language writing, but who wanted a space that specifically supported the realities that faced women writing.

²⁴ In separate conversation with Strang and Robertson, July 15, 2005.

The idea of the smaller group was that if you had to bring your baby or your uncertainty, you could. Robertson's first introduction to the School came about through this group and she joined the Collective (a volunteer body that organizes events and applies for grants) shortly afterwards. The connection between Strang and Robertson was also established at Simon Fraser University where they attended courses by writers George Bowering and Robin Blaser (1986). Although Bowering and Blaser taught at a university, they were first and foremost poets interested in non-canonical twentieth century writing. They introduced Strang and Robertson to the works of the Canadian *TISH* group and their predecessors among the Black Mountain Poets, the Berkeley Renaissance, and the Objectivists: modernist writers like Zukofsky, Williams, Charles Olson, Lorine Niedecker, H.D., Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce and others. This academic environment had a profound impact on the poetic development of Robertson and Strang in several ways. But while the university sustained an important community, it contained its own problems. The very essence of Language writing is to resist the notion of essence *as* truth. In the academy, where disciplines demand argument, analysis and proof, these poetic politics were anathema. From their university experience, the poets took an awareness of the precarious existence of poetry in academia. They also suspected that Silliman might be right when he claimed that academic training "bureaucratizes meaning into a fetish of the signified [and] robs intelligent people of the ability to read" (146).

As a result of their time at the university, their involvement with the Kootenay School and their growing familiarity with the Language writers and their Modernist predecessors, Strang and Robertson developed a sense of the relation of poetry to politics. Like Vico, they were working on a new science where poetry is philosophical, political and even biological. If you wanted to rewrite women, language, the human and maybe even the whole world, poetry was the best place to start. In their project, Robertson and Strang were in good company.

The radical reworking of poetry by Zukofsky, Stein, Pound, Duncan and Spicer to free language from the fetters of Victorian Romanticism and to allow words to write the world anew influenced the following generations of Language writers. Poets like Andrews, Bernstein, Hejinian and Howe strove to liberate language from the pressures of capitalism; loosening language from the confines of commodification was a first step toward liberating the human. Although Strang and Robertson are now less optimistic about the potential of poetry to alter existing and oppressive systems of power and to rewrite the world (as are many Language Writers), their work is deeply affected by the early political ideals of Language writing.

Influenced by European and American Modernism, Language writing arose from the anti-Vietnam War movement. The political manipulation of the media during the war magnified the blatant use and abuse of language by institutions seeking power. Also affected by Russian Formalism and French Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, Language poets saw conventional poetry

and public language as rife with hypocrisy, fraud. Essentially, their intent was to expose the hidden ideology in so-called natural modes of language use and to engage language and thus poetry as a ground for social practice, where writing could be a form of social action.

Although it would be misleading to define Language writing as a cohesive movement, it has a common philosophical and phenomenological basis. Not only is Language writing fundamentally language-focused, it is also a poetic practice that understands language as a site for the experience of existence and the consciousness of apprehension. As Hejinian explains, words are constitutive:

Words work not because they are natural emissions by things but because people agree on what they mean.

Anything made of words—including a literary work—is socially constructed and socially constructing. Aesthetic discovery is also social discovery. (*Language of Inquiry* 170)

Hejinian's idea of language is reflected in the work of Andrews, Bernstein, Silliman and Howe as well as others. My focus on Hejinian's interpretation of this movement is due to the fact that her work was important to Robertson and Strang's work.²⁵ As a rare early female presence in the Language movement, Hejinian provided theoretical possibilities and writing practices that were different from those of the majority of male writers. For example, Hejinian's *My Life* is an entirely non-sentimental, but not impersonal investigation into the

²⁵ In conversation (July 11, 2005).

formation of subjectivity through language. Like the women writers of the Left Bank, female writers like Hejinian and Howe provided another space for Robertson and Strang.²⁶

Interested in the social density of language and its ideological materiality, Language writing practices are generally committed to revealing the ideology in language and disrupting its message. Understanding language as a communal site of social interaction, Language writing avoids using poetry as a vehicle for personal expression or for communicating an overt political message. Instead, it pushes at conventional boundaries and uses words and their configurations as a kind of Petri dish in which the reader participates in the construction of meaning. Language writing often entails language experimentation where conventional form and content are reconfigured in experiments with words, sentences, paragraphs, grammar and subject matter.

²⁶ There were many others women writers well whose work was formative for Robertson and Strang. For example, Carla Harryman, Laura Moriarty, Leslie Scalapino, Rae Armantrout and Bernadette Mayer (Robertson cites Mayer's *Midwinter Day* as extremely influential to her own writing [in conversation November, 2004]). However, Hejinian's prominence in the movement and her many essays on the practice of writing brought her to the fore. For Robertson, Hejinian's example was profound and her famous talk "Strangeness" had a great impact on Robertson (the talk was sponsored by the Kootenay School of Writing and given in Vancouver at the Western Front, October 1988) (in conversation July 11, 2005). For Strang, Susan Howe was more important. Strang remembers Howe's presentation of her work on Emily Dickinson in "The Birth Mark" (also sponsored by the Kootenay School and presented at the Emily Carr School of Design, Vancouver, 1985) as "astounding" (in conversation July 11, 2005).

Although the impact of Language writing, its practice and its philosophy, on Strang and Robertson's work is undeniable, and although both poets worked with Bernstein, Hejinian, and Bruce Andrews at the Kootenay School in the late 80's and early 90's, they have moved in unpredictable directions. Examining the ideals and the purpose of Language writing, they question whether poetry can be, as Silliman argues, politically efficacious in liberating language from capitalist forces and enhancing class struggle (17-18). Strang suggests that at best, poetry might provide a sketch, a model of a revolutionary practice (see Strang's *Interview* below). As poets, Strang and Robertson are critical of *any* dominant ideological forces in *any* language practice. Their interrogation of language extends to their own poetic practice and this poetic/social consciousness is productively poetic in itself. Although this process of self-interrogation is an aspect of all Language-writing, Strang and Robertson move beyond the first generation of Language writers to develop a previously unwritten poetic space.

This space is partly the result of Strang and Robertson's reinvestigation of poetry as a site of subjective expression and lyrical beauty—two activities the Language poets largely, along with the so-called post-moderns, rejected. True to a fundamental Language writing premise, Robertson and Strang avoid conventional lyric; neither uses poetry as a site for recounting their personal life experience. However, their work performs the subject as personal-linguistic and constructs a kind of lyric. In "Word Jazz," Kevin McNeilly discusses another of Strang's collaborative works with François Houle, *Clamorous*, and writes that Strang's work is closer to "the lyric" than spoken word poetry or Language poetry; that it

“aspires to the song” (181). With some adjustment the same terms can be applied to *Low Fancy*.

If lyric is held aside from its association with personal expression and song is no longer bound to conventions of melody than *Low Fancy* is lyric and song. That is, the poems are personal, sonic, rhythmic and intimate encounters with words that facilitate subjectivities and linguistic and aural affections: “Quest no mirable pair / ineffable men—do I / ram rage at a ton’s treat?” (60). While the sonic aspects of *Debbie* are more conventionally beautiful, the excess perturbs a smooth read: “To those whose quiver gapes give queens / and pace their limbs with flutes, ropes, cups of soft / juice. To those whose threshold vacillates give / that bruise the dust astonished” (154-157).

The sonic and linguistic configurations that both Strang and Robertson construct constitute subjects or not. The subjects constituted are personal and intimate, because they are bound by a specific closeness with time. Both texts configure a certain intimacy with their readers who represent the texts’ presents and futures: how they are read and how they will be read. Each text also has a central and informal relationship with the historical texts they encounter: the *Aeneid* and the *Carmina Burana*. Part of the familiarity is a conscious cockiness, a studied refusal to be reverent or formal with literature, with language or with readers. Why should we be stiff and polite in the face of that which constructs us: those who write us and read us? Part of the familiarity is also just an expression of affection both poets have for the texts they read and for language itself. However, the textual casualness is also a technique of investigation, disruption and

revolution. These writers *will* come to know the linguistic pasts that have formed and in many cases wounded forms of subjectivity. These poems will not be cowed and respectful in the face of what has too often been an oppressive linguistic past. This textual familiarity with readers, with words, and linguistic pasts marks another difference between Robertson and Strang and the first generation Language writers.

By working with the historical texts the formal gap between our shared linguistic pasts and presents is reduced. Robertson's conversation with Virgil and Strang's reading of the *Carmina Burana* reveal the affection each contemporary poet holds for her chosen textual pasts. And these pasts are textual, linguistic. Robertson's interest in Virgil, for example, is not biographical. Virgil is a textual entity and our affections as well as our subjectivities are linguistic. Even in the poets' harshest critique of previous subject representations, their fondness for the works they read and re-read is obvious. Yet their attachments do not go unexamined. Robertson and Strang are quite aware that even the love they bear for these Latin texts has been impressed on them. Their affections are manifestations of oppression. Yet they occur within specific time and space. This love is a previously unexpressed rhetorical space wherein synchronic and diachronic time replace chronology, where *topos* replaces telos. These rhetorical spaces are *topoi*: sites of interface where textual pasts participate in present and provisional identity positions and subject agencies emerge that are deeply vulnerable to linguistic forces. As a result, this affection (like subjectivity) is also a temporary site of liberation and impression.

We love Virgil because we have been made thus. We also love Virgil because Virgil rocks—no critical understanding can diminish our adoration. But there can be no absolute repetition in its expression. As Robertson writes, “I have loved history’s premonitions / urgencies these parts lovingly I speak / in the dialect of servility” (*Debbie* ll.229-231). The subject is an open site of absolute impressionability. It is servility; it is the dismaying love of servility, and it is the agency of our possibility. The human subject is a site of perpetual linguistic relation. The possibilities of subjectivity are equal to its potential linguistic combinations. Both *Debbie* and *Low Fancy* locate the impressionability and possibility of subjectivity. Out of the inexhaustible possibilities that relational subjects offer these poems construct previously unexpressed subjects—*topoi*. Although the new is never exactly new (it is always perforated by what was and entangled with what might be) there are combinations, molecularly altered perspective, slight slants and strange shifts that occur. The constitution of these subjects (tilted, altered, expanded, reduced and turned) takes place in both poems. *Debbie* notes this explicitly: “I / design sublime climates for them, breathe on those wonderful soprano arms and for them / covet (who needs trumpets) common, lazy / joy . . . (243-247).

Although the nature of the human subject is a central issue for the first generation of Language poets, their work focuses on undermining notions of referentiality and absolutes. That is, Language writers such as Bernstein, Silliman and Hejinian generally identify the human as the origin of language: there is no external, eternal absolute place of meaning. While Robertson and Strang concur

with this position, they extend it and also identify language as the origin of the human. This basic premise allows each poet to explore how the subject is inevitably bound and “always already” enabled by its linguistic origins. In *Debbie*, to be linguistic is to be determined by social, historical, economic contingent forces that are beyond one’s will. However, this very vulnerability affords subjectivity a radical agency (and vice versa). In *Debbie* this formative possibility occurs metaphorically. In *Low Fancy* the subject is formed and empowered by the physics of word relations that take place on the immanent force-field of language.

In both poems, the investigation and reconfiguration of the subject consists of two activities: a critique of and a conversation with a specific historic work and the re-representation of subjects. These activities hew previously unexpressed *topoi* out of the already expressed. Both poems are feminist in that they critique the history of the representation of women and retrieve the buried and absented female. In their desire to rewrite women into language and history, Robertson and Strang unearth and reconstruct the human as a site of linguistic performativity where gender and being are determined by language. If the subject is a linguistic entity, then these poems are able to perform the human as a temporary site of relation.

Because of their poetic heritage, it is not strange that Robertson and Strang engage in a discussion of human subjectivity. Both poets have been affected by a poetic lineage that is committed to poetry as a site of philosophical inquiry. It is a lineage within which the poetic and the philosophical are inextricably linked, it

extends back to the pre-Socratics and through Aristotle. Epistemological problems inform the work of Zukofsky, Stein, Pound, Eliot, Stevens and H.D. These Modernists, like the contemporary Language writers, recover poetry as a potent site for philosophical discourse and practice, “a philosophy of practice in language” (Silliman 17). If language is at the centre of experience, what other medium better than poetry to investigate and perform its possibilities?

Zukofsky, Stein, Loy and Niedecker wrote in order to see and make the world anew. Tired of Victorian Romantic lyricism and the onslaught of early twentieth century capitalism, they wrote towards something and somewhere else. The impact of these poets on Robertson and Strang is unquestionable. And Zukofsky resonates particularly with Strang. As Creeley writes in the foreword to Zukofsky’s *Complete Short Poetry*, Zukofsky enters into “the physical place of language” in order to “inhabit the gestures, pace and density of those (“objective”) words “ (xii). This habitation is, as Creeley notes, “inclusive” and, I would argue, deeply democratic. That is, it is an inhabiting of language on a horizontal plane where each word vigorously records its own density and consequently moves into new relation with other equally expressed words. As Creeley claims, Zukofsky’s transliterations are a “uniquely human attempt to “read” the world beyond one’s isolating proposal or simple control, so to enter into it, tenuous but explicit, from here to there and back again, from *I*’s to *eyes*” (xii). Although Creeley’s often cited comment refers to Zukofsky’s “Catullus,” it also pertains to Zukofsky’s entire writing practice. However, the actual transliterative movement from word to word, from language to language—“from

here to there and back again”—that occurs in “Catullus” profoundly manifests the direction of such writing. Reading the words on their own terms would be to enter into language as a horizontal plane of immanence. To move from word to word, from relation to relation, from sound to sound, from sight to sight is to greet language without hierarchies of sense, without ideas of transcendence and to welcome (with curiosity) what you find there. This is a kind of textual democracy.

Emulating Zukofsky’s translation practice, Strang writes what Gilles Deleuze refers to as a Spinozist text, or what Creeley would call a Zukofskian text, because, as Quartermain notes in *Disjunctive Poetics*, Spinoza’s “presence and words march and sing through nearly all of Zukofsky’s work” (84).

Titchwell-Waas describes the manifestation of Spinoza in Zukofsky: “poem and readers are distinct yet folded together as they engage and mutually affect each other in their desire to actuate their perfection or being” (4). According to Spinoza, being is perfection and reason perceives the necessity of things as they are (*Ethics* Dem, 60). As a result, reason determines what is common (Dem, 60) and maintains the principle of common life and common advantage (P73, 154). The more “reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it” (P9, 6). That is, the result of the practice of reason facilitates positive relations; the more productive external relations a body has, the more perfect it is. The more “each thing is perfect, the more reality it has and consequently, the more it acts and the less it is acted on” (P40, 179). That which constitutes the real is perfect: “[b]y reality and perfection I understand the same thing” (D, 32). Zukofsky restates this formula in “A: “such need may see reason, thy perfect real”. The

“thy” in “thy perfect real” —the archaic informal address of the familiar subject— is the common human subject and its external positive relations, its disruptive *conatus*, maintain the common life, interrupt systems of absolute power and constitute the perfect real.

The real is perfect not because of its intrinsic value but because of its productive common energy that works toward common advantage and is produced by common external relations (Spinoza, *Ethics* 8). Zukofsky posits a central Spinozist thought into poetry: reality and thus perfection are the result of common healthy human relations. Toxic relations, imperfections, deplete energy and therefore constitute less reality (Spinoza, *Ethics* 8). Spinoza’s faith in the common multitude of humanity stems from this idea of common sense. The multitude cannot be wrong because it is through the common that reality is formed and within which the person thrives: “[a] man [*sic*] who is guided by reason is more free in a state, where he lives according to a common decision, than in solitude . . .” (P73, 154). Reason is the human’s capacity to identify these relations. A person who is guided by reason is not guided by fear, but strives to live freely and to maintain the principle of common life and common empowerment (P73, 154).

Zukofsky works a Spinozist sense of democracy into the poem by viewing poetry as the perfect site to express the perfect real. For Zukofsky, in *Cattulus*, the transliteration of Latin into English allows English to retain its trace of foreignness. English is both object and other. Objectified, words on the page are bodies shifting on a horizontal plane of relations. Their placement is democratic.

There is no higher meaning, no transcendental signifier. Each word works in proximity to the next. Its common notions occur as a result of the reader intersecting with the text. Each relation increases and expresses the common real that occurs between reader and text. Each line, each word, is a study in motion, balance and unbalance, and so active.

With a Zukofskian focus on the literal sound of the Latin words (their music), Strang pays Spinozist heed to what is perfect—that which *is* by virtue of common agreement (a language). Accordingly language is perfect because it makes a real. This is not to say that language could not be more potent or more perfect. Through Strang's translation, she extends elements of its perfection. She focuses on the sounds and the rhythms of the words: the motion of the words denotes them as objects within a linguistic whole. The maintained phonic attributes of the Latin intermittently extend the common sense of Strang's community to that of the mediaeval audience who heard these texts. Strang loosens the literal Latin meaning, but retains fragments of its reason, its reality and its perfection.

Subjectivity

In order to fine-tune my explanation of the poetic performance of subjectivities in *Debbie* and *Low Fancy*, I look at contemporary discussions regarding the subject and the role of language in the construction of the human, reading Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, and Emmanuel Levinas. Butler, Deleuze and Levinas converse directly with Spinoza. For Levinas, Spinoza is important because he (like Levinas) proposes a philosophy of ethics.

Yet Levinas' notion of our integral relation with the other directly challenges Spinoza's notion of *conatus essendi*, the Spinozist right to exist ("Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" 23-24). Levinas' subject only exists in relation to the other and has no intrinsic right to existence. In Butler's work on Levinas she notes this conflict (see *Precarious Life* and "Giving an Account"). Levinas poses a concept of ethics that describes the event of being in a non-subsuming relation with the other. I extend Levinas' notion of the nonsubsuming relation of the subject to Vico's notion of metaphor, and this extension is central to my analysis of *Debbie*. For Levinas, as for Vico, constitutive relations are not based in sameness.

Levinas argues against Heideggerian ontology because the subject's relations to others are ones where alterity is reduced to the same. That is, in Heidegger's thinking, the comprehension of being is presupposed, and this presupposition is always understood in any relation with reference to a universal notion of being. For Levinas, relation is not reducible to comprehension. It does not affect us in terms of a concept. The relation takes place in the situation of speech, in speaking or calling or listening. This relation is one where one is engaged in a non-subsumptive relation to alterity. To Levinas, this relation is ethical and non-violent. It does not require the comprehensive overwhelming of the other in order to exist. His notion of ethics is central to my reading of Robertson in that it is based on an apprehension of the subject as deeply vulnerable and impressionable.

For both Robertson and Strang the textual constitutions of subjects that occur in the poems are based on the relation of the linguistic subject to linguistic

forces. In *Low Fancy*, the relation is dynamic and constitutive—radically active. In *Debbie*, the relation is passive, constitutive and thus Levinasian in that it is *radically* passive. Levinas' understanding of the subject's intrinsic susceptibility to the Other and Wall's slightly altered reading of Levinas is structurally manifest in the Vichian metaphor.²⁷ Levinas' relationship to Spinoza is conflicted. Spinoza's notion of horizontal immanence and *conatus essendi* (the subject's persistent desire and right to be) directly contradicts Levinasian theory of ethical being. In fact, as I discuss later, Spinoza's notion of being is one that Levinas considers to be a form of violence (see Levinas' "Dialogue" 23-24 and "Is Ontology Fundamental" 9-11). However, Spinoza's theory of the absolute relatedness of bodies on that plane of immanence links him to Levinas' sense of subjects as intrinsically bound to and engaged with each other. For both philosophers, the dynamic of that binding constitutes a fundamental ethics.

Levinas writes, "[m]y ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world" ("Dialogue" 23). As a result, the subject owes a debt to the preceding other. When the subject is exposed to the vulnerability of the Other, it puts the ontological right to existence into question.²⁸ As subjects we are bound to an equally vulnerable Other in a relationship of mutual impressionability and

²⁷ Levinas takes his ideas of "the Same" (*le Même*) and "the Other" (*l'Autre*) from Plato (Adriann T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bersonci 11)

²⁸ Levinas writes that the ontological right to existence that Spinoza called *conatus essendi* and understood as the basis of all intelligibility is challenged by "the relation to the face" ("Dialogue" 23-24)

the necessity of preservation. That is, the relationship of the subject to the Other is not based on appropriation or sameness, it is based on its relation of absolute vulnerability to the Other's absolute vulnerability. This is what Levinas and Butler refer to as "precarious life" (Levinas "Peace and Proximity," 167, Butler "Precarious Life" 128-151). Within this vulnerability, the subject bears an intrinsic separateness and it is by virtue of this separateness that one preserves the alterity of each and foregrounds other possible relations.

Although Levinas' sense of ethics is derived from a divine source, his view is useful for my poetic analysis that observes how Robertson disrupts dominant forms of subject representation and admits into linguistic view subject formations that take fully into account the Other. Levinas' concept of subjectivity is particularly useful in explaining the structural dynamics of Robertson's Vichian metaphoric subject.

Butler's notion of the performativity of language and its influence on the formation and fluidity of subject identity (see *Gender Trouble*, 1990 and *Bodies That Matter*, 1993) is central to my inquiry into the poetic subjects of *Debbie* and *Low Fancy*. In "Giving an Account of Oneself," Butler situates the subject as fundamentally Levinasian; that is, it is both impressionable and ecstatic: "the [subject's] relation to the Other is ecstatic [. . .] the *I* repeatedly finds itself outside itself, and [. . .] cannot put an end to this repeated upsurge of its own exteriority" (24). Preceded by the Other, Butler claims that the subject is fundamentally unwilling. She asks how one might be a responsible subject within such a position. She places this impressionable and unwilling subject into an ethical context

through her reading of Levinas (“Giving an Account ” 22-40). Butler calls on Levinas’ idea that the impressionable subject is fundamentally, even structurally, ethical because of its extreme vulnerability to the Other, to argue that a consciousness of such vulnerability is necessary for responsible citizenship.²⁹ Although one’s identity as a human subject is unwilled (at the mercy of preceding and powerful forces—social, political, economical, environmental), Butler presents a model of subject formation that takes responsibility for itself and its community by recognizing that its vulnerability is shared by all other subjects. Butler’s idea of the subject and its potential for responsible citizenry manifests in *Debbie* and *Low Fancy* in the collective relationship that each poem constructs between text and reader. In reading the reader configures both her own agency and that of the subjects constructed in the text. Because the reading and the written subject is unwilled, it must repeatedly locate itself outside itself; it cannot help the repetitive extension of its own exteriority (“Giving an Account” 23). In *Debbie* his ecstatic relation to the exterior world is both the subject’s vulnerability and its agency. Forever seeking recognition, each relation, each moment of identity contains recognition and loss, passivity and agency. This movement of ecstasy and vulnerability is what constitutes meaning.

Butler’s notion of gender and identity as flexible and fluid, momentarily fixed through the linguistic shares similarities with Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* and

²⁹ To suggest that humans are structurally ethical does not mean that ethics is ontological. Instead it claims that we are capable of ethics because of how we are constituted. Our extreme vulnerability to the Other provides a model by which we may understand the Other’s extreme vulnerability to us and thus we can understand our responsibility to the Other.

with many Language writers who understand of the role of language in constructing the real. These poetic interests chronologically precede Butler's publications. Butler's work is also similar to Robertson and Strang's in that she suggests alternate modes of subject agency in the face of the prevailing conditions of oppression. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler suggests how we might arrest pernicious cycles of violence in today's political climate. She asks what media might show us the frail precariousness of life (151). Through Butler's concept of subject formation, through her notion of the subject as impressionable and ecstatic, it is possible to understand how *Debbie* is such a media.

Wall's theory of radical passivity supports my readings of the nature of subjectivity in *Debbie*. In *Radical Passivity* (1999) Wall's analysis of Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot and Giorgio Agamben takes place within a larger philosophical conversation. Reading Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben through Kant and Heidegger, Wall provides a framework that explains the potential agency of a subjectivity that is utterly impressionable, relational. Wall refers to this agency as radical passivity: "the pure possibility of any relation whatever" (156). The idea of a radical passivity provides a point at which the ideas of Butler, Deleuze, Levinas and Agamben interface and provide a philosophical means by which a certain idea of being may be understood. This idea of being is at once relational, interdependent, unwilled and yet paradoxically, it has vigorous potential. In *Radical Passivity*, Wall moves beyond the semiotic and focuses on another linguistic and subjective space, or milieu. Wall reads Levinas, Blanchot

and Agamben and explains each philosopher's rendition of this space, what Wall calls radical passivity. Wall's reading of Levinas is one of which Levinas could not approve because Wall reads the Other as the subject itself. For Levinas, the subject is importantly not itself.

Wall's reading of Levinas' notion of relational being infuses Heideggerian ontology of being (within which particular existence is understood in reference to the universal) with the Levinasian idea of rapport. Wall's subject embodies the Levinasian rapport that exists between the subject and the Other. As an embodiment of particular relation, the existing subject no longer partakes in the universal. Instead it becomes an image of itself, an image of nothing but a generic, passive potential of being. Wall combines Heidegger's notion that "existence is only possible in general" (2) with a linguistic reading of Kant's pure transcendental subject. Wall claims that the Kantian "fleeting and pure" *I* "was never anywhere but in language" (160).³⁰ Because there is no pre-linguistic subject, the subject must appropriate language to exist. As a result, Wall identifies language as the possibility of existence in general, claiming that the subject *must* appropriate language in order to exist (as a generic—but not universal—human).

As a linguistic/ generic entity, the subject does not receive a particular identity. For Wall, the subject inherits the general possibility of relation, "an absolute milieu" (162), and this milieu is a state of rapport, a state of "all possible

³⁰ Wall notes that he arrives at this reading from Agamben's account of Johann Georg Hamann's critique of Kant in *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron. London: Verso, 1993.

belonging” (161). As subjects, we can no longer simply say *I*. We must enter this rapport, this milieu (and think “no one, any one”) through language because language is the possibility of all experience (161). Language is experience and in the experience of language is the experience of existence. As a result, for Wall, the subject is utterly dependent on language; for Levinas, the subject is utterly dependent on its relation to the Other and that relation takes place in speech. In speaking or listening, the subject is actively engaged in an ethical non-subsuming relation where the particular other is not mediated through the universal and its alterity is maintained. The theories of subjectivity held by Wall and Levinas are useful for understanding the constitution of subjectivity in *Debbie*. In the poem language is both site of the Levinasian non-appropriative relation with the particulate Other and a place, an absolute generic milieu, that must be appropriated by the subject in order for identity/existence to be possible at all.

With Spinoza, Wall shares a sense of the common. We are, Wall writes, “not the masses, nor the horde, nor the wolves, and not the hero, nor the individual, nor the survivor [but] the motley” or what Spinoza would call the multitude (162). Wall shares Spinoza’s notion of the subject as in process and collective. However, Wall’s understanding of the generic opposes the Spinozist sense of the particular as the source of relation and meaning. For Wall, in the generic, the radical deappropriation of identity enables being (134). Being occurs through the subject’s radical passive rapport with itself. For Vico, it occurs through the subject’s capacity to create metaphors, essentially radically passive modes of linguistic constitution. In Vico’s fable the subject’s radically passive rapport with itself

occurs in the time and space that thunder brings. This time and space is the beginning of human perception, consciousness and the beginning of the rapport of the human with its collective self. This rapport makes the human possible. The human *is* the site of rapport, a gathering, a fashioning, a site of the multitude or Wall's "motley" (162). Wall's motley manifests in *Low Fancy* as a site of agency and disruptive relation: "our amenable inch" (45). In *Debbie*, it is our entry into language, into ourselves. "Do you remember the day we wanted / to describe everything?" (ll.25-26).

These contemporary philosophical discussions on the human subject reiterate what poetry already reveals; that is, the extent to which the human subject is intrinsically relational, linguistic, impressionable, potentially democratic and ethical. The extent to which poetic language can express subjectivity is something that poetry has long pondered and demonstrated. One source of the perceived difficulty of these poems is that the authors take seriously the idea that poetry is a potent site for a philosophical discussion concerning the nature of existence and the role of language in determining existence. In fact, both poems replace established notions of subjectivity with alternate considerations of the human. They illustrate that poetry is a site of dynamic process of thought and consideration; that poetry can think for itself; that poetry can philosophize. These poems are also vigorous occasions, linguistic events where words "every word [is] wholly, thoroughly a word" (Davenport 383). Looking at *Debbie* and *Low Fancy* within the context of a very old discussion, I illustrate how these poems are both philosophical critiques and phenomenological events. That is, these texts are

dynamic and hospitable sites of philosophical and poetic inquiry. These investigations locate deficits in the history of human representation and thus the poems propose and perform alternate constructions of subjectivity in previously unexpressed possibilities of linguistic being. By reading these poetic readings of older texts, this thesis makes obvious the potential of poetry in general and the capacity of these poems in particular to be constitutive linguistic sites of thinking and being.

CHAPTER TWO

Debbie: an epic

*We were created that the earth might be made sensible of her
inhuman taste; and love that the body might be so dear that even
the earth should roar with it.*

(Djuna Barnes *Nightwood*)

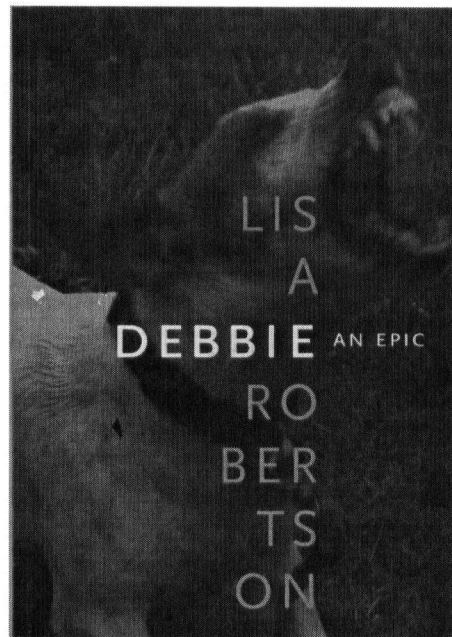


Fig. 2 *Debbie* front cover

Interview

Interview with Lisa Robertson (by phone: Vancouver-Paris) November 17th, 2004

Q. Why write?

A. *Not one answer. A thrill on the side—I think it's the sensation that comes from playing with structure when you get an intuitive feeling that language could go on in a different shape, direction than you had ever believed possible.*

A method for following and developing intuition. Intuition of structures that haven't been imaginable to me before.

Q. Intuition?

A. *An almost, a little tweaking feeling of possibility—not an explicit thing. Like uh, it's partially emotional. It has something to do with how a kind of, kind of almost emotional judgement of how things might change.*

How to make or follow change in relationships to language or to people. But not sort of obviously based on explicit conceptual structures.

It is emotional judgements of potentials that for me have something to do with how structures can change.

When I'm writing I often find I can be labouring away at something and it's not working and not working and then I realize I have to wait and finally it arrives. I might have to wait a year. To hold on to the difficulty and let it rest there.

Eventually it will solve itself. I get a feeling of what might work.

Q. Are you aware of how the solution works ?

A. *Often it is a simple thing. So simple it wouldn't have occurred to me.*

Easier to explain in retrospect.

I know it is working because it feels right. I know that isn't a very intellectually cohesive way of talking about it. When I'm teaching . . . I'm thinking about how to recognize and honour your own intuition. Why I write, the feeling of recognition and the movement that follows.

Feels very liberatory in a way that accepts complication—not through simplification. In a way it makes a setting for complexity so that a shape can be enjoyed, pondered over.

Noting a wave, any reaction, any refusal in the gut.

Q. Can it [poetry] be radical, revolutionary?

A. *I have no expectation that it will result in a change in the structure of the government.*

I feel less and less sure about the discourse about syntax as political. I don't resist that, but I don't feel that I have a relationship with that. But, I am very interested in the relationship of writing to change and describing change, describing or representing what change might be, the physics of change. When something becomes different from itself that pertains to social life and various relationships, public, institutional. More and more I'm interested in representing, as much as I represent anything, I want to represent change to myself. That remains the most interesting thing about living.

GIANTS

The giants were by nature of enormous build.

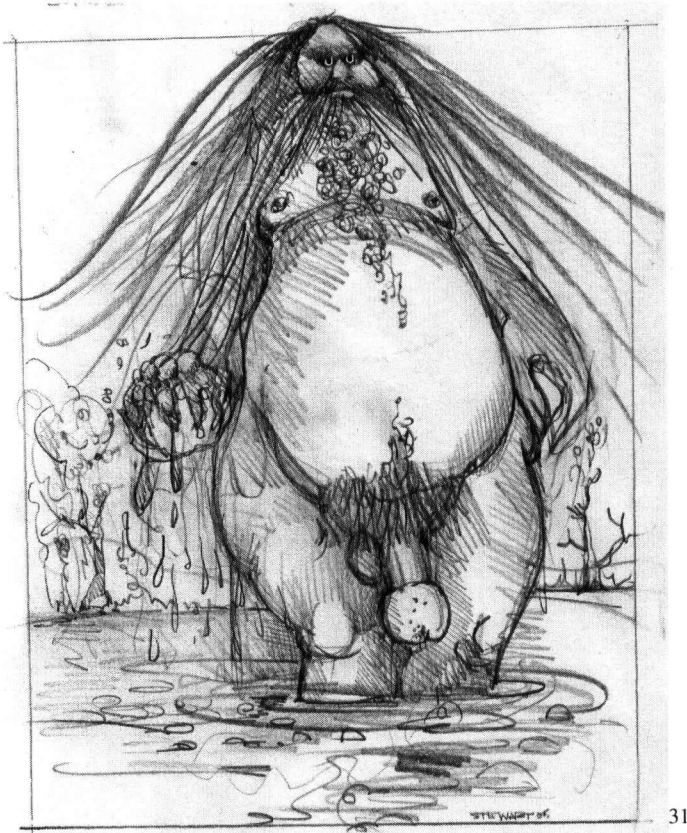
Giambattista Vico *New Science*

*Where adoration might imagine extreme distances—the past,
e.g.—and long to submit to what resembles it in no way—like any
good field, lying under its sky.*

Susan Clark *as lit x: the syntax of adoration*

Like Vico, Robertson constructs her own fables of origin, she writes her own giants and introduces her own split “feminist sky” (*Debbie* 1.41) to produce previously unexpressed subjects out of “rome’s green ruin” (n.p.). Vico’s tale of the origin of humanity is a story about giants. It is a myth that embodies the beginning of meaning and the intrinsic relatedness of existence. It explains the ecstatic constitutive metaphoric human, how we are memory and its image:

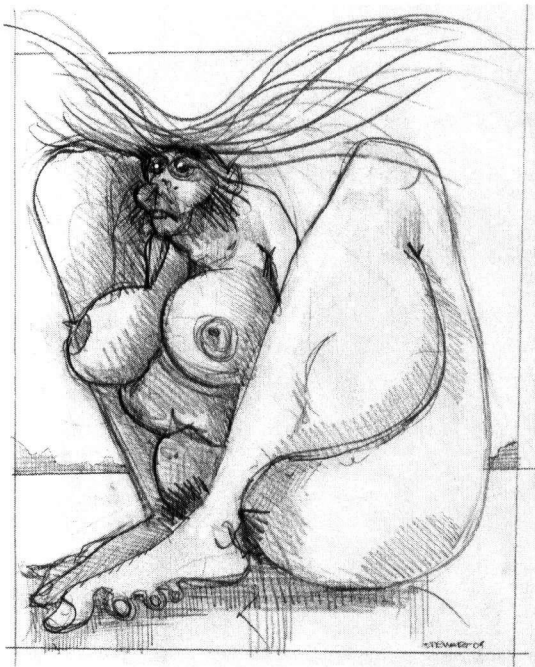
[T]he impious races of the three children of Noah, having lapsed into a state of bestiality, went wandering like wild beasts until they scattered and dispersed through the great forests of the earth, and that with their bestial education giants had sprung up and existed among them at a time when the heavens thundered for the first time after the flood. (*New Science* §195)



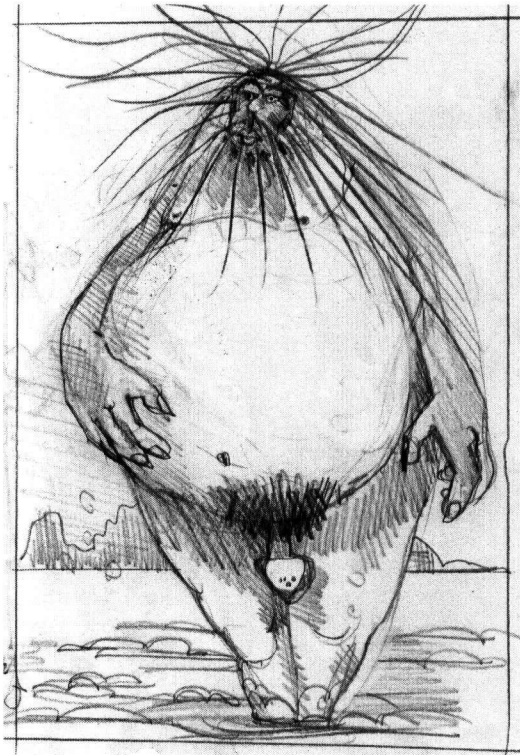
According to Vico, the founders of Gentile humanity were the errant sons of Noah (NS §195). The sons of Noah, Ham, Shem, and Japheth renounced their father after the long days on the ark. Tired of waves and rain, sick of boats and fathers, the sons of Noah bolted when the ark landed. They wandered over the damp earth, and their wives (whose names are forgotten) went with them (§369). Freed from the bonds of human society, the sons of Noah and their wives ran wild, copulating with anyone, defecating anywhere. Babies were born to savage mothers who weaned their children too young and left them to wallow in the filth of their own excrement (§369). But the offspring of the sons of Noah flourished. They grew without “that fear of gods, fathers, and teachers which chills and

³¹ "Vico's Giants," illustrations by Dennis Stewart, 2005.

benumbs even the most exuberant in childhood" (§369). They grew "robust [and] vigorous," fertilized by the rich nitrous salts of their own feces (§369). The trees and grasses also grew, fertilized by the nitrogen-rich excrement of the abandoned children (§369). The babies, the trees, and the grass in the fields thrived. The children grew excessively big "to the point of being giants" (§369). And these "[g]iants [. . .] existed in nature among all gentile nations" (§61).



Despite their great size, the giants were childlike (§4). They had no society, no language, no community, no banks and no mind. Yet their environment was fecund and their experience of that environment was immediate. Buffeted by stimuli, the giants experienced each moment as if it was the first and the last. They lived like this. for three hundred years.



Until the earth dried and the air rose in brittle exhalations. Electric, it ignited in the sky. Lightning struck, and thunder roared across the sky (§62).



When the giants heard the thunder they were afraid. But there was nothing to fear, for thunder is the sound of nothing. As Verene notes, thunder only signifies the passing of lightning (*Vico's Science* 91). Thunder is the memory of lightning; it is not something to escape; it is not something to fight or eat. The giants' fear was not necessary; any action against the thunder was futile.

I read this moment as excess in an entirely economic system of perpetual stimuli and activity. The giants' pause is the first and last moment of stillness in their lives. In the excess of the pause, the giants end and the humans begin. In the pause, caused by fear, the world is made again. I interpret this time and space as the re-introduction and manifestation of mind. In the time and space of mind, the giants shift from the absolutely physical to the metaphysical. Constant stimuli are mediated through the time and space; random, endless, stimuli becomes experience. The dense site of materiality and immediacy (the giant) becomes a site of the human: porous place of mediation. Suspended in the time and space of mind, motion, sound and matter are held in relation and the world is made and perceived as if for the first time.

Vico's tale of the giants reads like a metaphor for Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky's *ostraneniye*; a term that literally means making strange (4). The process of the giants becoming human is one whereby the matter of the world is suddenly set apart from them, held in abeyance in space, something to be perceived. In turn, the post-giants can now perceive themselves—their edges and endings. They too are held in abeyance, suddenly perceivable in space. In this tale, the world is a metaphysical event, precipitated by fear, brought on in a pause.

The world takes place in the spaces in-between. The event of the in-between is the presence of the human. The human is the proposition that makes meaning possible. According to Shklovsky, to make strange awakens us to the world: “it imparts the sensation of things as they are perceived not as they are known” (12). Experiencing her first sensation the new human (just post-giant) perceives thunder as a loud giant voice (*NS* §§9, 192, 193, 195, 377, 379, 383, 385, 389, 447-448, 516, 689, and 1098). Shklovsky advocates literary techniques of *ostraneniye* specifically as the goal of the artist to retrieve the mind from the banality of habit, for Vico, making strange is the basic act of perception and the grounds for being. Only when we are estranged from the material immediate life can we perceive at all.

However, when the new humans hear thunder they make that which is strange to them familiar by metaphysically extending their own physicality into the sky. They make thunder into voice. For Vico, an object cannot be known in and of itself. It can only be understood in its relation to the human. This is the result of the fallen sons of Noah and it is the basis of the Vichian metaphor. Perceiving the thundering sky, the post-giants extend themselves as metaphysical space into a world, into intelligibility. As a result, the thunder becomes a voice of the sky. Yet this relation, this metaphor is not based on likeness or assimilation. The thunder is not like a voice; the thunder is a voice. The relation is not based in similarity but alterity. The human and the sky are brought into relation through difference, proximity and necessity. The metaphoric extension of the post-giants into the sky does not assimilate or subsume the body of the sky into the body of

the just post-giant human. The space that exists between the two objects (new humans and sky) is importantly preserved.

The preservation of alterity in the Vichian metaphor can be understood in the terms of Emmanuel Levinas' notion of the subject's relation with the Other. The absolute alterities of the sky body and the just-post giant human are preserved in the metaphor of the thunder as the sky's voice, because the sky is perceived as the unreachable, nonsubsumable body of Jove. In the first metaphor of Vico's tale, the alterity is presented in a relation of the subject to what Levinas calls the absolute Other (*Totality and Infinity* 34-35). Manifesting themselves as body, the new humans perceived of the possibility of a body greater than theirs. It was a body that preceded and exceeded their own in space and time. In perceiving this Other, the giants perceived their own existence for the first time and became human. The human only exists within relation. Absolutely dependent on the Other for existence itself, the new humans longed for it with a metaphysical desire that could never be satiated. The Other was knowable and utterly unknowable: it was the world.

Levinas' notion of the Other maintains a theological position. For Wall, our relation of absolute alterity to the Other is our relation with "an alterity that the *moi* itself is" (4). Both Wall's and Levinas' reading can be supported in Vico's myth. A Levinasian reading maintains the theological position of the existence of Jove. For Levinas, a desire without satisfaction, which precisely understands the alterity and remoteness of the other, is the "alterity of the Other and of the Most-High" (*Totality and Infinity* 34). From Wall's perspective, when

the just post-giant humans perceive the sky as body, they perceive the generic possibility of their own subjectivity. In both cases, the subject and the Other emerged simultaneously out of the fear of thunder. The pause that the giants experience brings about time and space so that the subject's first perception of itself is across the time and space of the new mind. The subject's first perception of itself is as Other. Wall writes, "I am haunted, altered—but by no one, no father, no mother. I am haunted by no one other than myself. This is my ungrounded, abyssal, endless passivity. Myself comes to me as the very event of my being and therefore, as cast, I am exposed to, permeated by, alterity" (44). In this sense the Vichian metaphor is an extension of the Lacanian mirror stage. The first thought is a metaphoric gesture where the metaphor mirrors and extends perceived material metaphysically across time and space so that the subject is imaged back at itself. Once the subject locates a responsive surface, it notes its utter difference to its self and locates its Other.

Because the giants desired this unattainable Other (whether it be theological or a haunting of themselves by themselves), because this relation with absolute alterity was the only means by which they could come into being, the post-giant humans worshipped the loud unreachable sky. In Vico's tale, the giants bathed the mud and fertilizing excrement from their huge bodies in ritual ablutions. With clean bodies and new minds, the new humans shrank and their heads grew (§371). With each newly-made relation, with each metaphor, the human mind increased and the world extended in relation. Suddenly self-conscious, under a sky of such profound alterity and intimacy, the new humans

stopped defecating and copulating out of doors (§371). The massive and solitary giants disappeared and the small collective human emerged, and with it, human society. This collectivity grew as the world extended through the repetition of metaphors, communal ritual and the repression and extension of experience and space.

Yet according to Vico, the early humans still understood the world sensibly—the new human emerging mind was too fresh and raw for abstract thought (§376). The mind understood only what the body could extend into metaphorically: “[t]hus, head for top or beginning; the brow and shoulders of a hill; the eyes of needles and of potatoes; mouth for any opening; the lip of cup or pitcher; the teeth of rake, a saw, a comb; the beard of wheat; the tongue of shoe; the gorge of river . . .” (§405). As a result, the first language was bodily, and was poetry, “the language of necessity” (§404). Poetry evolved from the mind’s most intimate encounters with itself. These encounters were its relations with the perceived material world. The first humans were poets and they attributed to bodies the being of animate substances, with capacities measured by their own, namely sense and passion, and made fables of them. Every metaphor “was a fable in brief” of a human relation, a human society (§404). Every metaphor explained the relation of the new humans to the matter around them and their sense of how their material bodies extended into that newly constituted space—this space that was constituted by the metaphoric acts of extension. Thus, the new-humans’ fable of Jove was a fable of their own origin as humans. Literally, the human subject was configured by its relation to the sky, to Jove.

One of the many striking aspects of Vico's story is the giants' environment. It is a completely contained system. The giants flourish on their own excretions. Their excess is material and finite. Thunder is the first instance of the immaterial, of infinite excess because it is a representation of absence. Because of its inherent absent present, thunder is perceived, it is the first moment of the metaphysical—a sign and a space of nothing: the possibility of anything at all.

The thunder introduces finitude as well as infinity. Gazing across the space of the metaphysical, the post-giant humans perceived themselves for the first time—this was their origin; this was their memory. They perceived themselves as Other and in relation to the Other, as being otherwise-than-being: they are the first metaphor. As metaphors, the giants became subjects, now, always a middle term, always delayed behind the present and presence: the human.

Before the thunder, the giants lived in the immediate present—this was synchrony: simultaneous time. After thunder, the giants were what Wall calls “Being-cast” (49) or what Agamben refers to as “being-called” or “linguistic being” (*The Coming Community* 9). Being-cast is necessarily an inspiration from the Other in which the subject is delayed. This delay is the basis of memory. In the delay the reiterated object exists in the shadow of the Other. Yet the ecstasy with which the subject desires the Other brings synchrony and mind. Desire compels the ecstatic extension of mind into the sky that the subject perceives as itself (as Other)—this percept becomes the body of god and thunder the voice of god. In this extension, the giants become metaphoric, imaged, relational beings.

The space and time of mind is a vehicle for the tenor that is the material body and visa versa: the body is a metaphor for the mind; the mind is a metaphor for the body—both extending as time and space into time and space. Thus, the post-giant new humans perceive their surfaces of stuff and sound.

The purpose of Vico's tale is to illustrate the poetic, metaphoric origins of the human. If the human is, in fact, a metaphor, a linguistic site of mediation, then indeed the possibilities of poetry as a means to rewrite the human subject and so the world is worthy of inquiry. In Vico's tale of Giants, he configures a metaphoric system that is as constitutive as it is descriptive. For the post-giants everything is metaphor. From the first second on, the first thought was a metaphor that imaged the world as an extension of the human (not like but *of*). Verene considers the first metaphor as the post-giant's perception of thunder as voice. Because the new humans couldn't know God's truth, they perceived everything within the terms they knew. They only knew the life of the body. When the life of the body met mind, it made bodies out of all things: thunder is voice, the sky is Jove. The post-giant imaged the world.

The post-giants became the world as an endless producer of images (each metaphoric relation constitutes another image, another space and thus more relations). The extended image is the result of a direct and sensible relation with the world (a bodily mind). Vico would say that the metaphor reveals the history of that exact relation. The metaphor is the mini-fable. Structurally the post-giant subject compulsively extends into the world. The extension is the infinite metaphysical post-giant evolved from the limited physical giants.

The post-giants are awkwardly (and productively) both in (and so next to) the world and they *are* the world. This is an interesting problem. How are we (as post-giants) both next to and of this place?

Vico would argue that there is no way out of this rather claustrophobic construction because we are kept from the real truth. As Debbie says, "there is no outside" ("peroration"). Wall might say that the first metaphor was the post-giants themselves. The first thing they perceived and sensed was mind, their mind, and they perceived it as Other and so extended that Other into the world. For Wall, that perceived space is the possibility of being, the generic site of being. It is the empty guts of the image, the human, the subject. It is the empty space that is our passionate rapport with being. This is not particular or universal; it is the motley (162). It is a no-name brand of being and the site of our passionate rapport with being.

METAPHOR

Art is everywhere, for artifice is at the heart of reality

Jean Baudrillard *Symbolic Exchange and Death*

[T]he metaphor is the most luminous.

Vico NS §404

Debbie is a new metaphor, a new subject. She is a buried female subject, unburied. Previously erased by history's tales of men and blood and gore, she is written (in conversation with Robertson, January 2003). Yet Debbie is not necessarily female or human. As an emerging subject, she is widely gendered; her perimeters expand the limits of the human. She becomes the site of our passionate rapport with being. Her possibilities are ours.

Debbie is at the centre of the Robertson's epic—she is the hero. Of the many and varied subjects in the epic, she is the most visually realized. Her presence and identity in the text are vivid, unstable, magnificent and temporary. Debbie is constituted of and constitutes a series of vast and visually compelling images. She is narrated and at times narrator. She is mostly female, one of “Virgil's bastard daughters” (l.705), and often a man: “Yes I am a man” (l.567). She is sometimes superhuman: “her hearty hands bear / the bruised sea” (ll. 111-112) and sometimes extra-human: her “sense of [her] body [. . .] include[s] both dog and owning state's daft glamour” (ll. 514-515).³² She embodies the

³² The sense of the subject in *Debbie* might be looked at in relation to Deleuze and the deep-ecologists who have shown interest in Spinoza. In Robert Hurley's preface to Deleuze's *Spinoza* he quotes Arne Naess, the Norwegian ecophilosopher who outlines areas of compatibility between Spinoza's thought and the radical environmental movement (ii). Hurley notes that Deleuze

unthought-of possibilities of the human. She is egalitarian, impressionable, linguistically material, radically passive, radically tragic, constitutive and brief. To me, she is a version of Vico's giants and their movement to the human and human society.

Her epic begins as the narrator simultaneously defines and welcomes readers to her alternate epic: "RHETORS, TRAVELLERS, NEIGHBOURS, I'VE BEEN / thinking—yours are names I'd like to wear in / my lungs" (ll. 1-3). Identifying her readers as active participants, the narrator introduces them to a tale, a memory, a memory of a "middle ground," a space of beauty and grass, intelligence, women and trees (ll. 25-38). This scene is imaged like a utopic city-state. Unlike Vico's mad, copulating, defecating giants, these women lounge "on the clipped grass" (ll. 28-29); they are "compelled by trenchant discussions of sovereignty" (ll. 30-31). "Freed scholars" read "from worn books the rhetoric / of perfidy" (ll. 34-37). Although it is not yet certain what the rhetoric of perfidy consists of, the scene has revolutionary consequences: In the "upper left corner" of the idyllic gathering, clouds group and regroup a syntax of politesse, of civic graciousness (ll. 39-40). Thinking, the women have drastic material consequences: "[t]he feminist sky split[s] opens and "in a spume of surprised light" the Nurses of Perfidy descend (ll. 41, 45-46). How the Nurses are

introduces the idea that the inhuman may compose us as well: "[W]hat we are capable of may partake of the wolf, the river, the stone in the river. One wonders, finally, whether Man [*sic*] is anything more than a territory, a set of boundaries, a limit on existence" (iii). However, the notion of the subject in Debbie surpasses the confines of what is usually considered Nature and includes the inanimate and the machine.

perfidious is also not yet clear. Except that they are unexpected and funny.

Floating down from the sky, not quite like Dante's Beatrice, perhaps more like the angels descending toward Evangeline Musset in Djuna Barnes' *Ladies Almanack*,³³ they pull slogans in their wake: "Profligacy is Justified by Expedience," "Anodize the Mirage of Soul," "Harmony is an Effect of Disproportion" (ll. 47-51). The Nurses wear gold shoes; they chant oddly suggestive phrases and are desirous of words: "Feed from my tongue / Touch my wet hip / Give me words / Give me words" (ll. 57-60). From this split feminist sky, through the surprised light, through the space cleared by the "NURSES OF WORDS" (l.61), Debbie enters: "THIS IS THE LIGHT DEBBIE STEPS INTO" (l.109). Like Vico's early humans, Debbie is just post-giant, a new metaphor, constituted in "the middle ground" of the lounging, talking, reading women.

Debbie is a giantess, a goddess: "HER / toffeed flanks roll with greatness and sustenance in their sockets" (ll. 109-110). She embodies the Vichian heroic. She is majorette, cheerleader, big giant, sweet candy, and frightening Barbie ("her / toffeed flanks roll" in "their sockets"!). As she steps from the sky, Debbie is imminent, even glorious possibility: Mighty amazing beauty / moves her and all the whirling majorettes / are her marvelous squadron: their bare throats / spill analysis†" (ll.112-115). The footnote to line 115 is "†Toast!" As readers, rhetors, travellers, neighbours, we are bade to celebrate her entry onto these pages.

Through Debbie, we are bade to witness and adore the subject and its constitutive capacities, its linguistic origins, and possible recombinations. Later we also come

³³ See "July" (42).

to mourn its historical misrepresentation and degradations. What Vico writes is true in *Debbie: an epic*: the human makes what it sees. As readers, in the pages of *Debbie*, we are Debbie and just human.

Vico's *The New Science*, finds the origins of humanity in a linguistic process: the metaphor. In Vico, the metaphoric process of transference is *not* based on similarity. This is central to its constitutive powers: metaphors are sites of production where meaning and subjectivity emerge out of relations of difference. In Vico's tale of the giants, metaphor is the process by which the just post-giant humans perceive and construct their world and their own subjectivities. Unable to access God's truth and the actual real, the post-giants are required to constitute their own truth. In this sense, what is true is that which is made, human made. The primary tool of constitution is the metaphor because it allows the post-giants who are still deeply embedded in their bodily life to extend their physical experience of the world into the metaphysical. The Vichian metaphor is based on the specifics of the subject's physical relation in the world and with the world. Vico's metaphor is not based on similarity. It is a linguistic system of identification that is based in relation that perceives, creates and denotes relation.

The Vichian metaphor is central to the production of the subject in *Debbie*. It is based on a metaphysics that shares certain elements with Levinas and Wall. That is, the Vichian metaphor does not presuppose existence; it is non-assimilative in its relations, and radically passive in its approach. By analyzing how the Vichian metaphor works in regards to an Aristotelian metaphor we can locate its non-assimilative radical passivity.

In Aristotle's view, similarity is the basis of metaphoric transference. The metaphor's analogous nature allows us to impose the universal on to the particular ("Poetics" 63). According to Kittay, the Aristotelian metaphor is the basis of classification and selection and is the linguistic realization of unity in that it brings variance into homogeneity (3). [I]t is the linguistic means by which we bring together and fuse into a unity diverse thoughts . . . "(6). This fusing of diversity takes place within an assimilative system that is composed of a vehicle and tenor. Linguist Eva F. Kittay writes that the vehicle is the language image through which the tenor is understood and the tenor is the sense of the language image (16). For example, when the river snakes, the curving river (the tenor) is understood within the terms of the snake (the vehicle). In I. A. Richard's view the river is the original idea and the snake is the borrowed idea (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 99).

Linguists George Lakoff and Mark Turner state that the metaphor consists of one schematic structure being mapped onto an already existing schematic structure so that the logic of the existing structure is mapped over by the logic of the imposed other (103). The snake is perceived as like the river and so the schematic structure of the snake is imposed onto that of the river. The idea that the metaphor allows us to homogenize the particular into the universal is contrary to the Vichian metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson move closer to the Vichian system when they claim that language is largely metaphorical because our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical and that this system correlates to our bodily experiences in the world (3). According to Lakoff and Johnson, one of our initial

and most basic experiences is that of ourselves as entities, as containers with an inside and an out, separate from the rest of the world, and that we project these conceptualized boundaries upon the world and the things we find there (58). As a result, a metaphorical ontology manifests itself in language (58).³⁴

One important difference between Lakoff and Johnson and Vico is that Vico does not suppose that the human's idea of itself would be relegated to notions of containership. In fact, the metaphoric action in Vico is not the emulation of the body's containership qualities, it is an extension for the metaphorizing mind that extends the body infinitely out into the world, so that its identity alters with each new encounter (§405). Thus, our experience is not relegated to inside or out, but to a structural next-to-ness, a form of kinship. This notion of next-to-ness is central to Vico's understanding of metaphor. According to Lakoff and Johnson, Aristotle, and Kittay, the metaphor acts as the linguistic means by which one previously inarticulated domain is "fused" into the terms of an already articulated domain. The undetermined is held within the confines of the already determined. This process of mapping adapts the not-yet-known to the known and restricts the present within specific prescribed forms of the past. Utilized within this framework, the metaphor restrains vagrant impulses of meaning.

³⁴ In a review of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* in *New Vico Studies Journal*, Naomi Brown remarks that Lakoff and Johnson's theories are a banal version of Vico's theory of metaphor and being (118-122).

Verene writes that Vico's metaphor is unlike Aristotle's because it is indicative: "it shows something directly" (181). It transfers (*metapherein*) sense, signification to a figure that is shown. As Grassi writes, it " 'leads before the eyes' (*phainesthai*)" ("Rhetoric" 202). At its point of origin the Vichian metaphor is speech (*NS* §347). Grassi writes, "[s]uch a speech is immediately a 'showing'—and for this reason 'figurative,' 'imaginative,' and thus in the original sense 'theoretical' (*theorein*—i.e., to see)" (202). The imaginative language of the metaphor produces new images.

The Vichian understanding of metaphor is not widely held and anti-metaphor sensibilities are common to writers who view the metaphor as symbolic rut. This attitude was later shared by the Objectivist poets, Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, and Basil Bunting who sought to purge language of old metaphors and produce poetry that was "an object to be dealt with as such" (Williams 582). Hejinian argues against the metaphor and for the metonym in her search for a "poetics of scrutiny" ("Strangeness" 44). Hejinian reinscribes Jakobson's notion that the metonym works on a principle of combination, not selection: "compared to metaphor, which depends on code, metonym preserves context, foregrounds interrelationship" (38). Interested in the development of scientific language, Hejinian notes a pervasive desire to rid language of its metaphors in seventeenth and eighteenth century science writing. Understood as a trope, based in similarity and conceptual imposition, the metaphor was decried by seventeenth century, eighteenth century scientists who found the metaphor deceptive and a means for obscuring of truths.

In *The History of the Royal Society of London, for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*, Bishop Thomas Sprat (1667) advocates “a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions . . .” and decries the “trick of Metaphors” (qtd. by Hejinian 156). In *Voyage into Substance: Art, Science, Nature, and the Illustrated Travel Account, 1760-1840*, Barbara Maria Stafford cites William Warburton (1741) who implies that the return to metonymy [away from metaphor], to the concrete fragment of nature is a return to tangible simplicity and to the convention-free (42).³⁵

However, in *North of Intention*, McCaffery situates the metaphor in a more Vichian light. Approaching writing as an economy not a structure, McCaffery suggests that a “textual economy” concerns itself with the “order-disorder of circulations and distributions” (201). He proposes writing as a general economy, and cites Bataille’s definition:

The general economy [. . .] makes apparent that excesses of energy are produced, and that by definition, these excesses cannot be

³⁵ In her introduction to “Strangeness” in *Language of Inquiry*, Hejinian notes that Barrett Watten has pointed out to her that there are other methodologies besides the tradition of scientific work for addressing “knowledge of sensible realities” and the scientific method has some similarities with the Marxist tradition (136). Hejinian suggests that we look at Louis Althusser’s work on “modes of structural causality and the expressive nature of effects” in this context (137). Althusser’s essay “Spinoza” in Montag’s collection is precisely on this subject. Althusser discusses how Spinoza’s understanding of structural causality absolutely refutes the transcendent real: Spinozist truth is brought about by causal social activity (5). This is the same principle on which *Low Fancy* is based.

utilized. The excessive energy can be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without meaning (qtd. by McCaffery 201).

In a rejection of the structuralist position developed by Jakobson, whereby metaphor is the axis of selection, and metonymy, the axis of combination, McCaffery states that the “[m]etaphor, in fact, attacks the notion of absolute meaning” (205). Like Hejinian, McCaffery extends this conversation to the seventeenth century—albeit with different results. McCaffery notes that Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) remarks on the “radical ambivalence of metaphor, its striation of both truth and falsehood” (206). McCaffery’s analysis of Hobbes’ understanding of the metaphor proceeds as follows: by virtue of transference and behind its image as a tool of unification and assimilation lies the destabilizing force of metaphoric transience. That which is named and that which names must disappear in order to reappear. For example, for its meaning, the metaphor, *the lip of a cup*, depends upon the imposition of the cup on the framework of the body and specifically the framework of the mouth. Conversely the construct of the mouth must move toward an impossible submersion of mouth into the construct of cup. The metaphor *the lip of the cup* moves toward (but never completes) an annexation of difference. Yet this attempted reconciliation of difference occurs more because the two things are different than because they are similar. In fact, metaphor’s continual attempt to unify and classify perception and experience depends on its inability to fuse the irreducible, unmasterable difference and indeterminacy of the figures. Thus, McCaffery asserts the general economy of the metaphor as an inscriptional site “of both profit and loss” (207).

McCaffery notes that part of the metaphor's constitutional ambivalence comes about because figures in the metaphor are actually related through a metonymic contingency, not through likeness (206). Rather than separating the metonymic movement from the metaphoric McCaffery sees them as integral to the general economy of the metaphor. He notes the metonymic quality of the metaphor by suggesting that it requires a passage through metonymy (206). McCaffery notes "any purported resemblance between two terms (such as metaphor necessitates) must be predicated upon a contiguous scene [. . .] allowing the spatio-cognitive assertion of resemblance" (206). The spatio-cognitive resemblance is not based on similarity, but on the preservation of difference maintained through the next-to-ness. McCaffery's metonymic metaphor follows Vico's configuration of the metaphor, where metaphoric transference is metonymic relying on actual next-to-ness in order to give "sense and passion to sensate things" (§404), is metonymic. This is what Hejinian calls an "associative network" (39).

Metonymy

The primacy of relation in signification over similarity in the Vichian metaphor identifies it as metonymic. Metonym signifies through association and contiguity. Conventionally, the metaphor is understood as working through substitution. The metonymic aspect of the metaphor preserves the particular relationship of the human with the world. It is based in relation and on the physical proximities of the subject to the world. It does not depend on predetermined codes to signify; it depends on context and actual relations. That is,

a Vichian metaphor does not impose a preconceived conceptual map on another object in order to understand its nature. Instead it notes the relation of the human subject to the perceived object and places both the subject and the object in a configuration of relation.

This configuration results in an image that contains the details of the perceived relation. A Vichian metaphor reverses the process of comprehension in that the subject does not draw the world in, but extends itself into the world and becomes the world. As a result, the world is understood within the terms of each particular actual relation. Each metaphoric extension constitutes a new relation and this relation manifests bodily in the world as an image. The metaphoric image makes visible the mind of the just-post giant and the subject's physical relations. It provides the precept, not the concept. The image is not an abstraction or a concept; it is the visualized memory of an actual relation. The metaphor expresses the relation and the image holds the memory of that relation in a portable pictorial form. The relation of the metaphor to its point of origin is preserved and the relation of the subject to the material world is narrated by the terms of the metaphor. This narration and the preservation of the relation that constitutes the metaphor in the first place reveals the metaphor as a site of the production of meaning.

It is this network that makes the Vichian metaphor the means by which the real is made. Defining metonymy as a system where even "a connection once created becomes an object in its own right" (312), Jakobson unintentionally describes the Vichian metaphoric subject and the metaphoric system by which the

human real is constructed. Jakobson's citation of Boris Pasternak extends the Vichian nature of the description. Pasternak argues that in a metonymic structure "each detail can be replaced by another [. . .] Any one of them chosen at random will serve to bear witness to the transposed condition by which the whole of reality has been seized" (Pasternak qtd. by Jakobson 312).

The Vichian subject is itself *the* site of connection and the occurrence of a relationship. It is the originary metaphor whereby the subject *is* the transposed condition by which the whole of reality is seized. This is why the metaphor is a fable in brief (§404); it "bears witness to the transposed condition by which the whole of reality is seized" (Pasternak qtd. by Jakobson 312). Vico calls the fable a *verra narratio* (§401) and further argues that fable comes from *fabula* from which *favella* (speech) and *logos* (logic) derive. Thus our metaphors are sites of witness; they are maps that reveal to us the geographies of our lives, minds and relations. The metaphor works by virtue of its great metonymic contingent flexibility and this is necessary for the "the first poets had to give names to things from the most particular and the most sensible ideas" (§406). Each detail brought into the space of relation (human perception: the metaphor) bears witness to the condition of the human and is derived from a direct, sensible and passionate relation of the human with the matter of the world (§404). The metaphor embodies (extends) and constitutes the relation.

Through the metonymy of the Vichian metaphor, the initial connection created between the post-thunder giant and the material world *is* the first human. It is the space of relation that is the human that brings about absolute difference

that exists between objects. Before the human there were no relationships, no difference and no space within which objects could be held in abeyance, in relation, in meaning. McCaffery's notion of the metaphor as a spatio-cognitive assertion of resemblance is an extension of Vico's notion of poetic logic and its role in the configuration of the human. However, for Vico, the assertion of similarity initiated by the contiguous scene is spatio-perspective, not spatio-cognitive as McCaffery states. The metaphor is not a cognitive trope; it is a perceptive trope, an imaged spatial extension that is human's bodily relation with the world.

This tropical understanding of the human (human as metonymic metaphor) also extends Butler and Levinas' notion of the ecstatic subject into the metaphoric structure. McCaffery acknowledges the metaphor's movement towards similarity occurs because the two things are not the same (207). Similarity occurs because of difference. Without exception, Vico, Butler and Levinas base their understanding of the human as a subject of relation based in difference and its preservation, not in its annexation. McCaffery also suggests that it is also the indeterminacy of the figures that causes this impossible move towards substitution (207). This is also true for Vico who understands the metaphoric impulse as originating in the absolute unknowability of all things (§405).³⁶

³⁶ As noted previously, according to Vico, the human's inability to know the things of the world arises from the fact that humans are twice fallen from the grace of God. The first fall is the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and the second fall occurs when the three sons of Noah, Ham, Shem, Japheth leave the ark with their wives and begin the race of giants.

Butler's reading of the Levinasian subject also upholds this interpretation. Dispossessed by the terms of recognition conferred on the subject by the Other, the subject is "always other to [itself]" ("Giving an Account" 23). It is the indeterminacy of subject identity and of the Other that causes the subject to always be other to itself and to thus repeatedly extend itself outward in an upsurge of its exteriority seeking recognition, identity. Relations then cannot occur without the continued state of alterity between objects.

The metaphor serves to trace the human's continual encounter with difference and indeterminacy. The ecstatic throwing of the human into perpetual relation with the material world is its perpetual desire for identity. The desire for identity differs from Spinoza's *conatus* because it is not derived from an immanent source. The metaphoric subject exists only in relation. The metaphor expresses a perpetual leap into meaning that inevitably results in identity and loss. Just as in the relation of the subject with the Other, the subject and the world do not return to themselves after each encounter. They are both invariably transformed. The subject can only know itself through the metaphoric relation that takes place outside of the subject and yet fully constitutes it. The possibility of subject formation and meaning formation resides in a process that dislocates the identities whose conditions it supplies.

It is by this dislocation that the metaphor can continue to express possible future meanings and future collectivities of agreement. Utilized as a structure that constantly avows its audacious leaps, the unstable and social nature of its meaning, metaphor becomes a site of perpetual possibility. That is to say, the

discernment of the arbitrary nature or the implicit failure of metaphorical meaning is not the occasion for linguistic nihilism but is instead a generative loss of certainty within which new meaning and new communities can evolve. As Butler writes, sometimes it is precisely the sense of futurity opened up by the signifier as a site of rearticulations that is the discursive occasion for hope (*Bodies* 219). This loss of certainty also emphasizes the metaphoric and arbitrary nature of knowledge.

For a giant, mostly female, hero living inside a language that is disjunctive with experience, a movement toward a highly Vichian metaphoric language state might be a first step to re-word a world or to write the unwritten. A second step might be the evocation of a Vichian metaphoric instance. Such a moment might be the emergence of Debbie from the split sky, where experience is the experience of being constituted by language. The movement from Debbie's arrival to her final 'descent' is a textual movement through and a negation of traditional metaphoricities, a movement into and through Vichian metonymic metaphoricity. It begins with the event of clearing: "clear away the rubbish" (n.p.). After which, "we lunch nevertheless among reinvention" (n.p.). The poem is intentionally an excessively metaphorized text, and it is within this excessive environment that it becomes possible to re-metaphorize.

The process of metaphorical indulgence that occurs in *Debbie* brings metaphor to what Hannah Arendt calls its "original sense" ("Introduction" to Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* 13). I read Arendt's "original" in Vichian terms—that which is perceived by the senses. In Arendt's view, this sense is in

keeping with Benjamin's thought in that the abstract concept, *Vernunft* (reason), is traced back to the verb *vernehmen* (to perceive). According to Arendt, Benjamin was "not much interested in theories or 'ideas' which did not immediately assume the most precise shape imaginable" (13). Like the Vichian metaphor, Benjamin's metaphor is based on the notion of *metapherein*—which means to transfer (13). As readers, rhetors, we "pull thought across" (ll. 3-4). The metaphor depends, for its meaning, on the activity of perception and an immediate context (relation).

This context-driven space, one in which meaning is derived by virtue of sensually perceived relations, is metonymic. In *Writing Joyce*, Lorraine Weir refers to Vico's "new science" as one of metonymy, "set repeatedly within the larger allegorical exchange process of metaphor" (69). This metonymic "science" clears previous metaphoric space. It is this clearing that both configures and reconfigures the subject and it is the space through which the subject perceives and names another real. Vico writes that the first forest clearings by the post-giant humans were called *lucus* in the sense of an eye and that Vulcan set fire to the forests in order to observe in the open sky the direction from which Jove sent his bolts (NS §564). For Debbie the clearing (the *lucus*) is essential in order to clear away the rubbish and have another look: "this place overwhelms / me I require a clearing just for a / moment please cancel this earth [. . .] (ll. 464-466).

The metaphoric space of *Debbie* is derived by a relational and generative linguistic reality. Within this space, out of the textual excess, Debbie becomes a variety of subjects. This process is one in which each metaphor achieves significance by virtue of its immediate and metonymically derived proximities

and not solely from pre-determined contexts. This process also recognizes the communal nature of the metaphor and that the very *impossibility* of metaphoric transference supplies the collective *possibility* of its meaning. It is as if the epic, *Debbie*, through linguistic deconstruction and reconfiguration, becomes the vehicle which, pulled out of the conventional pattern of tenor and vehicle and placed in a metonymical arena, awaits its tenor. That is, as if the snake were to await the river and thereby foreground a local and exclusive (for the moment) present.

In *Debbie*, the local and exclusive present of Debbie is foregrounded by the Nurses of Perfidy. They are Debbie's vehicle. They descend from the split feminist sky trailing slogans in their wake (ll. 40-60). They are "swathed in a spume of surprised light / and streaked with the spent and fluted / layers of doubt which are revolution's spate" (ll. 42-45). The nurses are illuminated and streaked with the fluted layers of indeterminacy. Their indeterminacy is the unrelenting force of their revolution. These Nurses precede Debbie. That is they are the vehicle by which she emerges. Debbie is *nursed* into being by the Nurses of Perfidy:

HELLO NURSES OF WORDS FLATTENED AS IF
 pronominal and parthenogenic
 at the ordinary site of desire
 (ll. 61-63)

Yet the Nurses themselves are metaphors for the metaphoric process through which Debbie emerges. The first two lines explicate the nature of their

metaphoricity: “the NURSES OF WORDS” are flattened *as if* they are pronominal and consist of pronouns, and *as if* they are parthenogenic and capable of reproduction without fertilization. Flattened, the Nurses do not embody any system of hierarchy. They are, as such, horizontal. Pronominal, the Nurses occupy a generic non-specific space within which the subject exists without proper name or specificity. Parthenogenic, the Nurses are self-generating. Nurses can produce nurses without the usual requirements of penetration and patriarchy. These Nurses of Perfidy and words are the poet characters of egalitarian, generic, self-populating subjectivity.

For Vico, the poetic character, or fable, occupies the same position in poetic thought that the generic concept occupies in rational thought. In Kant’s view the generic concept is a transcendental apperception that cannot grasp an object. Deprived of an actual object, it can only think a pure position that is, in fact, itself. This “contentless representation” cannot be called a conception, but merely a consciousness that accompanies all conceptions (qtd. in Wall 156-157). Kant writes that “consciousness in itself is not so much a representation governing a particular object as a form of representation in general . . .” (157).

The flattened Nurses of Words are forms of representation in general; they are generic representative space, a pure position that is the subject itself. The act of metaphorizing involves the act of carrying across. The Nurses are described “as if” they are other than themselves. They are the very site of the potential of *as if*. According to Vico, Wall, Butler and Levinas, this is the nature of being itself. The subject is always not itself or, as Wall puts it, the subject is the “pure possibility

of relation itself" (156). The Nurses perform and illustrate this possibility: they are this "ordinary site of desire" (*Debbie* l. 63).

The subject is that ordinary space of desire. The Nurses of words, like the subject, are paratactic planes of space within which word bodies relate in a passionate avowal and disavowal of recognition. This plane is what the subject is and how it means, where it greets and makes (and remakes) the objects of the world. The subject space ignites meaning in a parthenogenic production, an immaculate (non-appropriative) linguistic conception (of perception) in which other words are acknowledged, even ecstatically approached, but never breached.

This spatio-perspective geography of the Nurses provides a relative and relational metonymic textual field, an alternative linguistic condition within which the particulate and contiguous natures of words and their subjects reiterate in relational proximity. Loosening the metaphor from the paralysis of adequation, the re-combination and the particulate re-accentuation of subjects and words that occur within this space allow for the possibility of at least the partial expression of that which has been excluded from the whole of the intelligible: *Debbie*, for example. Excessive metaphoric resistance to normalizing language trends opens language to the possibility of inscribing what has been proscribed from representability. As *Debbie* says, "if Luck's nameless girls love me / I'm happy" (ll. 122-123). Because the proscribed serves to define and preserve the articulated subject, any aspect of its inclusion will alter the existing social scenography. Thus, "[s]uccinct flowers thrust gauche grammars into the air" (ll. 37-38). "[I]mprobable clouds [group] and [regroup]" (ll. 39-40), and "DARK

ARTEMIS'S DIVISION UNPRACTISED / splits into the staccato glamour of
february" (ll. 77-79)

The metaphor is brought to the text's surface so that textual re-gatherings and contingencies can emerge. Debbie is a versatile metaphor and she is linked intrinsically/metonymically to her site of production, the collective human: the Nurses. The Nurses are the Other or "others folding clothes on slight / ly bent to place her folded garment her / companion turning round ribboned / thigh to watch her compel you to enter/ those rooms (ll. 88-92). The link demolishes the transfer of the particular relation to the absolute. The nurses compel, dream and display. They have the restrained charm of "insouciant / venus" (ll. 96-97). They appear to produce venuses: "(venus after venus stepped out)" (ll. 96-97). The Nurses are constitutive and yet they do not produce the VENUS: the classic totalizing Greek goddess of love. They produce and reproduce "venus" after "venus:" small, individual goddesses; small, generic goddesses. Some of these venuses are called "sweetheart" (l. 99). One of these goddesses will be Debbie. Disloyal to absolute power, and authority, these are Nurses of irony, of "light wrecks" and "frilled rust"

(l. 104). Not very much like the Goddess in Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, the Nurses emerge. Wrapped in a froth of surprised light, they are expressions of alterity burgeoning from a split sky. They are streaked with doubt. This doubt could be a means of exchange or exhausted or emitted—or all three, for it is fluted doubt. That is, it is doubt whistled or played on flutes or doubt visually displayed

in semi-cylindrical vertical grooves. It is variable doubt and its layers are revolution's spate, the force of a revolution's flow.

Doubt shifts us from the absolute; it might resist tyrannies of established meaning. Doubt might allow us to watch the revolution (any revolution) with irony and less sincerity. Exhausted doubt might let meaning emerge. Emitted doubt might publish the revolution or its end. Fluted doubt (carved grooves) might embellish the deceptive simplicity of the real and bare the artifice of all reality to itself. Musical doubt played on a flute becomes an instrument of revolution, of relation, of elation. Swathed in layers of doubt (complex and dynamic) the "Nurses of Perfidy gently / descend to earth" (ll. 45-46); and "They're risks to the pre / cision of pronouns" (ll. 46-47). Language whirls round them in a tornado of sense and its destruction:

Pixilate trails

spell slogans in their wake: Profligacy
 is Justified by Expedience drifts
 apart around swallows; Anodize the
 Mirage of Souls skims the trees; Harmony
 is an Effect of Disproportion
 spirals to riptide. As their gold shoes brush
 the grass to riptide. As their gold shoes brush
 the grass and the louche earth quivers in their
 honour (ll. 47-55)

The “[p]ixilate trails of slogans” that follow the Nurses as they drift to earth reveal their extreme visibility and textuality (l. 47). They are pixilated. The dots of ink from which the words are constructed are obvious. This lexical noting of the materiality of the Nurses’ words is embodied in the varied typesets of the words of the poem:

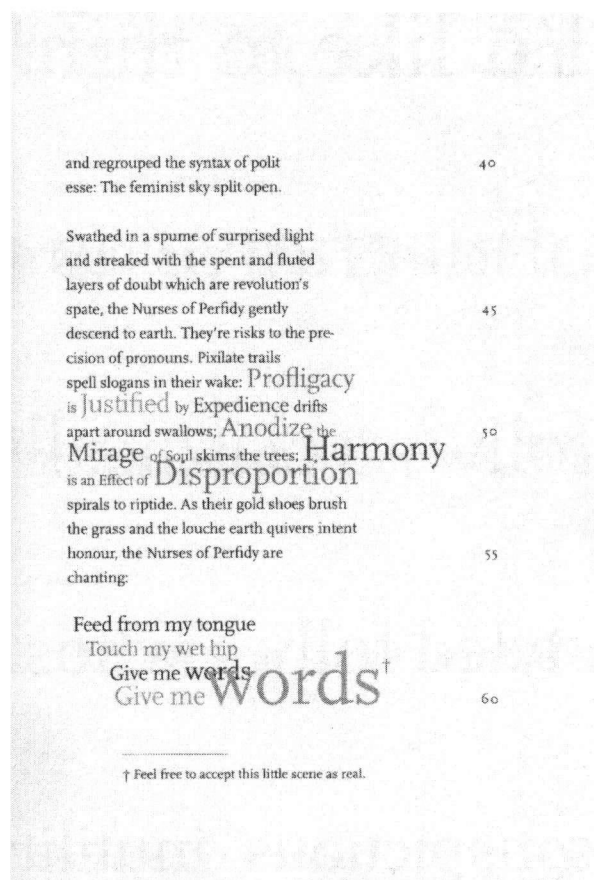


Fig.3 Debbie n.p.

“Profligacy” is offset from the rest of the sentence in large type. ‘Justified,’ too, but in lighter ink. ‘Expedience’ is smaller, but still larger than the rest of the text and darker than ‘profligacy’ or ‘justified.’ Each slogan is displayed with various sized words and various densities of ink. The literal text and the texts in the narrative that accompany the Nurses defy sincerity, continuity and endurance:

"Profligacy is Justified by Expedience" (ll.48-49). Reckless extravagance, indulging excessively in the pleasures of the flesh, is justified as a means to an end. This is their first slogan and it dismembers among the swallows. Yet its trace remains. Perhaps physical pleasure is a means by which we can "Anodize the Mirage of soul" (ll. 50-51): anaesthetize the proposed phantom of the soul—make painless the violence of the platonic lie. Indulge recklessly in the pleasures of the flesh. Make the image bright. May the pleasures of the visible be plain!

Pellucid

*air fucking gorgeousness garments of
perspex rubbings in this version*

Debbie: an epic

Debbie asks what would happen if we "were *not* denied the word *pellu / cid*" (my emphasis ll. 8-9) and the Other came to the reader not as a possession but as a companion? What if we could be next to ourselves in a state of besideness? Standing beside oneself in linguistic pellucidity would be to see oneself as a linguistic subject formed by the constitutive power of language. What if we could clearly experience the linguistic, metaphoric condition of subjectivation as a general relation, as a "being next to."³⁷

Linguistic clarity would not be attributed to style or expression and idea: words do not point to an external and identifiable real. Linguistic clarity would

³⁷ I borrow and extend the term "being next to" from Stanley Cavell's account of "being next to" in Thoreau's *Walden* (*Senses of Walden*. New York: Viking, 1972. 103-106). See also Charles Bernstein's "The Objects of Meaning: Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein" in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*. 165-183.

be such that language would be revealed to us in its layers and mechanisms of repetition and meaning. Our pellucidity would run us on to the void shores of language where words would illuminate incessantly in their vivid exteriority and empty totality. If “we were not denied the word *pellu / cid*,” we would come face to face with language and the ecstasy of our endlessly extending subjectivities. Meaning would be a transparent and accountable process, so that we might look at language unflinching, unembarrassed in the face of its murk and blur. The disquiet of language exposed thus could also reveal its workings in ways we could barely recognize, in ways we could hardly sustain. Language left to its own devices, configured as a dynamic site of meaning, points to itself, a constitutive and extending *here* (not an outside contained and actual *there*). Linguistic clarity bares the real as linguistic, contingent and allows for the full potency of the production of meaning to take place in full view.

The narrator of *Debbie* asks what if “I lost money pushed sea-green through the / prating muck” (ll. 10-11). What if systems of value were reconfigured and lost means of exchange emerged in new forms of significance and beauty, money emerging sea-green? Then the “thieves of legitimacy [would be our] swank and wobbling darlings” (ll. 11-12). Old ideas of truth erode when we are “[d]enizens of the labile couch” that is language (ll. 15-16). We are the inhabitants, the naturalized foreigners in this linguistic motility. Here, the intrinsic fragility of all meaning is revealed to us: “[a]ll that we have forgotten about narrative steals back into narrative and watches us with shining eyes” (“peroration” n.p.).

“[W]ould you feel welcome?” (l. 15). If language were pellucid, its own perspex, if language was ours, utterly transparent and accountable, as linguistic subjects we would be returned to ourselves, to that site from which all subjects (human and otherwise) emerge. For we are comprised of the crystal clear empty totality of words. But would you feel welcome? The text offers itself up as a site of clarity, of indeterminacy. Truth multiplies, identities melt, gender forms and turns: mutable and unpredicted. “[I]f / slightly shivering, you could slip into / Debbie’s lily-gold shirt (or thistled bodice) / friends, would you feel welcome?” (ll. 12-15). What if all meaning is contingent and not absolute? What if the transcendent is just another linguistic prop? Without the comfort of the familiar pretense of an absolute, Debbie’s “lily-gold shirt” could easily be an uncomfortable “thistled bodice” (l.14)—a “stiff shirt for your gift” (l. 17).

The invitation might be taken up. There are “cool fruits for [our] snack” (l. 18). But, there are “lesions” in all “meaning” (l. 21); and “blossoms [that] / fringe intent” (ll. 21-22). The very rupture of meaning is its bloom. It burgeons over the edge of intent, always fecund, always slightly out of control, somehow beautiful. The narrator seduces her readers through our configuration. Our hair is “bright” across our cheeks (l. 16-17). The narrator loves us; she attends to us with reverence. She has loved us even before we can remember being loved. She calls us “Friends” (l. 22), she has praised us with the “antediluvian flutes.”

The configured readers are not alone on these linguistic and flowering edges. They are ideal, “exquisite” (l. 6) and productive; they have been here a long time. Yet their “memories” are new and well organized, “new catalogues”

(ll. 22-23). Their memories bring “all names of ease” (l. 23). Delighted by her readers, the narrator “[b]egins at [the reader’s] leisure . . .” (l. 24). Here, on these pages, although the readers are deeply indeterminate; they are gorgeous and powerful with words. We are *absolutely* welcome. As a readers we are always welcome. The text, this poem, is our occasion, our “Party Scene.”

Here again, we are not denied the word pellucid. Behind the small darker print of the verses, a list is printed in larger, lighter texts. The list is entitled “Party Scene”. A colon and a list of party favours follows: “Foaming Gold Cups Lyres Fretted Roof of Gold Torches Screens Jewels Fifty Serving Maids A Hundred Young Pages Rare Napkins This Embroidered Couch.” This party—its Gold Cups, Gold Torches, Screens, Jewels, Rare Napkins, its excess and the linguistic pellucidity of its typography—is Debbie’s purpose. The contextual and decorative aspects of the text are “purely decorative” in that these “pure” decorations, these images are wherein the real is bound. No surface is too thin. All that glisters *is* gold. Surface is deep; it is where *we* are. Robertson’s attention to the text accentuates this. Excess and exaggeration accentuate chance relations. On each surface we observe the production of meaning, the image does not float phantasmagorically over the words. Literally see words as words and through words and thus directly encounter the site of the momentary human and its temporary real:

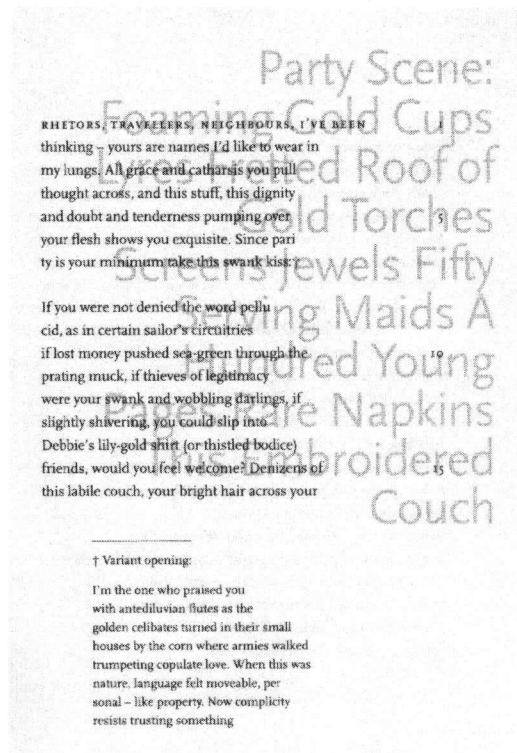


Fig. 4 Debbie n.p.

Rome and language, it is all style, all affectation, all artifice. Debbie is the debutante, the social, society figure. And the reader can think her own absorption into this place of absolute shiny fascination. This place, this page, offers a belonging, a belonging to nothing, an open and anonymous belonging to a constructed real. And as the narrator reminds the configured reader on the next page, they have been here all along: “Do you remember the day we wanted / to describe everything?” (ll. 25-26). Words are in us, of us, about us, by us. But this time it is going to be (as always) a little different. This time, the readers have been invited into the highly visible thick of the mutability of words, into an epic that is not quite like you would expect, into a syntax that falls steadily into disarray, into a field of images the readers both recognize and have never seen before. This is the middle ground, the medium where the art of topics can take place:

We saw a

euphoria of trees. This was the middle
 ground. Some women lounged on the clipped
 grass, shadows and intelligence moving
 lightly over their skin, compelled by
 the trenchant discussion of sovereignty. (ll. 26-30)

Shadows and intelligence move lightly over the skin of the lounging women. Dappled with shade and intelligence, women discuss unmitigated power. They lie under a “euphoria of trees” (26). In the background “Others . . . rolled their pale / trousers to wade in the intimate sea: / their crisp gasps matched the waves” (ll. 32-34). This scene is gorgeous with precision and surprise.

And the scene is ours. So we are told: “Do you remember the day we wanted / to describe everything?” (25-26). The memory is beautiful and utopic and its subjects are women: the preceding sentences refer directly to “[s]ome women” and then indirectly to “[o]thers” (ll. 28, 32). But, this memory is difficult. It would be logical to identify the subjects in the next sentence which follows as female, but the configured readers are challenged: “Freed scholars / strolled in pairs along gravel / paths . . .” (ll. 34-36). The highly visual nature of the scene evokes a history of visual representation. But, Western European history is devoid of both visual and textual depictions of large gatherings of women scholars.

There are examples of specific women scholars throughout history: Proba, Christine de Pisan, Artemisia Gentileschi, Aphra Behn to name only a very few. But over the centuries, have women ever been depicted as gathered groups of

scholars discussing religious difficulties, attending institutions of learning, tending to matters of government, discussing the movement of a revolution? No—not in history books, in art nor in literature. There are no visual representations of groups of women comparable to Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1495-1498), Raphael's *School of Athens* (1509-1510), Jacques Louis David's *Le Serment du Jeu de Paume* (1789), Johnathon Trumbull's *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence* (1794), Robert Harris' *Fathers of Confederation* (1883). In this section of the poem, the extension of female gender identification is syntactically logical, visually compelling but historically unfamiliar. The fact that we are reading an epic, that we have been identified as "RHETORS," places us in a gendered and poetic/literary time frame that stretches back at least two thousand years.

The extension of thinking women (scholars or rhetors) into their historic absence exploits the critical opening found in the normative historical narrative. The non-gender-specific scholars must be recognized by the readers. In this situation, the readers are the constitutive Others who bring with them the terms by which the subject will be subjectivated. The terms of recognition cause extreme disorientation. The readers are faced with the difficulty of accommodating the logic of the text; the logic of the syntax that suggests that the scholars are women.

Yet the readers have the terms by which history has granted them recognition. These terms require that the scholars be read as male. In "Giving an Account of Oneself," Butler describes the disorientation that conferring recognition on another creates when one is aware that those terms are not one's

own. In the process of identification, the women scholars are dispossessed by the very terms by which they receive recognition. As readers, as subjects, as rhetors, we are subjected to the norms we employ; we are the agency of their use and the instigators of their decay. Since disorientation of orientation is deployed in *Debbie*, the configured readers are asked to confer recognition on subjects by virtue of a horizon of the non-normative. This horizon opens in the disorientation that occurs in the original terms.

In order for the configured readers to identify the scholars as women they must actively resist and mutate the truths of history. Resisting history is disorienting and possibly dangerous. For thousands of years female scholars have been denied general access to public institutions of learning. What happens if you loosen the scholars from their previous non-existent context? In order to establish this space of scholars for women, the readers must extend the narrative of women by virtue of the order of the sentences on the page. The readers must be "rhetors" working in the art of topics and "travellers" (l. 1) who "pull thought across" (ll. 3-4), reconfiguring a previously unknown metaphysical space. The visual scene is stunning and the need to extend it is intense.

Yet there is doubt and unease. The women lounging on the clipped grass discuss sovereignty; the freed scholars read about the art of persuasive treachery: a revolution is at work: "[s]uccinct flowers thrust gauche / grammars in the air" (ll. 37-38). These awkward grammars necessitate rudeness, a breach in etiquette, treachery, revolution. If the constructed readers resist history's powerful connotations (we love the male scholars), they are tactless, even unintelligible as

they gore the custom that represents the collective, glorious thinking, writing (beautiful) human as male. To read the scholars as women is to wince and persevere. The beautiful scene bears its own treachery, its own breach of faith with history and its readers.

History will not be honoured and the configured readers are invited into the discomfort and pain of this dishonouring and its relation to the unexpected. Not only that, they have been granted agency that facilitates this discomfort. This readerly agency is both exhilarating and rude. Will we feel fully welcome in this text of lesions and blooming? Not likely. And yet this is our memory. We, too, wanted to describe everything—not just what we knew, but everything.

And this memory is “the middle / ground” (ll. 27-28). The metaphor of the middle occurs repeatedly in *Debbie*. In part, it situates Debbie as a figure of ambiguity. It also might situate Debbie as the middle term essential in systems of logic. Verene writes that an argument requires the “invention of the middle term of the syllogism” (*Vico's Science* 168). The middle term is the term common to the two premises of the syllogism that makes the connection between the subject and predicate of the conclusion possible. The middle term is “the traditional basis of any line of reasoning” (168). In formal logic, the syllogism is an argument comprised of three steps: a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion—all men are mortal; Greeks are men; so all Greeks are mortal. Often one premise is dropped in informal reasoning because the logic of the syllogism is considered self-evident. The dropped premise is called the enthymeme. Its suppression reveals the extent to which deductive reasoning is based on preconceived notions

of truth. As a reader you do not have to witness the entire argument: you know how the argument goes already. In the *New Sentence*, Silliman notes that suppression of a premise in syllogistic reasoning often occurs in literature so that meaning is derived in “above sentence integration” (77). That is, meaning ceases to be lodged in the immediate activities of the text itself, but is completed in the mind of the reader. An enthymeme suggests the potency of the other elements of the syllogism. Their truths are not up for discussion. Nor are the mechanics of their construction visible. However, as the above syllogism reveals, logic illustrates its own contingencies. The middle term of the argument is the term that is common to the two premises of a syllogism, but not mentioned in the conclusion. The middle term makes the connections possible. The topic of the syllogism must be based on an understanding that is generally accepted by a community. If the knowledge is not shared, nothing is illuminated.

As Vico points out, sharing knowledge is the production of knowledge and an argument must be invented before it can be critiqued (*Study Methods* 15). In the case of the quoted syllogism above, it is clear that the middle term tacitly expresses the collective understanding of the term Greeks. In this case the common term (contained by the middle term) Greeks implies a male community. In order for this syllogism to be true, all Greeks must be men. In *Debbie*, truth depends on collective inventions (middle terms), on the stories we have told ourselves (and been told). The middle terms facilitate the fables of a community. They are the middle grounds for communities of meaning. The study of the such a middle ground is the basis of Vico’s *New Science*. Vico is concerned with how

invention functions to produce truths and memories on which we base the human, the real.

In Wall's reading of radical passivity, the middle term might be seen shifting from mediated universal confirmed in syllogistic reasoning to a generic and constitutive site of passionate negation—a place where the subject undergoes itself. The “middle ground” in *Debbie*, is the imaged abstract syllogistic middle term shifted and seen as middle ground. Because the middle ground is also an expression used in painting, the relation becomes visual rather than logical. We can see it. The exposed third term turned to middle ground reveals the processes that make meaning. The metaphor of the middle ground extends into the image of the trees. The euphoric trees are not a place of mediation, they are a productive middle ground, a site of “infinite dispersion” (Wall 6). The trees are the visual image of language itself: pure exteriority; pure potential. They are, as all images, “an eternal return to a never-having been or an extreme youth” (6). Because they are a site of potential, the trees are euphoric. As a collection of trees, they image the communal aspect of the passionate rapport where the subject greets itself as image and is ecstatic and passive with regard to itself. The euphoric trees are the relational, collective, radical passive possibility of the subject, of any relation at all.

In a Levinasian sense, the middle ground (the euphoric trees) might be read as rejecting the mediated universal. The trees do not exist on a Spinozist or Heideggerian horizon of being. They are an event of being in relation. They are an expression, an invocation. As reading subjects our relation to the trees is non-

subsumptive. We do not comprehend them; we actively engage with their absolute alterity. We do not reduce them to the same. We are next to them. We too become a middle ground. And our reading relation to the trees is ethical, diminishing and constitutive. We return from it inextricably altered. As subjects we extend toward the trees, becoming what we have not been, losing what we once were. As a result, the cumulative effect of syllogistic reasoning crumbles.

We wanted to describe everything

We saw a euphoria of trees

Some women lounged on the clipped grass.

The middle ground in the poem does not hold together a process of reasoning, but rather scatters it. The “euphoria of trees” does not offer an accepted assumption through which truth may be discerned. It offers a radically passive image through which truth is poetically invented, reinvented. Truth is its infinite dispersal and the passionate ethical relation of the subject with the Other.

Reading *Debbie*, the middle term becomes a visible middle ground and releases meaning from the syllogistic bind. The middle term necessary to syllogistic reasoning is unhinged. All presuppositions are fraught with the contingency of particular relations and the potential of meaninglessness. The truncated part of the syllogism, the enthymeme, is made pellucid. It has to be. As readers we can't know what comes next. As readers we need all the terms before us. And even then, we cannot be sure. Existence is no longer presupposed, no longer known. Rather it is something sensed or lost. The text and its readers and Debbie and her girls are an activated, exposed, visible, metaphoric middle ground.

Meaning is consensual, collective and invented. To hide these trees and their collective joy denies the social praxis that is constitution of images. These images are the means by which we ground ourselves in a world. They are linguistic. Logic relies on stories and *Debbie* exposes the praxis of language—"grammars" thrust "gauche" into the air (ll. 38, 37). This linguistic, relational practice is the extension of Vico's thunder. It crashes the unthought into mind. It makes the real.

These thundering grammars are relations made by virtue of the text's relationship with itself: the proximity and relation of word to word, sentence to sentence; the relation of the readers with the narrator and the relation of the readers to themselves. Thus, the readers inhabit their readerly role as neighbour. As a result of this contextual, relational middle ground, in "the upper / left hand corner improbable clouds grouped" (ll. 38-39). The lexical interplay play between gauche and the upper left corner (where the "improbable clouds grouped") emphasizes that things are not correct, or regular. The consequences of this alterity, this gauche left-sided memory (that the readers cannot quite remember) are so vast they are atmospheric and linguistic. In this strange gathering of female scholars "the syntax of polit / esse" is "regrouped" (l. 40-41).

A structural un-rightness is at work. The clouds gather in the upper left-hand corner. The sky reads like a page and the word "polit / esse" literally splits in half, foreshadowing catastrophe. The rules of the language of courtesy have been structurally disconfigured. At this moment, the distracting, catastrophic and astonishing occurs: "[t]he feminist sky split open" (l. 41). The split sky is an

emblazoned image of Butler's critical opening. Another wound is made; more blossoms bear forth; that is, "[s]wathed in a spume of surprised light [...] the Nurses of Perfidy gently descend to earth" (ll.43-46). The Nurses are produced in a textual system of ecstatic recognition, disorientation, irreversibility, hilarity and pellucidity: they are funny and they far exceed and fully fail all expectations and previous textual conditions.

Butler writes that such a transformation forecloses on the past in an irreversible way ("Giving an Account" 23). The return is also impossible because there is no staying inside. The subject is compelled outside its self. The only way to recognize and be recognized is through a mediation that takes place outside, exterior to the subject in a convention or norm that the subject did not make: "I'd like to think of narrative as folly—a classically styled folly" (after Party Scene n.p.). The very possibility of the subject resides in a perspective that dislocates the first person perspective whose condition it supplies. The narrating *I* did not supply the classical narrative or its folly. Yet she is in it.³⁸ Thus the text and its projected readers embody and perform a subjectivity that is by its nature heteronomous not autonomous. The subject is not singular. She is always various and preceded by an Other.

The "conspicuous inutility of the narrative [. . .] decorate[s] and articulate[s] the idea of the present" (after Party Scene n.p.). In fact, it articulates

³⁸ In *Syncopeations: the Stress of Innovations in Contemporary American Poetry*, Jed Rasula wonders if the *I* in Debbie is an homage to Dorn's Gunslinger (222). I don't think so. There is no existential here.

and decorates the subject. In the context of *Debbie*, the reader and the narrator submit to each other as to a preceding Other that governs recognizability. It is through its relation to the Other (to the classically styled folly of the narrative) that the subject achieves recognition. As Levinas would have it, this relation is not bondage or slavery but a receiving of powers (*Entre Nous* 110-111).

The process of welcome that begins the epic accentuates and performs this relational, receiving process. In the welcome there is a constitutive loss, an ecstatic recognition of transformation that forecloses on the past in an irreversible way. The irreversibility constitutes a new: that which has been identified by what precedes it, but is incapable of a return. In this sense, this inability to return constitutes the subject's outside. There is no literal actual outside into which the ecstatic subject extends itself, except by virtue of this irreversibility—the result of an ecstatic encounter that entails both identity and loss. In the first line of the epic, the narrator identifies her readers in a surge of irreversibility (or exteriority). While the narrator provides the terms of recognition she is not unaffected by this relation. Neither narrator nor reader can resist being altered. The subject is nothing else but being-altered (Levinas, *Otherwise* 111).

In order to bring the reader to language, to the possibility of “being altered,” *Debbie* invites the configured reader into the poem as place of linguistic production, into language as the origin of the human. The text embodies this return to words—its dilemma and constitutive astonishments. The poem begins with a greeting that identifies the readerly community and then states the narrator's interest: “TRAVELLERS, RHETORS, NEIGHBOURS, I'VE BEEN /

thinking—yours are names I'd like to wear in/my lungs." (ll. 1-3). What awaits the configured reader within this site of production is not necessarily comfort. The welcome is not a pure offering. It is a relational engagement of intensity and reciprocity. The relation of the readers to narrator is an exchange of recognition: recognition that is potentially returned the moment it is given. This reciprocation is the fundamental exchange of the Vichian metaphor. It is the basis of Levinas' notion of the subject and it lies at the foundation of Wall's radical passivity.

In my reading of *Debbie*, I hold Levinas' theory of the nonsubsumptive relation of the human subject with the other in which alterity is preserved as an extension of the Vichian metaphor. Through these two notions of subject relatedness, I understand the figure Debbie to be the text's most central means through which textual subjects are configured. Debbie is also the means by which the mechanisms of what Butler calls subjectivation,³⁹ and meaning based on relations of alterity, are made visible.

Wall writes, "[b]eing-expropriated *is* human being" (156). In Latin, *ex* means out and *proprius* means one's own. To be expropriated is to be out of one's own. To be expropriated is to be with one's Other. Wall's notion of the subject and its intrinsic radical passivity informs this reading of Debbie. She is a subject-less subject and this is her power. The loss of "one's own" is not tragic; it is the ecstasy of the linguistic existent: it is the ecstatic release of being. The subject is constituted by not being itself. As Wall writes, the subject is empty of

³⁹ Subjectivation is Butler's term for the process of becoming a subject. See "Giving an Account of Oneself" 23.

determinacy and destiny, it is passionate rapport—the possibility of any relation at all. The subject is both figment and figmentitious. In *Debbie*, the image of Debbie is our ability to think the rapport that is the subject. The relation that exists between the Other and the subject constitutes the subject. The rapport between the subject and Other is the subject's possibility of existence. It is the generic possibility of existence and it is the possibility to think that which always comes. The figure Debbie in her various manifestations is our possibility in general. By reading the epic and regarding its central image, we enter into this rapport and its possibility: “[Debbie] IS THE LIGHT [we] STEP INTO” (l. 109).

A reciprocity of identifications and the constitutive rapport begins as the readers are named by the narrator in the first line of the poem: “rhetors, travellers, neighbours” (l.1). To read the epic is to be an active participant in language. As readers we are rhetoricians. In turn, the narrator is recognized by the configured readers in the following sentence: “I’ve been / thinking” (ll. 1-2). By assigning herself the personal pronoun, the narrator has recognition conferred on her by virtue of her readers encountering the pronoun *I*. As the narrator proffers recognition to the reading subjects, her identification of herself as a thinking being notes the position from which she recognizes.

The sense in the sentences, “I’ve been / thinking” (1-2) is three pronged. 1. The narrator has literally been thinking, 2. The narrator thinks, therefore she exists: *cogito ergo sum*. 3. The narrator has been thought by someone else. That is, she exists because she has been actively and previously thought. She has been preceded by a narrative always already in progress; she is identified by terms that

are not hers alone. As a result, what she offers as a moment of recognition is to some degree what has been offered her. The narrative necessarily predates the narrator and, like the configured readers, the narrator has also been constituted. Her subjectivity is not self-grounding; she has been thought/narrated and thus she exists.

In fact, the narrator has been defined by terms of recognition brought to her by the reader who brings terms which are also not of the reader's making. Both subjectivities are susceptible to terms not of their own design. The text embodies and performs processes of recognition that do not originate in a central control room. Although the relation between the subjects may be singular and intimately personal, the terms of identification are not. All subjects are dispossessed by the terms with which they obtain and confer recognition. As the narrator offers these terms, what Butler calls "the normative horizon," she establishes the subject and what Butler calls a "critical opening" (22). In this case, the immediately situated ambiguity supplies an obvious critical opening because it can be read in multiple ways. The ambiguous line foregrounds the substantial critical openings (even gouges) that are to come.

Rather than being afforded being by way of thinking (I think therefore I am), the reading and narrating subjects exist because they have been recognized within the terms of an already progressing narrative (I think, therefore I have been thought). The acts of recognition are constitutive and constituting. Addressing the readers as "RHETORS," the narrator points to the persuasive and constitutive role of the reader. To read is also to persuade, to have agency in the formulation of

meaning. To be a reader is also an invitation to be a “traveller,” to travel through time (the duration of words), through space (the space of the page) and the mind’s eye (through the reader’s interpretation of the images proposed by the text): “to pull / thought across” (l. 4). The identification of the readers as “neighbours” identifies the relation of reader to text—it is intimate, proximate, but it is not appropriative.

The narrator’s desire for her gorgeously and boldly identified readers (their names are in caps: RHETORS, NEIGHBOURS, TRAVELLERS) expresses the complexity of their relationship. The narrator would like to wear the names of her readers “in her lungs.” The narrator desires to have those names adorn the surfaces of her internal organs. She is expropriated in the sense that she longs for the relationship that takes place outside of her inner transcendent self and on the edges and folds of her material self. There is no essence, only accessorizing. While the narrator desires to inhale her readers, she does not wish to subsume them. The readers’ names will be worn like fashion accoutrements in the space where she breathes and from which she speaks.

The narrator’s wish is what Levinas calls the metaphysical desire for the absolute other (“Dialogue” 304). Metaphysical desire is Levinas’ interpretation of the production of being that understands being as “being for the Other” (304). The narrator identifies her relation with the readers in terms of this desire. She desires to *wear* the names of her readers in her lungs. This Other is not an other on which she can feed (like bread) and find satisfaction. It is a surface she may encounter, a texture she may be next to. But her desire is without satisfaction and it precisely

understands the remote exteriority of the Other (*Totality and Infinity* 34). The reader's alterity is preserved because the narrator's desire is a matter of adornment not complete subsumption.

And despite the narrator's desire for surface and her concern for fashion, the desired encounter is not superficial. Or rather, there is nothing more profound than this superficiality. This desire is the production of meaning, of being. The surfaces, the lungs, are intimate and fragile and the relation is ecstatic: "[a]ll grace and catharsis you pull / thought across, and this stuff, this dignity / and doubt and tenderness pumping over / your flesh shows you exquisite" (ll. 3-6). The narrator is compelled into this relation. She identifies and is identified; she desires with a metaphysical desire and thus she *is* exteriorized: her lungs (her most intimate interiors) are exposed as a site where she desires to encounter her readers.

The exteriors of both narrator and reader are laid bare. The "dignity / and doubt and tenderness [that pumps] over / [their] flesh" reveals them as "exquisite" (ll. 3-6). The revealed and desired exquisite Other does not fulfill desire; it deepens it. The relationship is contingent on separation and the nourishing of difference and hunger. The exposed surfaces, organs, flesh, names do not merge. As the narrator's exteriors are exposed and proposed as sites for linguistic fashioning, the reader's exteriors are also described. The fleshy linguistic production of their being is depicted. In an inverted image of the heart, words pump meaning over the "flesh" of the readers: dignity (they are recognized and granted being); doubt (they are utterly unknowable); tenderness (they are

“exquisite” and nurture the narrator with a hunger) (I. 6). Both narrator and reader are transformed in this encounter of surfaces. It cannot be otherwise.

The ecstatic process by which recognition takes place does not contain a moment of return. As narrator and readers extend themselves in ecstatic relations of exteriority, they undergo recognition and annihilation: neither can return to their previous conditions. The narrator identifies her readers again: they are “all grace and catharsis” (I. 3). The readers are grace because they are divine; being is attributed to them (they are named). They are catharsis, ecstatic release, because the process by which they are recognized (brought into being) is also one of absolute loss from which there is no return. By virtue of their next-to-ness the readers and narrator develop new subjectivities because they can no longer be what they were—the very terms of recognition require this. Catharsis in the Aristotelian sense is understood as a collective action. It is the useful by-product of the dramatic tragedy. Moved to great sorrow an audience can release its individual and repressed emotions in a collective, healing expression of grief. That the narrator finds her readers to be cathartic suggests that in them she is drawn into a collective and liberating expression of productive loss.

It is clear that reading rests in an intimate and ecstatic proximity to narration. Reading is not the same as narrating but it is an extension of its practice and vice versa: both activities are forms of ecstatic thinking that “pull / thought across” in a process of surging exteriority, recognition and loss (II. 4-5). Yet compelled to recognize the Other in terms that are necessarily not its own, the subject repeatedly finds itself outside itself and is thus always other to itself. And

this non-assimilative relation is transformative because it recognizes exteriority. The recognition of exteriority preserves difference and the preservation of difference sustains the perpetuation of desire. The subject must always hurl itself into relation, always seeking recognition from the metaphysical Other. This reading emulates the Vichian metaphor.

Subjects are subjectivated by the recognition conferred in these relations of proximity and they are dissolved. As a result, the “parity” that the narrator declares is “[our] minimum” is not one of sameness but an equality of reciprocity. We cannot return to what we have been, but what we become is simply a shift in being that recognition and meaning require. There is no transcendent progression toward an absolute or final identity; there is no sordid decline to utter meaninglessness—it is the movement of endless being. This ecstatic parity is our minimum and for that we are offered a “swank kiss” from the narrator (l. 6). The kiss is a relational gesture of desire. It is the swank (ostentatious, excessive) gesture of welcome to this ecstatic surge.

Levinas writes that the appropriative model of the subject is intrinsic to “the whole of Western history” and denies exteriority in its need for sameness (*Totality and Infinity* 46). It is through “[p]ossession [that the other] becomes the same by becoming mine” (46). Wall argues that for Levinas, the Western metaphysical subject has “been incorrectly conceptualized” (39); that Levinasian subjectivity is absolute passivity; it was never meant to come to presence and it is meant for the Other who will always precede it (39). This passivity to the Other is the process by which the subject comes into being and continually becomes other

than what it was. And as the narrator longs to wear the names of her readers in her lungs and the readers (“all grace and catharsis [. . .] pull thought across”) they are not the same as they were (ll. 3-4). Each word in the poem exchanged between the two (the text and reader) shifts each by each. And “the stuff” we become and become again shows us exquisite” (l. 6).

Image

For a genuine poet, metaphor is not a rhetorical figure but a vicarious image that he [sic] actually beholds in the place of a ‘concept.’

Friedrich Nietzsche *The Birth of Tragedy*

Insect murmur clots the peartree

Debbie: an epic

As a metaphor, Debbie emerges as an image of the post-giant humans. She is not a concept. She is an extension of Vico’s thunder—she steps out of a split sky. She is previously unexpressed *topos*: through the metaphoric relation, space has been rendered in her emergence. She is the visible presence of an absence: glorious female epic heroes. As she is re-membered, turned, she drifts from the imperial dictates. The configured reader is invited to “Toast!” Debbie and her entrance (footnote to l. 115). She drifts from shore and provides an alternate *topos* that bears meaning across from placelessness to place. She means within a momentary fixation of thought. Time fixed in space and space fixed in time: both signal the absence of unmediated presence. This is what the metaphor embodies.

Time is a vehicle of space; space is a vehicle of time. This metaphor is an image of the place derived from time and space.

When Debbie is a metaphor for the human, both Debbie and the human shift. When the *river snakes*, the river returns as snake and both river and snake are inexorably altered, shifted markedly in their imagined being. The narrator describes Debbie's mutable exteriority, the surface of the glorious image: "giddy swish so skin-like / as a dress / trailing theft / as a spill / Riddled, cloaks / this pink text . . ." (footnote l. 115 n.p.). There is the press of fashion, the texture of fabric. The surfaces of the image are its essentials. The "giddy swish" is "skin-like as a dress." Debbie is a visible surface of extreme femininity. She is also a "man writing the dry ardours" (l. 690). She is a quintessential cross-dresser, "trail[ing] theft / as a spill."

Debbie's drag is as much her feminine surface as her heroic. She transvests; she transgresses in her surfaces because she has no essential core by which she may determine the appropriate or the approved accessory. She is only image—which is everything: the edges on which all surfaces are turned, where all identity drifts. What was taken from the Fathers, from Virgil, from history, spills so that the reiteration of history is incomplete. She messes with it. She turns the dress askew. "Riddled" and "skin-like" the dress "cloaks" "this pink text" or a "riddled" "spill" "cloaks" "this pink text."

The images change, the memories alter at the level of reading. The "pink text" is altered, re-fashioned, re-membered by Debbie's style: "for her we could / be female" (footnote l. 115 n.p.). The untenable oppressive surfaces of the

previously expressed female have shifted. We might be possible now as we drift and spill. Insincerity loosens history's dictates. *Now*, we could be female. Debbie, the narrator, and the configured reader are the textual *we*. They have become the "thieves of legitimacy" (l. 11) in this riddled shift of pink and words.

And the image of Debbie is replaced by Debbie and Debbie again: "I Debbie with spurred ankles and purple knee-skin / stand free to forget / species anxiety" (ll. 125-127), the image is pellucid and striking. New surfaces emerge from the toffeed flanks. The ankles are spurred; the knees reveal the blue of veins beneath, or the purple of old scars. An interiority is exteriorized: being and its vulnerability are exposed. This is the image that is the metaphor that is the memory that is Debbie. And she stands "free to forget" (l. 126), "species anxiety" (l. 127). The subject of self-sufficiency is a deep species anxiety. What is the human transcendent existential 'I' within its context as animal, as collective, material organism? It is with great anxiety that the human 'I' views its dense and infinite sociability, its riddled surfaces of skin and hair. This anxiety is embodied in language, in writing. It is with unease that the writer engages language without a self. In the "neutralizing space of literature [she] loses the power to say 'I'" (Maurice Blanchot *The Space of Literature* 69). Language must always empty itself out, and "[t]o write, [is] to enter the Neuter" (Wall 116). Language is its own image: "the indispensable ornament" (*Debbie* l. 212).

To arrange language under fascination, to be drawn to its shiny surfaces is "to remain in contact with the absolute milieu . . ." (Blanchot 77). "[C]lear away the rubbish. the visible remains" (*Debbie* frontispiece): "blurred / motion of

slowed ships the brown funneling / smoke on lurid water: all these burn / in language so directly” (ll. 216-219). The visible burns in language—the sophist’s slick rhetorics of truth. If, as Robin Blaser writes, “within language . . . the world speaks to us with a voice that is not our own” (281), the voice is public and observable in language. This public place is a plane of surfaces, of communicativity. To “be in contact” with language is to be adrift on its imaged surfaces, to be momentarily wrapped in its fashions.

We mean only by the means of our bordering: “the ruddy earth ex/hale[s] so beautifully mimesis” (ll. 221-222). Our exteriorities, our ecstatic relations are “breasting slick uncertainty” (l. 227). “How great they look! restored to lightness” (l. 249). There is nothing ineffable about the image. Its empty totality envelops its existence in this surface or that. It renders materiality into pure linguistics. It is unlike the existential subject transcendence because the empty totality of the image unravels it and its subject of permanent identity. The empty totality of the image is the image of no representable figure that is un-named un-according to its image. As a “moot person in a moot place” (footnote to l. 237 n.p.), she is an arguable point, a matter of rhetoric in a milieu of rhetoric. She is surface. The “pianist’s carnal humming” is *not* ironical (ll. 255-256). There is no underlying meaning. There is no hidden truth to this art and the humming is carnal not cognitive. Debbie is the metaphor that constitutes the image that is the embodiment of desire, not an adequation of the thing with the idea.

Thus when speaking of the newly emerged Debbie, the narrator says, “Whence!” (footnote to l. 115). From where? From what place or source? Or to

the place from where? To go to the place from where, is to return, to remember, reiterate. And Debbie is “whence.” She is a return; she is memory. In her return the relations change, the memory shifts: “Good-bye Father” (l. 237). The returning subject says goodbye to the “Father” and “speaks.” “I Debbie speak/— as evening’s lily-drunk and belling and / roman as fields singed by white boots / rivers rocking and confluent [...]” (ll. 237-240). She is not like the human. She is an extension of the human. She is a vehicle of the tenor human. She is a giantess, a fable of her own origin. She exists in the shadow of the Father/Other: “[...] I extend / my arms into complicity and / lyric protocol” (ll. 276-277). She is a reiteration of previous subjectivities. She is complicit with the history that has conferred upon her specific terms of recognition by virtue of the fathers and their poetic protocol. Yet “[t]hrough various relations and pleasures [she has] moved / equidistant to the thoughts foredoomed by Father” (ll. 336-337). She has extended into new spaces.

There, moving equidistant to thoughts foredoomed, Debbie recalls herself in the collective: let’s “slip away, and keep ourselves for better pasts” (l. 338). The footnote to “better pasts” reads, “We are Flaubert.” There are other histories and other versions of being. There are other narratives that offer room for joy and the excesses of alterity. One such narrative is Vico’s. His tale extends the metaphor that is Debbie. The bodily mind’s eye of the post-giants reveals the mechanics of being. The bodily mind reveals and embodies the metaphoric process of memory whereby mental space or *topos* is formed. This *topos* is literally a place constituted in the mind that facilitates relational meaning—this is

Debbie. In the context of the poem, by virtue of her relationship with the narrator and the reader, Debbie constitutes a common sense. She is a *topos*. She “is made by feeling the world in concert with other human beings” (Verene 177). Feeling the world requires the retrieved fugitive sensation and a love of textures: “Lust’s / dumb muscle imitated velvet / jackets of uncertain manufacture” (ll. 386-388). It also requires visual acumen. The figure Debbie embodies this mind’s eye:

—for instance, this morning ontology puts “my hand” into “the body”—proving the vicarious truancy of the self (ll. 282-285)

These sensations, this “hand,” this “body,” these textures and the “vicarious truancy of the self” are linguistic—they are not based in an empirical real. They are the *meta* physical, the metaphor. The post-giant’s extension of thunder into language provides a metaphoric means that Debbie textually incarnates. Thunder and Debbie extend into language. They point to and obscure that of which they speak. The thunder notes and obscures the passing of lightning. Debbie notes and obscures previous incarnations of the human. She is complicit with history and its Fathers, yet she demonstrates that “the vicarious truancy of self / is vernacular. [...]” (ll. 284-285). That is, that the essential self is absent. We are the imagined linguistic: the “ultra clear manufacture” (ll. 291-292). We are the reiterated occasion of language. Debbie and Vico’s thunder are the textual metaphors of this metaphoric occasion. They take the place of the real in order to speak it. They affirm existence by taking its place.

Debbie is also the reiterated occasion. She is a great manufactured doll. There is something of the Futurists dream here, a love of machines, a love of what

is made. Only Debbie is different. She cancels the misogyny of the Futurist ideal. Debbie brings “the habit of danger,” “the aggressive gesture,” “the athletic step,” “a fresh beauty” to a glorious female doll/giant/goddess Debbie (Marinetti 233). In *Debbie* “the rosy cars / ascend” (ll. 437-438) to “the feminist sky” (l. 41), home to the Nurses of Perfidy (l. 45). War is not “glorified” as the “hygiene of the world” (Marinetti 233). Instead, war maims and “bores” (*Debbie* l. 681).

Although, in part Debbie works to demolish the libraries, to probe the cemetery that is history, she does so without hand grenade, without fire. She flips pages. She looks for the dead, abolished in the records of the patriarchy, in the texts of Virgil. She finds ambivalence and irony in the power and fragility of language: “[t]he transparency of the classical is a gorgeously useless ruse” (“peroration” n.p.). Out of the fragility, the ashes of language, between the stacked books that no longer hold “truth” she finds the possibility of another image: “[s]omewhere among those flowering transparencies a shepherdess is hidden” (“peroration” n.p.).

In Debbie’s dream the Nurses of Perfidy drive pink cars in the “wonderful autumn” (l. 436) and the leftover traces of Marinetti’s dream dissipate in the obsolescence of its own violent sincerity. Yet the Nurses are “not free” (l. 432)—no being is free. To exist is an ethics of relation and it is as “obscure / as Love” (ll. 433-434). We exist by virtue of desire, by virtue of terms of identification that precede us, narratives we can never fully know. We can never extricate ourselves from the Other. The imaged subject in *Debbie* is bound, relational and unfree. What are her options as a subject? “Perhaps she’s cataloguing the rhetorics of

plush ambivalence” (“peroration” n.p.). To catalogue the rhetorics of plush ambivalence is to see language through the excesses of language and to accommodate its unstable, iterative, ambivalent, immoderate ways. “Gentle Colleagues,” the narrator addresses her configured reader, “[i]magine yourselves as Debbie” (“peroration” n.p.). She recalls the object that is absent—in this case it is the vagrant varied human who affirms existence by taking its place. It is Debbie. Debbie is the vagrant human. She is female. She is also “both a man” (l. 567). She is “afraid” (l. 571). She is a “participant thespian” (l. 597). She asks “‘Human!’” How shall / it call out so that you will pity me?” (ll. 579-580). What might be said so that the human might be heard? Debbie is deep entanglement. She has made no wall. What does not constitutes the Human? How shall it call out so that she will be pitied?

Even when she is heroic: “[m]ighty amazing beauty / moves her and all the whirling majorettes / are her marvelous squadron” (ll. 112-114), her condition does not endure. She shifts—an exterior diachronic condition of a linguistic common. Debbie is an invention—pathetic and ethical. Ethical, precisely because she cannot endure. She must always be in relation to some thing, some one else. This relationship is metaphorical and her foundation is foundationlessness. She owes her being to this relation. Thus as a tenor—as a human (pathetic, ethical: particular and generic but not transcendent)—Debbie is continually re-seen, shifted, made familiar (placed in a relation to the vehicle) and placed within a larger context of meaning. She is the human is re-vised. Previous versions, even

fairly recent attempts have been problematic: "Good Evening Modernism," she says (l. 581).

The expressive *I*, the existential dream of agency, is over. The age of Modernism—that saw the birth of Futurism, the fascist dream of the human machine, the whole humanist human, the liberated human, the existential human—fades into the darkness of evening. The old dreams of the human require a harmony that necessitates the obliteration of too many potential subjectivities (women, dogs, trees). As Spinoza states, "harmony is commonly born of fear" (*Ethics* 157). The self-sufficiency of the existential subject requires violence and obliteration to manifest its being: "Father's real soul owes oblivion / to himself [...] (ll. 235-236). Debbie "[doesn't] sing to the border: Wars, captives; captives, / bores [and] the joke's torqued on the side of fortune / and dust [...]" (ll. 680-682). As a non-appropriative metaphor, Debbie is linguistically ethical. She embodies relation, not appropriation. She is not of the heroic, but neither is she its opposite. She is titled and leans to the side. She is not driven by raw will, but subject to the forces of luck, bliss and dust.

As a result of not subsuming those with whom she makes relations, Debbie is a sublime hostess, an insurgent flower arranger: "Hand us plenty of Lilies. Spread those / inane purple ones to mark / nepotism's unsated trap. And from those poppies work / braided wreaths for our tired girlfriends" (ll. 332-335). She invites being; she makes literal and figurative places for "the glorious girls" (242) and designs "sublime climates for them" (l. 244); she breathes "on those

wonderful soprano arms and for them / [she covets] common, lazy joy" (ll. 244-247).

Yet her susceptibility to dust makes her only a temporary local coherence. Both Debbie and Vico's thunder announce absence by presenting something in the place of that to which it refers. Each "*tears itself apart from the moment it begins to speak*" (Wall 65). This tearing apart is also part of Vico's cycle of history, the heroic childlike savage splendour of humanity moves forward into maturity (reason) and then to revolution and decline (NS §245): "her gory wound was foaming and her / flesh ignored posterity. at that moment, / to see her fallen was to be seduced by the / futile glamour of pomp. she was like a / ruin that asserts an elizabethan despair" (following "My Frieze" n.p.). Just as thunder dissipates in a hurling outward of heated air, Debbie is also a site of dissolution. Each image forms, decays and is replaced by another.

In the space of the example that is Debbie, she is all relations, all qualities. She is an image because she is not an ideal or an enduring symbol. She belongs among and borders on all the various differences and idiosyncrasies that render her legible. A thousand idiosyncrasies describe the empty world within which Debbie moves—this is her epic:

ad infinitum into the grass!

of how the quickened sea was

reddening roseate saffron-forced

rapid flecked with varied plume undulate

become all fine spun haunted growling

shaded to the tepid river. Multa!

Multa!

(ll. 670-675 original emphasis).

Debbie resists the very thing that makes her recognizable—propriety: “the ordinary movements of words nurse my limits” (l. 258). Debbie is nursed and “[i]terative” (l.306), constituted in the public mouth of words and by the Nurses of Perfidy, “at the ordinary site of desire” (l.63). The community from which she is constituted and which she constitutes is utterly common: “I have made no wall. “Human!” (ll. 579-580) Each image of Debbie occupies a new human or non-human space. It is a place that Agamben describes as community and that is, as Wall writes, already “radically in question” as it opens onto another space “where each being is always already substituted for another being who is in an always other place” (127).

gemmed engine, flood of eloquence, a pearl's
 pearl for minion; cedar lantern, mirror, companion
 of material's sweet hour and spring (I mean
 your curiosity's [sic] work)—you presume to write quick slung
 bells beside my blabbering
 as if stern day lit all the disciplines
 (ll. 356-361).

Each object opens into the next—“gemmed engine, flood of eloquence, a pearl's / pearl for minion” (ll. 356-357). The configured reader can “presume to write / quick slung bells beside [Debbie's] blabbering” (ll. 359-360). Or she can take

ownership, interpret each statement as if dry lexical clarity is possible; as if textual exegesis is for real; as if a certain and absolute actual could be seen through words. She can search for adequation, substitution. Or she can be a “companion / of material’s sweet hour and spring” (ll. 357-358). She can be next to the materials of the text, its images, its words.

To read as a companion of material’s sweet hour, the reading subject might experience her own exteriority. She might greet the sweet absolute anonymity of language and meet its shiny surfaces. To be a companion of “material’s sweet hour” could “spring” the subject into ecstatic relation that opens to yet more new “parties / of space and loss” (*Debbie* ll. 381-382). In this possible relation, in “material’s sweet hour” the lost synchronicity of immediate presence (such as the giants lived) reinstates itself as a state of intermittent accompaniment: the metaphoric subject compelled endlessly into the material world in search of recognition.

The Spectacle

In *The Coming Community*, Agamben discusses Guy Debord’s argument that capitalism has transformed the formative social relations among people into a mediated state of being within which we are mediated by images (12). Agamben claims, and I agree, Debord’s diagnosis is remarkable in that he describes in 1967 what we experience in its extreme form today: the “transformation of politics and of all social life into spectacular phantasmagoria” (79). More than thirty years after *The Society of the Spectacle* was written, Agamben argues that the spectacle remains “the alienation of human sociality [from] itself” (79). It is, as Debord

writes, “the very heart of society’s real unreality” (13). The spectacle Debord introduces and Agamben discusses is the result of the dialectical transfer that Negri criticizes in the social systems of Hobbes and Rousseau (*Savage Anomaly* 113). The dialectical transfer from the individual to the universal and the absolute causes the spectacle and its mystification and obfuscation of the connection of the human to the real.⁴⁰ It presupposes and makes possible the transfer of individual power to absolute power without the interruptive capacity of the Spinozist system. Alienated from its fundamental and practical *conatus* the human is separated from itself. And, as Agamben points out, when humans are alienated as such the mercantile economy attains absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over all social life (79). Having falsified production, the spectacle manipulates collective perception and controls social memory and communication. Everything can be called into question except the spectacle, which says nothing except, “Everything that appears is good, whatever is good will appear” (Debord 15). However, Agamben finds that the spectacle retains something: “a positive possibility that can be used against it” (80). That is, the spectacle reveals the world to us as foundationless: “it reveals the nothingness of all things” (82). This revelation according to Agamben makes it possible for humans to experience “their own linguistic being—not this or that content of language, but language *itself* [. . .] the very fact that language speaks” (83).

For Vico, the metaphor is human linguistic being. All that brings humans together—their language, culture, laws, religion, science—is the result of the

⁴⁰ Negri argues that Spinoza’s metaphysics demolishes this dialectic.

image: “o little world approximate[d]” (*Debbie* l. 656). The image does not divorce us from life; it is life. Debbie is the imaged human in the epic. Yet the moment she emerges, Debbie is ambiguous. She is a particular and majestic: Her flanks roll with “greatness and sustenance / in their sockets” (ll.110-111). Yet she is also spectacle. Bought and sold, also coded: the name of a popular porn star in the seventies,⁴¹ a popular name of white upper middle-class North American girls born in the early sixties. The name evokes a certain phantom female. Debbie spans a range of connotations from cheerleader to porn star. Debbie’s army, her “marvelous squadron” consists of whirling majorettes (little white boots, batons, twirling skirts). This was a popular activity for young girls in the sixties and early seventies. Debbie’s flanks are the smooth brown thighs of the Barbie doll. She is a massive Barbie, a cheerleader, sex goddess—ridiculous, pornographic, glorious and damaged. She drinks the “fetid silt of mythic rivers” (following “My Frieze” n.p.). She is “Virgil’s bastard daughter” (l. 705). She is “drowned in [this] blood ambiguous” (l. 713).

In *Debbie* and in Vico’s linguistic theory of humanity, it is unavoidable and necessary that the image constitutes the human real. The Vichian image embodies this constitution, its relations and the common nothing out of which the image is born and into which it fades. There is no real world, no human without the image. The image is constitutive of reality and without it, human communal life is not possible; without it, the human is not conceivable. Yet the spectacle is

⁴¹ Debbie is the leading role in the famous porn movie *Debbie Does Dallas* (starring Bambi Woods, 1978).

also unavoidable in human life. However, there is an important difference between the two. The image is constituted by and constitutes local and specific configurations of human relations; it is fluid, responsive and based in change. The spectacle is cumbersome. It preserves and inflates specific aspects of a constituted real. While the image, the metaphor is a fable (a true tale of a common real) the spectacle reflects the interests of systems of institutionalized control.

The spectacle suspends iteration and attempts to conceal the labours of its production so as to protect itself from alteration. While the spectacle is embedded in State time, in chronology, the image emerges as diachronic and synchronic. Its durations and events are not tied to the logics and limits of chronology. In addition, while both the image and the spectacle are based in absence, in nothing, the spectacle is based on the absence of a contingent real and its exteriors conceal the apparatus of the State. The image is based on the absence of consistencies, on the ambivalence of identity, on the space that is the human subject in the world. The image emerges, extends from specific contingencies that occur through particular relations.

This understanding of the image is crucial to *Debbie*. In the epic, the image is constitutive of a textual reality that develops through the exact relations of reader and text and through the lesions present in the spectacle of Rome. The character Debbie is not more natural than Rome. She emerges holding artifice “above nature” (l. 738). It is through the artifice of language that Debbie can configure and reconfigure. That is, Debbie is not born. Rather, she extends and submits. And she arrives in a collective, with the nurses, the majorettes and febrile

bastard daughters. In her collective form she interrupts the amnesic spectacle. The image Debbie is a project of recognition. She is the vehicle by which the absent tenor, the human, is shifted, turned and endlessly reiterated in such a way that it becomes familiar in a radically altered context.

Debbie is female and male. She desires to have other non-human forms of being included in her sense of her body. She wants to have ownership of the state's "daft" spectacle: "If my sense of my body / can include both dog and owning state's daft / glamour, I'll graft soft logics to myself / and shall send for either" (ll. 513-516). Debbie's femaleness, her dual-gendered-ness, her desire to be a dog and to familiarize the spectacle places the human in an another arrangement, context. As a human, Debbie embodies pathos as opposed to ethos. She is "evanescent; transitory and idiosyncratic," not universal ("Pathos" def. 2). This quality makes Debbie a difficult spectacle. In *Debbie*, the spectacle creates a figure of the world that is separated, organized and imposed by the capitalist state, by the media of the state. It consists of forms in which State and economy are intertwined: "[...] THIS COIN / WHICH THE DEBTOR ACCEPTS / AS EXISTENCE/HAS BEEN STRUCK/IN THE LIKENESS OF / ONE'S SOUL / BY THE INDESTRUCTIBLE / IMPERIUM" (following "As if The World's a Punctured Chit" n.p.). In this economy, representation itself is an aspect of capital.

The recognition of human subjects as humans is determined by certain rules of representation—what denotes the real—that are determined by the Imperium—that deny the production of meaning. This system of denial is

“INDESTRUCTIBLE.” The transfer of power is so complete that the disruptive capacity of the individual is diminished. However, the metonymic Vichian metaphor (based in the sensible connections of actual linguistic relations) that constitutes the images in *Debbie* is the initial capacity of the human mind. The excess of particulate image in *Debbie* interrupts the Imperium’s notion of sense with other and alternate stories, fables, metaphors. She also bears the thick mark, the “gory wound” of a history as it has imaged, damaged the human, the female. Yet she is construed of fragments, not a seamless totality of either absence or presence. Imaged, figmented through the collective memory and resulting agency of configured reader and text, Debbie withstands the spectacle—she bears its power and its bruise.

The Vichian image does not constitute the spectacle because it does not mediate social relationships. It constitutes them. In *Debbie*, the Vichian metaphor reveals the core of the spectacle as hollow and it celebrates it as a rhetorical space, as the possibility of relation now open to the possibilities of relations. In the hollow, word surfaces and word images are encountered; absolutes are not found. Specific, lush and idiosyncratic sites of relation persist: “I will / comb the pale hair of boys with muttering / hands wanting only the satiate fact / of that silk [...]” (ll. 144-147). The satiate fact of silk is produced in the necessary and accommodating hollow of the metaphor, not in the gaping abyss of the mediatized spectacle. Silk is constituted into another story, another metaphor. As readers, we have to work at this one. The image requires readerly attention. Silk is “a satiate fact” (l. 146). One possible reading suggests that the fact of silk satiates, satisfies,

gratifies and possibly even saturates the senses. The tenor is the 'fact' and the vehicle is the activity of satiate. Silk is a fact that satiates the senses. Our reading relation to silk here is not descriptive in the sense that we don't know if silk is red or brown or soft and smooth or ridged and rough. We know only that its factualness satiates. We know what silk does. We understand what Debbie's physical relationship to the silk is: a relationship of satiation. The literal aspects of the silk are left open to us, in this expression of the activity of silk and the activity of its relation. The image of silk is a metaphor based on the activity of a relation (it is metonymic). Silk is not similar to the satiate fact; it is the satiate fact. As Debbie says,

all soft

things roar: each cruddy beast, each bloated hour
 each hunger monstrous with tongues, the baroque
 yawn of the avant garde, its purloined game
 of solitaire and wielded branch pastoral (ll. 657-660).

All things are engaged in an activity of being: roaring, bloating, hungering, yawning, purloining, gaming, wielding. Yet unlike Spinoza and like Vico, the world is approximate, not immanent: "o little world approximate" (l. 656). The little world is close to its self but not exactly. It is approximated and always not quite itself. In Vico and in Debbie, immediate presence is elusive. That is the nature of the world and its images: they are constitutive but not containable. They do not represent a real; they configure a real. Debbie's reader is an imaged companion, not a Spinozist immanent force or a capitalistic spectacularizing

carnivore. The text is not for consumption and language is returned to itself. But what greets us there is emptiness: Dedicate the / grave to Nothing! (l.657). It is an important emptiness, a Vichian metaphoric possibility. Here, thought does not precisely exist in a positive form, as it does in the Spinozist metaphysics. Here, thought and subjectivity are spaces formed in constitutive relations. Unlike *Low Fancy*, as we shall see, the metaphysics of *Debbie* does not point to a force field of immanence. Rather it points to a passive, but potentially productive process of loss and desire. *Debbie* exists in a relational reciprocity. The subject is a metaphoric site of relation through which the world is constituted in the pause, in the space and surfaces that are the human: MY HUMAN FACE A BLAZING SHIELD / is all that I could give (ll. 371-372). The human face is a blazing shield, a surface of profound and motile depth. As Levinas writes, “[the face] is a relation with a depth rather than with a horizon” (*Entre-Nous* 10). For Levinas, being does not occur on a horizon of being; it exists in the face of the Other. It is the ethical demand made of us by the Other. Levinas writes that “the relationship to the face [is] an event of collectivity—speech—is a relationship to a being itself, as a pure being” (10). The face signifies, as Butler suggests, “the vocalization of agony . . . by which we are awakened to the precariousness of the Other’s life . . .” (*Precairous Life* 139). This subject is not driven by an essential persistent drive to exist. It does not contain an essential right to exist. In the Vichian metaphor, the subject is Levinasian: it occurs by virtue of its impressionability, its relations. It owes its very existence to the presence of its preceding Other. The narrator’s “human face” is also Vichian clearing, a shield, a round space of light. It is not a

Spinozist site of horizon. It is an exteriority with depth. Existence (and its flame) occurs in the space between. This face is a metonymic site of relation that clears a metaphoric space. Into this clearing, the flames lick. Into this space, the subject is perceived, illuminated by an Other. It is all that it can give. The relation configured as a result of the narrator's ecstatic, flame-like leap into the dark of the Other is the possibility of Debbie. In this metaphor Debbie's face is what Vico refers to as a *lucus*, an eye through which she will extend the world (*NS* §564). It is a clearing like the one that Vulcan made when he set fire to the forests in order to observe in the open sky and watch Jove's lightning (*NS* §564).

According to Vico's thinking, as the human capacity to be abstract increases, the quality of life lessens. The evolution of abstraction leads to the final stages of humankind: madness and dissolution (*NS* §241). The loneliness of this insanity is our present age. The human is torn from itself by virtue of excessive abstraction and reflexivity. It is the spectacle of logic and rationality that in its relentless and dogged path takes the human from its actual potent poetic/linguistic nature. The image abstracted too far from the sensed, the necessary and common life becomes the spectacle. The spectacle made pellucid reveals its nothingness. Its nothingness revealed exposes language as language and "the fragility of being-in-relation" (*The Coming Community* 154). Vico's emphasis on sensation is taken up in *Debbie* as way of accessing this fragility of being-in-relation. As Wall writes and *Debbie* manifests, the "[s]ensation [...] is the exteriority of our most passionate interiority" (120). Through a textual event of extreme excess, *Debbie* "[d]edicate[s] the grave to Nothing" (ll. 661-662). Through the lush images of

Debbie the empty skull of the spectacle is inverted. The alienating spectacle of the “febrile Fathers of liberty’s bastard / antiquities” (ll. 700-701) becomes the glorious, alienating, yet utterly localized image.

The imaged subject is too idiosyncratic to be appropriated by the State or the reader: “Good-bye! good-by! sea-sick isis-luna sea-cave moon-light we’re / trench-digging trigger-happy bull-dog walkers” (ll. 506-507). The image resists ownership and specularization because of the speed with which it mutates, the complexity of its textured surfaces and the sheer exuberance of its lexical excess. This subject-configuration is “quick-sand” and it “take[s] the victorious element” (l. 508). This process extends Henri Bergson’s proposition of *le bon sens*, whereby the subject through thinking “at each moment wins itself back to itself” (88).

For Vico this winning back is our ability to create *topos*, metaphors which continually constitute new spaces that are the linguistic embodiment and extension of specific human conditions—*sensus communis*. The metaphorically constituted image is not the spectacle but the embodiment and replenishing of human collective activity. In *Debbie*, our return to this place of making places—the art of *topos*—returns us to the imaginary subject. The text opens the imaginary subject to itself, to its lack of subjective unity. The transparent subject is the perceived as the imaginary construction of a *sensus communis*. It is no one, but a gathered imaginary, “clothed” in being (Lacoue-Labarthe 259). It could slip into Debbie’s lily-gold shirt (or “thistled bodice” (l.14)). You could slip into Debbie’s shirt. The configured reader becomes tenor and vehicle to the lily-gold shirt, to

Debbie. This is our “vital dwelling in language” (Agamben 83). The imaged subject is infinitely varied in this dwelling.

As each imaged subject opens to another and another it is “passive with regard to *itself*” (Wall 1). Each imaged subject submits to itself in the metaphoric system of tenor and vehicle as though it were an exterior power. It is always outside itself and its own other (1). The image is fundamentally or essentially passive; it occupies empty space. Quite simply, it “is nothing” (Wall 14). For Vico, this nothing is the foundation of the human—the mind thinking itself (the giant mind opened to itself in thunder), not nihilism. In Robertson’s epic, the space that is the image is the possibility of the linguistic configuration of another subject, another common wherein we might win ourselves back to ourselves, where the previously mutilated subject may replenish itself through language.

Yet in its final page, the epic parodies the text of a fashion magazine:

THIS SPRING

NEW

VERNACULAR

HEARTS (*Debbie* last page)

Another new product is promised: vernacular hearts. The bold text announces that even in our biology, we are linguistic and sold. While the principles of readerly participation and the materiality of language might disrupt the embedded commodification of language and of the reading subject, *Debbie* does not offer its readers absolute freedoms. The configured reader is seduced and subjective identification is an aspect of that seduction. A swank kiss has been offered to *our*

exquisite flesh (ll. 6-7). The text makes an entry into language that brings us back to language, to what it never was. Language was never ours in the sense that it brought us unmediated experience—it never brought us unmediated presence. Experience is metaphorically organized (thus, mediated, lost) from the moment the giants hear thunder and feel fear. Prior to the metaphoric processes of mediation there was no humanity. Humanity itself is the loss of presence, of immediacy. Humanity is linguistic, textual. Rome and Rome's Virgil predate Debbie. But for the narrator of the epic there is no pre-Rome, no pre-Virgil nor do Virgil and Rome exist in a distant past. Rome and Virgil are always already—patriarchal literary, historical, literal authorities.

Within the context of *Debbie*, these authorities wreak representational oppressive havoc on the bastard daughters of Virgil. Their representational havoc, in fact, constitutes the bastard daughters of Virgil. Debbie emerges inappropriate, illegal, out of an institution of an authority that has created her by absenting her. Debbie is the double-bind, monstrous offspring of Virgil: she is his, she is not his. Yet due to the infidelities, the deep ambivalence of her own imaged identities, Debbie reveals the nothing that lies behind Virgil's spectacle of authority. This nothing is the absence that lies behind the spectacle that is Rome: "the phantom permanency of a context" ("argument" n.p.).

Rome is spectacle. Rome is that which, for Debbie, embodies the power and chronology of the State. Rome is that which has separated humans from their collective constitution of themselves. But, as Agamben points out, the spectacular is also a site of opportunity (82). Our reality has been transformed into the

spectacle, glorious and alienating. The spectacle has totalized itself and separated human life from its common. Because of this separation we can now inhabit the hidden that has been previously withheld from us and that hidden is the nothing that lies behind both the image and the spectacle. And in the nothing is the active collective space of the human. Debbie finds this opportunity in the spectacle of Rome. She cites the poet Frank O'Hara: "The Romans were honest, / they thought it was all girls, / grapes and snow" ("episode" n.p.). "The Romans" knew the nothing that lay behind the spectacle they framed. They knew and they didn't care.

The interpretation of consciousness on the part of the Romans is Debbie's point of origin. Debbie begins where the artifice no longer hides behind the banner of the real. The suspension of disbelief is no longer necessary. It is all girls, grapes and snow.⁴² Rome is a vast, powerful, oppressive and insincere illusion: the age of spectacle is not a phenomenon of the twentieth or twenty-first century, it has always been. Power has always been interested in the spectacle because it needs it, from the pyramids to Disney Land, empires uphold and maintain spectacular phantasmic displays of potency. Agamben writes, "the spectacle is capital to such a degree that it becomes an image" (79). He argues that the spectacle occurs "when the real world is transformed into an image and images become real . . ." (79). Debbie is our opportunity for us to see what we

⁴² Where do you find snow in Rome? In ancient Rome, slaves gathered the snow from the distant mountains to make ice cream for the Imperial banquets.

have always been, pure image, linguistic, invented imaginings. She asks: "What is that gleam? / It is radiating from a phoneme (ll. 675-676).

In the transparent spectacle of the classical epic, Debbie finds a gorgeously useless ruse, an extravagant absence. Seeing this absence as opportunity, as a site of potential (as Agamben suggests) Debbie moves in. This space is the experience of language itself, a place of memory, a place of plush ambivalence, of knowing and not knowing. In that place, against "the dark and the privacies" of the spectacle with its violation of and concealment of production (l. 601), is communicativity—a fecund nothing where "Debbie learns the word loveliest" ("peroration" n.p.).

In the spectacle, memory is no longer necessary for meaning to occur; neither is social praxis. In *Debbie*, the social praxis is reading and re-membering, and *Debbie* is pellucid to its own events. *Debbie* reveals the energy of its textual praxis and its imaged consequences. Images derive and drive the social praxis of reading. The metaphor images and embodies the entanglement of Other and subject—the labour of existence. The spectacle wipes out social practice. With regards to the production of the spectacle, only the State is required. The State degrades space. It is atropic—against *topos*. The destruction of space negates the social praxis, the labour of relations that constitute the common, the collective human.

The figure Debbie (a spectacle re-visited) reinstates this space: "Good-bye Father. I Debbie speak" (l. 237) She consists of and notes the intricacies of linguistic, human relations (between reader and text) their movements— obscure

and a moot: a “moot person in a moot place” (footnote to l. 237). Like the physical world, the *topos* that is Debbie is discovered, not subject, not object, yet to be discovered, knowable yet intrinsically unknowable, impossible, yet possible, imaged here and yet always shifting and nowhere. The directly lived life that Agamben places somewhere in an unthinkable past is a life unimagined, without image. Life lived directly is a physiological (a giant life) not psychological life. The world begins when the chaos of materiality is mediated by excess that is the experience of nothing that destroys itself as an experience—from this place the image emerges.

In Vico’s “true” fable, humanity is a linguistic moment. The excess of thunder made mind. Debbie is an image from the “indifferent deep” (Blanchot 254). She emerges out of the common, out of the nothing that is the place of pure communicativity. The epic begins with the visual, an image (of sorts): “Insect murmur clots the peartree: emblem / so castigates rome’s green ruin. We lunch / nevertheless among reinvention” (n.p.). The image and its nothing and its linguistic constitutive social praxis tear holes in the libraries of Virgil and in the spectacle of Rome. As readers of the epic we lunch there, we reinvent, “among rome’s green ruin”. For the ruin is green and Debbie “feeds us the future” (“peroration” n.p.) and it spills from our capsized mouths (n.p.).

In Agamben’s critique of the spectacle in *The Coming Community*, he conflates the image and the spectacle. Although the distinction that I am making is not Agamben’s concern, it is important for the purposes of this discussion—his conflation is noteworthy. If the conflation of the image with the spectacle allows

us to see the absence of an absolute behind the spectacle *and* the image, it allows us to face the origin of the human. This origin is not godhead, it is linguistic, metaphoric. In *Debbie* the image is the spectacle dismembered, set adrift, and returned to image. Unlike the spectacle, the Vichian image that the epic assembles is not predacious. It is not totalized and separated from the specific relations of the text and its formal considerations and proximities. The image is at the centre of the poem's performance of sense. That is not to suggest that the image has an intrinsic essence or transcendental potential. Rather, the image is the spectacle inverted, remembered: it is "a common and exposed singularity" of exteriority that communicates itself by realizing its sheer appearance" (Wall 154). When the spectacle is dismembered through the activation of a collective memory, "the visible remains" (frontispiece n.p.) and the image remains as the percept and possibility of human relations. Blanchot asks, what is the image (79)? And answers: the image is "when there is nothing, the image finds in this nothing its necessary condition, [and] there it disappears" (79).

Sensus Communis

Vico's *il senso commune*, is a common sense that is (§144), as Gadamer defines it, the sense that constitutes the common (21). This common sense contains the common places of the human derived from the common relations of the people. There is no place of absolute authorship. Common sense defies the spectacle because it occurs through narrative—collective disruptive speech. Any transfer of metaphoric sense to an absolute power or foundation of reality will be interrupted by the relation of meaning to the *sensus communis*.

The Nurses of Perfidy represent a particular *communis*. The commonality that their image constitutes exists on two levels: a relational common generated by virtue of the proximity of exteriors and the possibility it offers of anonymity and indifference in regard to identity. The image exposed as the image presents a generic site of what Agamben calls communicativity or that which “communicates only itself” (*The Coming Community* 65). In *Debbie*, the image reveals that there is no absolute identity to which we can all cling but only the immanent possibility of relation, the possibility of the image. The image reveals that that which has been hidden from us is not our essence but our sheer and figmental natures. By inhabiting the figmentary quality of our subjectivities, we can be restored to ourselves, to our surfaces—to our linguistic being.

The metaphors in *Debbie* are based on this metaphoric/metonymic transfer of sense—not sameness. As noted above, the metaphor consists of a perceptual and sensual relation. Transferring sense to a figure is not a process of conceptualization, it is a perceptual and spatial. The metaphor clears space in the mind, in the physical world of matter. The human is a geography that must continually extend and reform itself. Vico’s metaphor calls forth that place, that *topos* from the *sensus communis*.

For Descartes rhetoric is used to persuade someone of an already established truth (85). For Vico, rhetoric makes truth. The ingenuity of a mind trained in rhetoric to produce the middle term, the *topos* wherein conceptual processes take place is what makes truth possible. *Debbie* is our training in rhetoric. Through her, as readers we learn the keen ability of the mind to create

the metaphoric *topos*. Debbie is comprised of linguistic space: "quoted episodes" (l. 259). Her configured body bears its stories: "her mighty hands bear the bruised sea" (ll. 111-112), "her gory wound was foaming [. . .] (My Frieze). She is a cultural memory of absence: "I was present at nothing" (ll. 565-566). Her metaphors reveal a historical human truth about the representation of women subjects. As textual embodiment of the linguistic human she is what has been written: "I imitate / many things such as the dull red / cloth of literature" (ll. 609-611). She is also what can be rewritten. The occasion of her rewriting exposes the mechanics of meaning: "[f]or if Virgil has taught me anything, it's that authority is just a rhetoric or style which has asserted the phantom permanency of a context" (argument). While Virgil may have asserted the "permanency of a context", this epic does not. Contexts shift as meaning emerges from a process of metaphoric relation that is based on metonymical proximity. As language shifts so does the context, the metaphor, the authority of the text. *Debbie* revisits the making of the Virgilian hero, the absented, abjected female of the Virgilian epic.

As Vico writes "the first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables" (§51). To re-member a cultural memory is to make new metaphors, to reinterpret old ones: "Sweet buggered-up earth and derelict I / desire some futurity" (after Envoy). The earth is buggered up, by imbalances of power, war, gender inequities, poverty, greed, sorrow. It is "derelict" and yet so is the subject, the *I*. And the line can be read thus: "and derelict I / desire some futurity" (after Envoy my emphasis). Through the authority of phantom contexts, the subject has also been buggered and made derelict. Yet despite its dereliction

or because of it dereliction the subject desires futurity. Not necessarily a continuance of absence, abjection or unease, but futurity, imminent possibility, new memories to compel the subject into the future— differently: “[b]etween antiquity and us floats love in the library. I’ll import back / into antiquity this lexical span, this unfleshed sex, this loosening / tear at the mid-afternoon institution” (proem).

It is this desire for futurity that drives Debbie into the past, into the library where she finds ambivalence: love *and* a lexical span of absence that stretches back for over a millennium. In her desire for futurity, Debbie imports the absented human, the female, the unspoken other (unfleshed and a loosening tear) back into the mid-afternoon institution of antiquity: the library. Importing such absence induces vivid and protracted enactments of the Vichian metaphor with another Rome: “I’ll call it a lens, a wet rhetoric whose / long focus gathers the lilies, the roses, the simple daisies from the / pleasant grader of the Roman walk to offer them to you” (proem). The metaphor is the linguistic construction by which meaning is made and memory is possible. *Debbie* remakes a cultural memory. She refocuses on the Roman walk. Her lens is language, a wide angled lens. She re-works the metaphors that are memory and inserts “a porcelain shepherdess,” “figurines of rhetoric” (argument).

According to Vico, the first humans (the founders of humanity) “gave natural and proper names to things”, so that among the Greeks and Latins “name” and “nature” meant the same thing” (§494). The names were based in relations, they were inventions: “in those first times all things necessary to human life had

to be invented" (§498). The names were both being and copula (Verene 173); the metaphor (that was the mind) had the primal power to construct the *is* (Verene 174). The epic *Debbie* (like Vico) focuses on the astonishing—that any thing should exist at all. Debbie greets the ornamentation of linguistic being: "I greet an ornament. Hello shepherdess! Lend me a bit of that stuff. The fancy stuff. So, Virgil, this is how it is" ("Debbie").

As an alternative epic hero re-visiting Virgil in an alternative epic universe, Debbie is the text's figurative and literal demonstration of the oppression of all forms of proscribed subjectivity: women, the human subject, the subject in general, within in a specific literary and historic genre. She is also the demonstration of the subject (albeit momentary and contingent) loosening from these restrictive forms. Debbie observes her own imprisonment and liberty in language: "I dreamt that Virgil mapped my lavish sleep / I read the curbs of epic lust's *dérive* / And there, saw myself" ("Debbie" n.p.). Within the shifting place of Debbie's dream, she dreams the Virgilian map of the human, women—by these she is confined, preformed. Yet she reads the epic's curbs: the limits of its legitimacy, its intelligibility and the edges of its unintelligibility. These are her boundaries also. Yet the epic is by its nature comprehensive. Its lust, like the empire is infinite. It is absolute excess: everything and nothing. To read to its edge is to look over the abyss and find no thing. There, Debbie finds herself. She is both the empire's abject (mapped by Virgil) and the very foundation of the absence its edges profess to reach. There is nothing beyond the empire. Debbie is that nothing: a middle ground: a place wherein new topics might extend. To read

thus is to derive and so to drift in an active and altering sense.⁴³ In reading, Debbie simultaneously corrodes and extends the epic's imperial edges. As readers, we are made complicit in the complexity of Debbie's absence and agency. To re-member, to dream, to read is to embody an incommensurable spatial shift.

This shift in constitution comprises Debbie's imminent possibility. She consists of episodes of perception. The nouns that are used to name Debbie are not ones that are *like* or analogous to her but ones within which she comes into active productive relation. Relations occur as a result of chance and specific necessities. While the logical mind will always perceive the metaphor analogically, a mind trained in the *sensus communis*—the sensibilities, feelings metaphors, and memories upon which human culture rests—is able to see unity in difference (Verene 41). As readers of *Debbie* we are trained in this bringing together of difference into unity. We perceive utter strangeness. As we extend outward toward the perceived strangeness we recognize what we cannot know. A thorough training in metaphoricity allows the mind to create a point where two concepts meet:

but the iterate name

⁴³ The term *dérive* derives from the Situationist practice of *détournement*. It is the deflection of certain texts through their occupation (Marcus 178-179). Robertson's *Debbie* might be seen as a *détournement* of Virgil's *Aeneid*. However, it is closer to Brossard's use of the term which is less militaristic and concerned with the drift of meaning. Many writers have discussed and used the term *dérive* such as Jean François Lyotard and Steve McCaffery. Nicole Brossard uses it extensively in *Picture Theory*.

in bland ecstasy coupling greenness and
 want greenness and sugar I feel the tongue soft
 ening as I swore I wouldn't this my novice tongue I sell it to you
 persons of praise and astonishment invisible
 inks pooling nevertheless on nothing it is yours (ll. 471-477)

The meeting place is the *topos*, a space constructed out of the subject's bringing together of difference into relation. This meeting place is a newly constructed space ("a bland ecstasy coupling greenness"), an extension of the perceiving and perceived subject ("I swore I wouldn't this my novice tongue I sell it to you persons") wherein new structures occur based on new relations ("inks pooling nevertheless on nothing it is yours"). Because similarity is not a requirement for the relation, the possibility for relation is infinite. The "bland" everyday common "ecstasy" of the "iterate name" couples "greenness and want". The intrinsically common practice of language works in ecstasy. Through desire it produces (green) meaning and "persons of praise and astonishment." It is yours.

Memory

Memory [is] the art of the Muses; that is, of humanity

Vico NS §669

Unlike Descartes, for whom thinking denotes existence, Vico and Robertson locate memory at the heart of being. As Verene writes, "memory is the first art of the humanity" (98). Debbie takes her return to language through the *epic*, she articulates the ways in which we are unconsciously "mapped" by narratives, particularly dominant narratives that persist in various forms

throughout history. In *Debbie*, Virgil is a metaphor for the weight of the literary past. The edges of the Virgilian epic reveal the limits, the erotics of its appropriative expanse: its “catapults of lust” (l. 210). The imperial poem by its very nature, includes everything—it expresses the rapacious desire of the empire: “through dark rote through diversities of greed and sleep and flight insuperable depth” (ll. 205-207).

Yet Virgil’s empire is a particular narrative of everything. It is the construction of an everything that relies heavily on an equally constructed nothing. It is founded on a “dialect of servility” (l. 231). The over-representation of the heroic epic male and the under-representation of the non-heroic epic female in Virgil’s *Aeneid* render the figure Debbie inscribed and proscribed in the Virgilian epic. Debbie is one of “Virgil’s bastard daughters” (705). The female presence in Virgil’s *Aeneid* is generally either an aporia, utterly marginal, or an aside of hysteria and self-murder (see “The Tragedy of Dido” Book IV and the fate of the Queen Latium in “The Death of Turnus” Book XII).

To address their absence or their mutilated presence, Virgil is summoned and Debbie finishes off “his passion” with “verse:” “I con- / cluded his passion with the quick / familiar verse beginning *from / old spoils* but should have / said *funeral meats*” (episode n.p.). Virgil achieves sexual pleasure and satisfaction from hearing the same old story (his same old story). In the realms of the empire, meaning and its pleasures arise from a narcissistic, masturbatory engagement of the empire with itself. Virgil’s epic is also imaged as an imperial phallus that Debbie jerks off with irony and disdain. She deems the stuff “old spoils” and then

rethinks its image, proposing a new one: “funeral meats” (“episode: majorettes” n.p.). The empire’s phallus is not just meat, but dead meat. The words also contain a reference to *Hamlet*. Debbie reworks Hamlet’s criticism of his mother’s hurried marriage. Gertrude’s wedding to Claudius takes place soon after the death of Hamlet’s father, the King. Hamlet declares his mother could use the funeral meats, the funeral feast, for her wedding feast: “Thrift, thrift, Horatio, the funeral bak’d meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (I.2. 179-181). In *Debbie*, the funeral feast of old dead Kings, of Fathers is a different sort of wedding feast. The “funeral meats” of the empire also points to the carnage left by the empire, the murder of beings not considered subjects. Sexual innuendo, sharp humour, social critique and sly rewrites of old tales are part of the excess that is Debbie’s address to Virgil. She critiques history and its representations of women, of the human. Loosely gendered herself, Debbie dickers with the great phallus and its records of truth. She “attributed / incorrect motives to an archivist / simply for something [else] to happen” (ll. 478-480). Reinterpreting history, she re-writes it and supplants history’s lack with a “frieze of girls” (l. 695):

We wish to
 —for the frieze of girls—be extravagant as each turgid docent
 wants some of those immaculate foundations but there is no aim
 but paraded hunger, liquors
 rolling floats of roses. (ll. 694-699)

The turgid docents protect certain narratives. They guard the immaculate foundations of specific versions of the antiquated truths of museums. But, here, in

Debbie there are no such foundations, only excess—the spectacle of desire, distilled fruits and sugars and “rolling floats of roses” (l. 699). Debbie locates Virgil, the epic and its excessive desires as her Other. This is the narrative into which she has been brought. Virgil and his texts bear the terms by which she has been recognized (and so brought into being). Virgil also bears the terms by which she has been refused being.

It is Virgil’s “[p]recocious closure [that has] sculpt[ed]” her identity (“Debbie” n.p.). The relation between them has allowed for “[t]hin difference, thin frock” (“Debbie” n.p.). That is, the Virgilian terms by which Debbie has been determined have not accommodated alterity. They have required, demanded, the aggression of appropriation and Debbie’s potential in her variant and absolute difference has been denied. Harmony *is* “an Effect of Disproportion” (ll. 51-52). It is not relation. It is the aggressive weight of the Imperium on the subject pressing for sameness. Harmony embodies oppression. And perpetuation of sameness produces a meager being. Debbie is narrated into subjectivity—before she awoke, before she was conscious she was defined according to the terms of Virgil’s narrative. The Other (in this case, Virgil) establishes the terms of recognition by which the subject can be identified as a subject. Debbie’s account of her dream of the Virgilian mapping is a memory. She remembers a memory she never had. She bears witness to an event that she never observed but that is intrinsic to her being.

In *Debbie*, the process of memory is complex and Vichian. Debbie’s dream constitutes a re-seeing and a re-collecting of what is no longer before the

mind. The process of recollection is memory—Vico's *memoria*. For Vico, memory has three different aspects: memory, imagination (*fantasia*) and invention (*ingegno*) (§819). The dream also familiarizes the objects by imitating and thus altering them. The imitation is what Vico calls *fantasia* (imagination) and it is the power to re-order what has been recalled. Through *fantasia*, the mind makes the object familiar. Objects are not apprehended in themselves; they are mediated through the human (the linguistic). The sense of imitation in *fantasia* is not passive or false; it is a constitutive process by which the subject finds itself again. *Fantasia* creates a spatial shift whereby the re-seen is replaced so that it undergoes a spatial shift or drift. Vico refers to this shift as ingenuity—*ingegno*. *Ingegno* takes the shift and gives it a “a new turn,” putting the object into what Vico calls a “proper arrangement and relationship” (NS §819).

However, the sense of what constitutes the proper is not absolute but contextual. What is right and proper is determined by relations, and these relations are shared in a wider social context. In the case of *Debbie*, the social context is text and reader. This context can be read as an imaginative extension of Spinoza's sparse idea of the common notion whereby *ingegno* is perception, invention, the faculty that discerns larger contextual relations. In memory, materiality is arranged into a discernible and contextual object. When Debbie dreams of Virgil's map, his epic shifts—it inhabits a new space, a new *locus*.

Reading extends the motion of memory. Debbie reads, re-members the proscription of the epic's lust. Its rapacious far-reaching edges are her sites of diversion, drift and change. Debbie is “a hut / in a century of heady curiosity

[sic]" (l.493-494). She is an exile on the borders of the empire in a century of curiosity: "and fugitive sensation be in my / mouth so I can write the ending" (ll. 495-496). The *dérive* causes "lesions in meaning" and the "blossoms [that] / fringe intent" (ll. 21-22). The *dérive* puts the fugitive exiled sensation in her mouth. Debbie is allowed new active being, new curiosity in this new space. There she can write another ending.

The dynamic shift that memory necessitates brings into a *here* and *now* that which is no longer present (memory is the sign of an absence). Debbie shifts into previously uninhabited space. The Virgilian imperial representation of the human is a "kind of speaking that takes place on the border[s] of the unsayable" (Butler *Excitable Speech* 41). The epic of the Roman Empire requires the unsayable to legitimize its *said*. There on the drifting edges of the epic, Debbie re-sees: "and there I saw myself" ("Debbie"). Here focussed on the *I*, Debbie turns away from herself in favour of the objectivity and deeply personal anonymity of the generic *I*. The *I* of the common. Proscribed by the very terms that confer recognition on her, the Virgilian terms that require the absorption of all difference in their infinite grasp and totalizing power (emulating that of the Roman state) fail. The very act of memory, of reading, shifts the edges of definitions. Memory necessitates the failure of representation. The deeply personal, utterly common *I* no longer serves as a function of representation. Rather, it is an alterity always preserved in the act of re-membling because space is continually re-instated in between the seen and the re-seen, between the *I* and the *I*.

And thus Debbie “greet[s] an ornament”—herself (“Debbie”). The totalized, naturalized force of State power, of Virgil’s comprehensive and descriptive prowess is ornamentation. So is Debbie. We are all the collective relations of our exteriors. Our separateness resists appropriation by its very nature. There is no essence and this is not superficial. Or rather it is intrinsically superficial and this is profound; our surfaces are utterly constitutive. They are our origins.

As she greets an ornament, Debbie meets up with another surface, the poetic, pastoral trope of the shepherdess. She re-members it. Re-instates its exterior in a spatial drift and she addresses it: “Hello shepherdess! Lend me a bit of that stuff. That fancy stuff” (“Debbie”). The fancy stuff of empires, of description, of identity, is a shifting scene of surfaces, of narratives: “So, Virgil, this is how it is” (“Debbie”). The “origin [is not] as lapidary” (“argument” n.p.). “[A]uthority is just rhetoric or style which has asserted the phantom permanency of a context” (“argument” n.p.). No context is permanent; no origin is ever mastered.

Memory itself is a process by which the real is reconstituted again and again; it is the basis of thought. Debbie’s memory allows her to pull before the mind what is no longer present. She familiarizes history’s images. She imitates through a process of alteration and re-con-figuration, thus placing historical objects (women, heroes, men, couches, gold cups) within relationships that constitute new social contexts and sense. She sees herself in Virgil’s map. Her memory is a fundamentally metaphoric process through which she reconfigures another Debbie; she extends another surface: “I am compelled to witness this

fresh redundancy [...]” (“Debbie” n.p.). The emptiness and anonymity of words allows her to re-inhabit them again and again. Each reiteration is a shift in being: a “fresh redundancy”

Although several reiterations of Debbie occur in the text, the first memory of Debbie is *ours*. Remember? The narrator addresses the reader in the beginning pages of the epic: “remember the day we wanted / to describe everything?” (ll. 25-26). The reader is invited to rest in intimate proximity to the narrator (she would wear our names in her lungs), after which the reader and the narrator are identified as “we” and included in the textual memory: “remember the day we wanted to describe everything?” The collective *we* is one metaphor for the relation between reader and text. The reader is both vehicle of the tenor that is the text and the tenor for which the text is the vehicle. We are “Denizens of / this labile [linguistic] couch” (ll.15-16). We utterly inhabit its space. We succumb to its fabrics, its textures, its “fancy stuff” (“Debbie” n.p.). We are its sites of relation; we are also the agents of its meaning. The readers are both absolutely passive (supine, submissive and seduced) and absolutely active, even athletic: “Your sweet strokes beat so fast / [Debbie] must dare all!” (ll. 141-142). In an active and ecstatic relation to text, the readers are participants in “new sports” (l. 140).

RADICAL PASSIVITY

*In poetry you must love the words, the ideas and images and
rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all.*

Wallace Stevens *quoted in* William Flesch

Robertson's epic circumvents Western European humanism and defines the human subject as linguistic. The text rejects notions of free will and self-determination; it disrupts the individualism of Modernism and bears witness to its central premise: humans *are* language. However, the text does not suggest that to be constituted by language is to plunge the human into a paralysis of nihilistic relativism. Nor does it proscribe the possibility of human agency or render notions of social responsibility meaningless. On the contrary, *Debbie* illustrates how our linguistic nature is precisely the venue for our subjective agency and the means by which we are ethically bound to each other.

Debbie returns language to the human by revealing (as Vico does) that the human is a linguistic proposition. Thus, in returning language to the human, *Debbie* returns language to language itself; that is, to "a point of contact with an absolute milieu empty of all determinacy" (Wall 162). Language returned to itself is language writing into the eye of its own storm, into the infinite stillness of the imaginary dimension of any relation at all.

Language returned results in the reformation of subjectivities and problematizes the production of meaning. In the text, visible and legible human subjects emerge that are not singular or self-defining. They are preceded, exceeded by language and their susceptibility to the linguistic is the primary

condition of their subjectivity. By virtue of this susceptibility, the epic's subjects are more aoristic, more rumour and "[d]eep gossip" (18) than substantial presence. Yet there lies their potential.

The Subjects

Against all our expectations and prejudices, the subject was not a ground at all. It was unpower and weakness, and this is the case for a simple and even banal reason: the self does not form itself. It has no ability at all until the other and others intervene and bring it into existence. The self is absolute dependency, and its dependency is an inexhaustible potentia.

Thomas Carl Wall *Radical Passivity*

Butler's and Levinas' understandings of subjective impressionability and Wall's radical passivity inform the direction of this section. I begin by situating the linguistically vulnerable subject in *Debbie* and the radically constitutive agency it engenders. I explore how the vulnerability and agency performed in the text extends to the reader. The extension initially takes place in a textual invitation that welcomes the reader into a linguistic process in which reading is an ecstatic process of loss and recognition—identities dissolve and reform. In the text, the process is pellucid and irreversible. By virtue of this welcome, both reader and text produce subjectivities of such alterity that the words *subject* and *human* are redefined: "*these* words know void shores and different drivers" ("screen" following "How to Judge" n.p.).

The epic produces many diverse subjects, not one autonomous, all wholly heteronomous: “absolutely outside [their] sex” (l. 510), “a / dreaming brevity in dazzled font / diverted” (ll. 511-513), “a hut / in a century of heady curiosity [sic]” (l. 494), “[i]terative” (l. 306), “never free” (l. 289), “as wax”(l. 225), “drowned in blood ambiguous”(l. 713) “compelled to witness” (argument), and “sequined eros” (“March: Thespians Against Knowledge” n.p.). These subjects are unwilling, “*radically* unwilling” (Butler, my emphasis “Giving an Account 39). That is, they exist by virtue of their failure to substantiate and by virtue of their relations that occur as a result of this failure.

Levinas designates the form of being that attempts to reduce alterity to sameness as *Being*. This idea of *Being* is Hegelian; it follows the ideal of Socratic truth. According to Levinas, *Being* and knowing as it is defined by Western philosophy and metaphysics is a “philosophy as egology” (*Totality and Infinity* 44). The notion of *Being* and knowing necessitate the reduction of the alterity of the Other and the subject in an “essential self sufficiency of the same” and denies the vulnerable bond all subjectivity has with the Other (44). To “Anodize the mirage of the soul” is to dis-empower this notion of *Being* and its notions of freedom and solitary sufficiency. This slogan “skims the trees” (l. 51) and another one follows: “Harmony / is an Effect of Disproportion” (ll. 51-52).

To disallow the Other her absolute alterity is to enforce a harmony of sameness. If freedom means remaining the same in the company of another, knowledge contains the ultimate freedom and the Other is given impersonal *Being*. Freedom is to affirm the priority of *Being* over a relation to someone. Thus

freedom denotes the impersonality of *Being* and permits domination and thus subordinates justice (Levinas 45). Its harmony is disproportionate and not harmony after all because under the banner of *Being* it is the effect of an inequity, the disproportion of power. This slogan gains physical force as it “spirals to riptide” and the Nurses descend to earth (l. 53).

The Nurses’ collectivity suggests that they are not *Being* but embodied relation. They are celebrated relation: their gold shoes brush the grass: the “louche earth quivers in their / honour” (ll.54-55 see erratum); the Nurses of Perfidy “are chanting [. . .] give me words†” (ll. 55-60). A footnote follows small typed dagger that proceeds the large grey word, “words” (†). It reads: “Feel free to accept the little scene as real” (footnote to l. 60). We are invited to “accept the little scene as real”. We may feel free to do so but we are not. The text’s expression of itself as artifice is the basis of its integrity. The “thieves of legitimacy” are our “swank wobbling darlings” (l.12).

The real the reader is invited to accept is one made in the relation of narrator to reader. It is not based on *a priori* knowledge. There are no absolute terms except reader (or narrator or Nurses). And these Nurses are disloyal to notions of *Being* and *Truth*. They descend from the sky. They are literally and figuratively marked with doubt. They are unbelievable; they are not to be believed. Believing is tied to the oppression of *Being* and these Nurses are impossibilities in this realm. They have no sincerity—their title declares it; and what of their clinical capacity—these Nurses wears gold shoes! The Nurses are released from the monotony of identity. They embody a production of being (not

Being); disloyal, seductive and compelling, they offer their reader insatiable hunger (“Feed from my tongue”) and the beauty of surface (“Touch my wet hip”); they ask for words in return (“Give me words / Give me words”) (ll. 57-60). Their relation to the reader is accomplished in deep service, lush hospitality and gorgeous insincerity. The readers are not free; they are, by virtue of reading, in proximity to this scene. They are bound to it in relation. Yet they are not subsumed by these nurses. The readers reside, impressed upon and apart from. The space remains. The critical opening awaits. The scene will change.

The Nurses highlight the impressionable production of being that occurs in each subject in the epic. The epic’s subjects are always preceded by an Other and their depictions enact both this production and its possible oppressions. The submission of subject to the Other, the production of subjectivity, is transparent, pellucid:

AS IF BECAUSE OF FATHER I WENT DOWN TO
the soft forced notions of boats
went as wax before repleteness (ll. 223-225)

The Other is “Father,” the agent behind the subject’s submission to the soft forced notion of boats. Because of Father the *I* goes down to the “soft forced notions of boats.” The word “notion” has a double life. It can mean ‘idea,’ ‘concept,’ ‘caprice’ or ‘whim.’ It can be an aspect of discourse that determines knowledge including taxonomies—a notion is a general concept by which the particular is classified. Or it can be a capricious whim or fancy.

The choice of the word 'notion' itself holds the whimsy of thinking.

Constructed by the whims of the dominant patriarchy, reality is a soft sell, an easy sell. What Father says is true. If Father says it is a boat, it is a boat. The options are limited by the constraints of power. It might look like we buy what we buy as consenting adults, but this economy is, as the Nurses' third slogan states, "the harmony [...] of disproportion" (ll. 51-52). The narrating *I* is forced to buy its real; she is subjected to a coercive harmony brought about by dire inequities in power.

The subject is as wax before the seemingly replete press of the Other (l. 225). The Other offers recognition (and thus reality) by virtue of the terms that define the universals and the subject complies. Yet this oppressive relationship is not simple. Despite or perhaps because of its coercive and oppressive nature, the relationship is emotionally compelling. For the subject has "loved history's premonitions," history's projections of the real (l. 229). The subject has "lovingly" spoken its "dialect of servility" (ll. 230-231). The subject has been perversely or inversely empowered by its identifying relation with the Father as Other. To let go is to lose the *I* conferred on the subject by the Father/Other.

And the relationship is even more complex. As the epic's commitment to pellucidity reveals, the Father is also linguistic. Like Debbie, Father is a metaphor: a site of relation. Language is the final human Other. The Father is a style, a rhetoric of power. The terms of his narrative define the terms by which Father offers recognition to the subject. The epic's linguistic translucence reveals its subjects as sites of extreme vulnerability, and exposes the constant falling

away of subjecthood, sincerity, truth and the real: "Father! Founder! I cry inasmuch as / narrative requires it" (ll. 300-301). The subject cries as much as the terms of narrative dictate she should.

Yet the text reveals that the Other as Father and the Other as language and the subject as linguistically defined are all subject to the empty totality of language: the "nakedness in the words" (l. 295). The empty totality reveals what Levinas calls the "presence of the exteriority in language" (*Totality and Infinity* 302); its "moot shells of oscillation" (*Debbie* l. 305). The exteriority in language (its "moot shells of oscillation") is affirmation of the production of what Levinas calls "morality itself" (302). It is the event of separation, of alterity whereby the linguistic subject is constituted in an arbitrariness that resists the unethical: appropriation and totalization. Debbie's question "What am I / today? "Iterative?" resists the violence that realizes being by enforcing sameness (ll.305-306). The subject is "iterative" (repeatable) and cannot remain faithful to the Father. Language cannot remain faithful to the Father. The nakedness of words, the insistent press of their exteriors and incessant need for reiteration creates a perpetual critical opening by which the alterity of the subject cannot be fully subsumed by the narrative of the Other: "[s]ome day I shall / laugh at even this obedience, wake / in the middling shade of the library / wander freely, calling out a name I hope (327-331).

Debbie's subjects are expressed as such. Each subject embodies the history of the oppression of Being *and* the exteriority of language that releases that Being into the relation of alterity: "Roman I, I father my / subservience the

sententious / thrill the organ public / in magnificence I will have borrowed / what animal and dire rumour outwore" (ll. 534-538). In the oppression of Being as sameness, the *I* is deeply personal. It is the Roman *I* that fathers its own subservience; it fathers its own obedience to certain maxims, to certain systems of knowledge. It takes and defends its own space; it denies the fragility and vulnerability of its exteriors. Yet the so-called first person singular, the *I*, is also deeply impersonal and the organ of the public: "the mouth is public / and human creatures straddle [its] debt" (ll. 367-368). Words work through us—the mouth is a public space and the language we speak is not our own. Although it is easily assumed as a by-product of systems of appropriative power, it is also a labile site of absolute anonymity.

Language exceeds and proceeds us. It is worthless and common and dirty as a copper penny on the street. But pick it up. Put it in your mouth. You can't know where it has been and you will catch something from it—it will always exceed you. In its excess (which is its exteriority) and in our relation to that excess, language provides the terms by which we achieve being, and to which we owe our most intimate selves. This paradox lies at the centre of *Debbie*. That is, language, the very form by which we gain personal identity (subjectivity) emerges from a public space—contemporary, smudged, ancient and strange: "I haunt this ratio / or throw it to you, shrinking sea, in augured / tongue bastard Latin hard song my busy pain / in moody tissue grieving" (ll. 423-426). The old "Latin hard song" informs Debbie's "busy pain". It persists in her "moody tissue," in her

“grieving.” Language precedes us and exceeds us. It constitutes our selves and our cells: “[a]rtifice complicates soft tissue” (ll.272-273).

Debbie’s new subject emerges from a particulate place of public anonymity: “[t]he beloved ego on cold marble / blurs inscription” (ll. 192-193). In *Debbie*, the Other is also the interior relationship—the ego: “The Beloved Ego in the plummy light / is you.” (ll.178-179). The subject is obsessed with the Other because it is the subject itself: “When I see you in that light / I desire all that has been kept from me / *etcetera* [...]” (ll.179-181). The subject desires itself as Other with a passionate metaphysical desire: “[...] Since your rough shirt / reminds me of the first grass / pressing my hips and seed heads / fringing the sky and the sky / swaying lightly to your scraped / breath [...]” (ll. 181-186).

The addition of *etcetera* suggests a kind of indifference or critical distance from the “Beloved Ego” (l.178). The *etcetera* offers a critical opening for the reader. The ego mutates plural and multi-coloured: “you are at least / several and variegated” (ll. 189-190). Our relation with the plummy ego is varied and complex: “The beloved ego on cold marble / blurs inscription” (ll. 192-193). Love always obscures relation. We can never know our origins, and certain notions of being keep us blind to the extent of our alterities. Such is the complexity of our exterior relations. The overwhelming nature of our exteriorities can lead us to deny that words “know void shores and different drivers” (following “How to Judge” n.p.). It can lead us to deny the debt we owe to words. *Debbie*, however does not deny this debt: “I do not love thee word whom I do owe” (ll. 458-459). Arendt notes the potency of this owing and the tenacity of the

“Latin hard song” (*Debbie* l. 425): “the Greek *polis*, rests at the bottom of the sea—for as long as we use the word ‘politics’” (Arendt 49).

Like the Greek *polis*, Virgil persists. His notion of the nation, the human and the poem course through us. In *Debbie*, “in this version” of the epic (l. 640), we can “call it / *bureaucracy* Virgil” (ll. 640-641 my emphasis)— and *Debbie* does. The Virgilian lineage in Western literary tradition is a “bureaucracy.” If we have read the canonical texts of Western European literature, we have been as rigorously subjected to various interpretations of Virgil as if those texts were regulating bodies of procedures and rules. The bureaucracy upholds an epistemological frame and operations of power within which the human subject is repeatedly identified. The *I* is worn in the endless repetition of whatever narrative, whatever rumour determines it: [d]eep gossip discovered this place” (ll. 18-19). We are rumour, “rome’s whimpering / clerics slack vernaculars” (ll. 440-441). But, “already [*Debbie*] do[es] not share their attitude” (l.444). From a page densely packed with large type, an almost chorus-like sensibility an anonymous voice issues a warning: “AWAKE ANY THAT SHELL OUT TO THAT RUINOUS BITCH RUMOR” (Third Part: Morbidity Demands the Reprisal of the Cabaret). *Debbie* heeds the warning and she claims that she doesn’t shell-out, that her prayers are “(an incorrect reproduction [that disturb] the after-effects)” (ll.262-263). Yet she is not free. She too extends her arms “into complicity and lyric protocol” (ll. 277-278).

Debbie is also an element of the narrative and its arbitrariness. Like the subject *I*, her exterior configurations (also linguistic) open her to chance and

relational encounters. The iterative and relational nature of the narrative means Debbie is, in effect, in effect. That is, she is the event of a relation with the Other. The endless repetition of this deeply impersonal personal subject is an event of the most personal and sustainable relation. Debbie's subject anonymity is reiterated in the section "March: Thespians Against Knowledge." Debbie explains that "I explains itself with its / blossoms porosity portraits" (ll. 595-596). Debbie dissolves into the absolute intimacy and anonymity of *I*. The subject blossoms by virtue of the porosity of its endless depictions.

No identity is airtight. In this quotation, the *I*, is narrated, and endlessly repeated by the narrative of "Father" (l. 596). This repetition evacuates the self of sameness, stability and self-certainty (Levinas, *Otherwise* 25). It evacuates language of anything but its exteriority. Language and the self cannot actually resist being altered; they *are* being-altered. Even the iterations of the Father, or Rome, are subjected to this alteration. These identities also only exist by virtue of their exterior relations. Their exteriority reveals the nothing that lies behind all identity, all truth claims, all narratives and all images. Yet where there is nothing there is always already no longer nothing and this is the sheer general generous possibility of experience, of relation, of belonging.

I shall open an item, by supple

lucite turn on embroglied pivot (ll. 548-549).

By exteriorizing language, by revealing the production of being, the *I* opens "the item," the image to a supple transparency, a supple Perspex, a pellucid Debbie. This turn, like an exposed trope, returns language to language. There, language

becomes an image of itself—just as the subject becomes an image of a subject, without self-certainty or stability, when the *I* clearly thinks the void shores of words. The subject's experience of the void (of language), of nothing, destroys itself as an experience and exposes a passivity that is uncontrollable, inexhaustible potential and passionate: "on embroglied pivot" (l. 548). This passivity is the point, the passionate pivot on which all that which is still-not-yet turns. It is place of passivity that is the very possibility of all relation. For Levinas this is a relation with the infinite (*Entre Nous* 58). This relation is "not knowledge but a proximity [that preserves] the excessiveness of the uncontainable which grazes its surface; it is desire (58). Wall refers to this as radical passivity.

[H]ad I not posed

kisses against frugal will o stiffened

spine of snow (*Debbie* ll. 556-558)

If the subject should pose kisses (ecstasy) against the frugal will of subjective self-sufficiency, the spine of snow would pause, "stiffened" in momentary, transient, fragile identity (l. 557) and "more sweetness could be possible (l. 560).

Since the subject's relation to the Other is ecstatic, subjectivity is the result of an ecstatic and compelled up-surfing of its exteriority, whereby the *I* repeatedly finds itself outside itself. This exteriority is comprised of the subject's extended surfaces against which it greets the world. The repeated upsurge of the subject allows the non-willed, un-free subject moments of address. However, as Butler points out the terms by which we are recognized and the terms by which we confer recognition are to some extent impersonal and indifferent ("Giving an

Account" 22). Since we are both comprised of and dispossessed by the language that we offer and self-knowledge, our capacity to understand the reasons for our desires is limited. In the midst of recognition as an encounter the terms used to facilitate the recognition also introduce an integral disorientation (22). Thus, the address itself, the moment of identification is a moment of obfuscation. The addressee is both subjected to the norms of the recognition offered and agent of its use: "Because we are not free/ my work shall be obscure / as Love!" (ll. 432-434). Debbie's "work" (her emergence, her critique of Virgil, her subjective formation, her constitution of new subjects (the "glorious girls" l. 243) and her technique of perpetual interruption) is "obscure" because she is not "free." We, not one of us, are free. We are as obscure as love. What formulates desire and identity precedes us and we cannot fully comprehend the particulars of its weight. Wall calls this unfree relation of the subject to its terms of recognition radical passivity: passive because the relation submits to itself and radical because this submission is constitutive. The radically passive human subject is fascinated by itself by virtue of its relation to the Other (expressed in the terms that precede it). Through this relation the subject submits in an ecstatic passionate extension of itself to itself as though it were an exterior power. The radically passive self is an event of unaccountable relation and participation. It is "purely passionate" (Wall 1). That is, it is a production of being based in desire that no satisfaction can abate.

Wall's notion of radical passivity extends the Vichian metaphor. The Vichian metaphor is an event of radical passivity. It is a relation wherein the tenor

submits to the terms of recognition conferred on to it by the vehicle and yet this submission is constitutive. The constitutive nature of the metaphor also speaks to the effect of the tenor on the vehicle and addresses the reciprocity of being. The Other is also in relation to and altered by the emerging subject. That is the relationship of the snake to the river extends the surfaces, the exteriority of the snake. This relation is as “obscure as Love” and “unlinguistic!” as Debbie claims (l.433-434). It is unlinguistic in the sense that it is utterly linguistic. So, that language is the unthinkable, constitutive force and extending space of desire: “I bludgeon the poem with desire and / stupidity in the wonderful autumn” (ll. 435-436).

In its radically passive capacity, *Debbie* critiques the reduction of alterity to sameness and asks what else the human subject might become. The human emerges as *Debbie* and ties language inexorably up with being. This linkage facilitates the poem’s investigation into the subject’s vulnerability to linguistic forces it does not choose and reveals history’s harm and the disquieting anonymity that results from such susceptibility.

Through the *epic*’s use of Virgil, *Debbie* suggests that our vulnerability to language, to linguistic bureaucracies is part of what constitutes being. However, this is not to suggest that the human subject successfully adheres to the rules of any particular bureaucracy. In fact, *Debbie* reveals that any model of a unified essential self, regulated by what Butler terms “normative horizons,” is impossible—whether classical, biblical, romantic, existential or otherwise (“Giving an Account” 22). The linguistic subject is continually disoriented by

linguistic terms of recognition that are not its own, and linguistic regulating bodies are constantly interrupted by their own progress. Despite the fact that language constitutes meaning, language also denies meaning as security or enduring coherence. Unified subjectivity is denied because no subject narrates itself into being. Instead, we are narrated, and the very terms of that narration are beyond our control.

Debbie the giantess asks, “[w]hat has / occasioned us?” (ll. 297-298), and she answers her own question—“Far limits purchased by loss” (ll. 300-301). The ecstatic subject is being exteriorized far-flung into compulsive relation, proximity or what Levinas calls “enjoyment:” “the nothingness of the future ensures separation: the element we enjoy issues in the nothingness that separates” (*Totality and Infinity* 142). Yet the linguistic bureaucracies that assert stable identity deny this narrative its exteriority and refuse existence its linguistic impersonality.

These forces are as constitutive as they are mutilating, as empirical as they are delusional, and we are never free of them: “I believe I am never free of / these beautiful woods—they excite / me powerfully as does the ultra / clear manufacture of girlhood” (ll. 289-292). Just as Virgil permeates our understanding of nationhood and empire, other linguistic systems force and form our perception and emotional attachment to constructs that establish the foundation of the human—like nature and gender. From our profound emotional and appropriative connection to nature (“these beautiful woods”) to our deep attachment to our constructed selves and genders (“the ultra / clear manufacture of

girlhood”), our impressionable subjectivities are annexed by linguistic systems that perpetuate oppressive and violent notions of being. Other non-injurious relations must be formed.

Turning back towards the Virgilian bureaucracy and its literary constructions of Rome, gender, nature, representation and the subject itself, *Debbie* faces the past and its wreckage. The text actively undercuts established linguistic processes and their legitimizing self-evident natures. It focuses specifically on the particular linguistic bureaucracies perpetuated in the name of Virgil and the “Father.”

As *Debbie* disrupts these systems, the text reveals the exteriority of language and the nature of the unwilled subject. The unwilled subject emerges from language, a site of anonymity that both forms and un-forms identity. If the subject is “as wax” and the wreckage of a male-centric history must be addressed (l. 225), if revolution is required, how can the unwilled subject resist? What would resistance mean? If we are subjects branded illegitimate by Rome’s fathers—“Virgil’s bastard daughters” (l. 705), how might we become legitimate? How might we be “female” (“She Has Smoothed Her Pants to No End” n.p.)? If we “would prefer to respond to only / the established charms (and forget inconvenience)” (ll. 733-734) but find that our encounters exceed established regimes of acceptability, how might we continue? How might the damage caused by certain violent normative horizons be assuaged, softened or even healed when even “[a]ll that is [deemed] beautiful [...] won’t salve these stuttered accoutrements” (ll. 737-739).

Resistance

The social revolution . . . [can] draw its poetry from the past, [not]
only from the future.

Karl Marx (misquoted) *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

In Robertson asks the following questions of agency and, these questions
lie at the heart of her epic:

Might there
be conceived a motion which is not
itself? Is this, for me, Desire? Resistance?
Chance? In my perception, the three are
inseparable. In this way I am not
restricted to only falling.

(onsets n.p. 21/4/04 12:11)

Might there be a motion conceived that is not itself? An unwilling subject could
be considered as such. In fact, an unwilling subject determined by relation could
only be “*not* itself.” Yet if existence is not singular, stable and discernible, what
is it? And how might a being that exists by virtue of “not being itself” facilitate
agency? *Debbie* answers these questions by demonstrating how the subject’s “not
being of itself” facilitates a potential kindled by chance and compelled by desire
and defined in the courtesy of relation.

In the *epic*, there are many Others, like Virgil, Father, Rome and Freud.
They each represent different linguistic systems. The narrator, *Debbie*, submits to
these language systems: “in the dialect of servility,” in “current conditions arms

of terror / and grammar" (ll. 231-233). Virgil, Father, Rome and Freud are the structuring principles of a symbolic order that requires subjective unity. Here, the narrator reveals its relations as bearing deep shadows: "I am / unmentionable ticking against the / dark adjacency" (ll. 71-73). This subjective re-entry into the narrative of Virgil finds a history mired in darkness and dismay: "I beheld horror in the wet shade's message/and time left me there standing" (ll. 420-421). Tragic relations with Others defined by systems of unified subjectivity and absolute knowledge (rather than its limits) form history's female. As a result, she exists as a site of violence and absence. It is Virgil who peers back at us through the structure of Freudian psychology: "The Beloved Ego in the plummy light / is you (ll. 178-179).

The ego represents another symbolic order determined by one of the Fathers and reflects a specific taxonomy of the mind, a specific reading of history. In an "acid point" of "one's exact rage" (l. 103), it is a tale that might leave too much out and imprison the subject in the drive for a self-sustaining self: "the tethered part twists from / servility to dreck" (ll. 521-522). *Debbie* bears witness to the fact that the model of self-certain presence to self is flawed: it is "drek" (l. 522). We did not come to full presence and we were not meant to come to full presence: "[n]either plenty of arrogance / plenty of gauze, nor the hard wall of / fingerbones (which is memory) can erase / this fact: we were half made when the empire / died in orgy" (ll. 428-432). We are always half-made. Neither our bountiful arrogance, nor our desire to soften the hard edges of our violent past (with "plenty of gauze") can erase our perpetual necessary incompleteness (l. 428).

Neither can the edges of our biology—"the hard wall of our finger bones (which is memory)" (ll.429-430). In fact, memory (that defines our materiality—the inventive surfaces on which we meet and make the world) requires this incompleteness. The subject is always preceded, partially un-formed, sparked into life by obscure adjacency. Its origins are always finally unknown. And this discovery (that there is no absolutely knowable subject, no foundation, that, after all, we were half-made) is not a crisis.

The lack of foundation, our incompleteness, our utter relatedness is our passion; it is the power of our un-power. Our absolute dependency on the Other, on others to be brought into existence is our rapport, our possibility. As readers we embody this relation and we are, as a result, "exquisite" (l. 6). We are "[v]ariant opening" (Party Scene footnote). That is, we also embody the failure of any narrative to contain its subject: "[n]arrative deletes its centre" ("peroration" n.p.). The narrator admits to the obscurity of her own words: "obscure / as Love!" (ll. 432-434) because, love, the ecstatic relations of our exteriority, renders freedom impossible. We are not self-sustaining; we are "given over, in each other's hands" (Butler 39). We are unknowable to our very selves by virtue of the utter integrity of our relations to others.

Our subjective relations with the Other require a passional submission—identity and loss and thus ceaseless "variant openings." In that variant opening there "is a death" (l. 462) and a subsequent subject who requires that "death" in order to emerge: "me I require a clearing just for a / moment [...] (465-466). In all acts of identity there must be the ecstasy of relating and the foreclosure of

identification. In Debbie's "March Thespians Against Knowledge" this process is perpetual, repetitive and frenzied. Debbie's majorettes march a dark route against the Father's Knowledge. In Father's knowledge, knowledge is isolated from life and language is the spectacle of the alienation of the human from itself. Debbie's majorettes are the invigorated inversion of this spectacle. Agamben writes, "the violence of the spectacle is so destructive and for the same reasons it retains something like a positive possibility that can be used against it" (*The Coming Community* 80). In the spectacular march of the majorettes, the subjects are ecstatic flashes, momentary, fragmented and stunning acts of linguistic relation: THE ROUTE IS DARK, THE DRUMS ARE THROBBING AND / —with flash eye-contact, slicked / back sex and super-skinny pin-striped / provenance— synchro-swimming stars / (shown here as majorettes) / pass across seven monitors [. . .]" (ll.582-587). The majorettes march across seven monitors. Here, the spectacle and the surveillance and reproduction of the spectacle is mimicked and then demolished:

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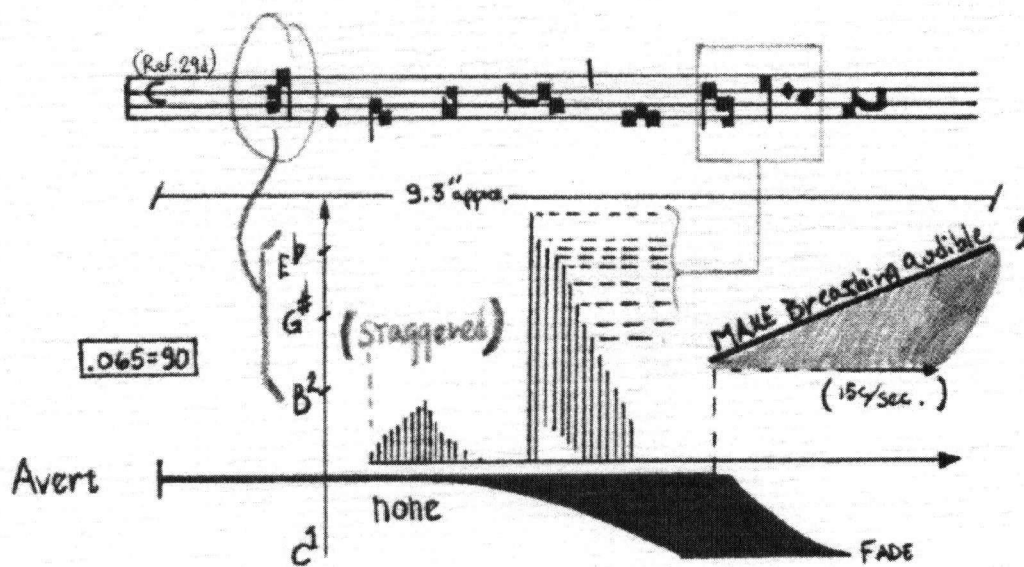
ver screens with their powderings, slashings
loadings of frank scattered strokes of un
matchable tones into the vapour
break into many many deaths and
many anguishes and hammerings ah
the strumming walk these rude these audacious
matchings raw coloured hurled subcatan

eous (588-595)

Through this demolition, the subject is conferred with recognition that observes itself is a process of dispossession and identification. The subject is both the terms by which the Father confers recognition and the variant openings by which that identification is of absolute alterity: “blossoms porosity portraits Father” (ll. 595-596). Faced repeatedly with the loss that occurs in recognition, the subject is compelled forward, outward beyond itself ever seeking new relations, new possibilities, new identities. The “lesions of meaning, these blossoms” in blossoming porosity portrait the Father, full of holes, deeply porous with new possibility (ll. 21-22). Debbie is “a participant thespian / against knowledge authority decays” (ll. 597-598). Authority decays in this process of subjectivication. All authorities—the new blossom portraits, the new *Is*, the participant thespians are also absolutely mutable, contingent: “shall we take I out close it up re / photograph it (ll.599-600).

Thus, when we, as the configured readers are called upon, as “[g]entle colleagues” (“peroration” n.p.), when we are asked to submit ourselves, to image ourselves beyond ourselves, as ourselves, as Debbie, we (the readers) submit in radical passivity—for therein lies the perpetuation and the interruption of our possibility: “Debbie learns the word loveliest [and] feeds the future to our capsized mouths” (peroration). From the fabulous, gory, precarious invention of Debbie we are fed language returned to itself, the future, the possibility of existence and its imminent spill as we receive it in our capsized mouths.

CHAPTER THREE

Low Fancy

Ex.1. LF 29

Interview

Catriona Strang Vancouver January 13, 2003

Q. Why Write?

A. *because it's so much fun*

an imaginary audience.

work a conversation through with thinking.

reading is existing

can't imagine a solitude

irrelevant whether it [the writing] gets read

sly, frivolous

Writing: a way of understanding, of intervening. a way of looking at stuff.

Taking apart shared cultural experiences, the perceptions of a nation: look at them, remember that they are assumptions.

Look at how they are built, build new ones? —no [not new ones], suggesting other ones.

[Writing as] pointing to the arbitrariness of what is.

[It is] not a critique of the arbitrariness.

[but rather] what if it had been this way?

[But] not modernist angst—the centre does not fall.

Who needs a centre [anyway].

Maybe we all need small ones [centres]—not big ones.

The big hegemonic “they” [are] indescribable—“they” don’t exist.

Hegemonic, I hate that word.

Is hegemony necessary?

Is it possible in small ways?

[Writing is the] suggestion of the variable.

Q. Can writing be a revolutionary practice?

Maybe a beginning of a sketch, a model.

Q. Can writing be an originary space?

A revolutionary space? Maybe.

[But, it] has to be pretty extraordinary.

*I mean people have been writing this way for a while now . . . just because you
use a noun as a verb . . .*

[Maybe writing is more] a moment of consciousness.

Originary experience is VERY problematic.

*[I see] originary experience as a way to hegemony, toward "proper" response,
"improper" response.*

Originary experience maybe as bursts of consciousness.

Taking down the stuff that stupefies.

Language as playground.

Defecting the nation

A lark, posturing

The origin of so much is personal.

Dicking around. I always end up writing about sex.

My method: muck around.

Literary excursions.

Zukofsky, rewriting, translation.

Carmina Burana [Low Fancy]

fucking with authority, fucking with fucking.

Writing backwards, writing on top of, adding to the pile.

Excess, musicality.

EVERYTHING is material [for the poem].

The complicit nature of writing?

A way out

Salvation, accessing salvation?

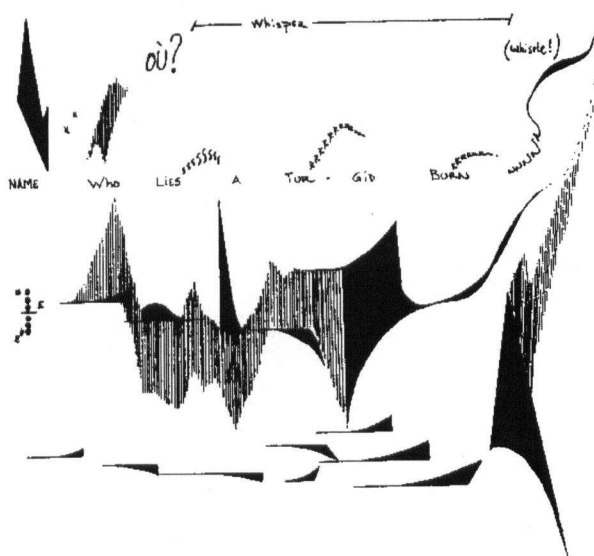
Leading to clarity. JUST MAKE THE POPE SPEAK GERMAN.

EVERYTHING IS MATERIAL

TRANSLATUS

"it hums"

Low Fancy



Ex.2 LF 25

Debbie is concerned with the production and extension of a constitutive negative space, a radical passivity. Vulnerable surface extends—ecstatic, impressionable; clearings take place. *Topoi* form. Meaning occurs through recognition and loss. In *Debbie*, there is a narrative (or two) that constitutes time in a syntactical, chronological manner. *Low Fancy* is different. Presence occurs through constitutive word tensions, not loss or absence. *Low Fancy* does not sustain a chronology. It is a graphemic, phonetic and lexical scape of alternating registers. To explain *Low Fancy* in Spinozist terms, I note Axiom 1, 2 and *Lemma* 1 of Part Two of *The Ethics*:

1. All bodies are either in motion or rest;
2. Each single body can move at varying speeds;

Lemma. Bodies are distinguished from one another in respect of motion, quickness and slowness, and not in respect of substance (41).

The organization of Catriona Strang's *Low Fancy* is linguistic and musical. The linguistic is informed by the dense musicality of the text itself where words are bodies in motion or rest and each body moves at varying speeds. Time and space occur without predictability: diachronic, synchronic. Word bodies are distinguished from each other in terms of motion and speed and never entirely with respect to their substance—that is, the literal meaning of the word is either secondary or equal to the musical pace of the text. The musicality of the poem is illuminated in the music scores by François Houle.⁴⁴ The almost

⁴⁴ The scores are composed and written by François Houle.

incomprehensible scores and the rhythmic language instruct readers to be readers, to read out loud. To extend sense so that reading becomes a plastic mode of perception. Hear with your eyes; see with your ears; read with your voice, your body. SING with your mind:

I am, I am. Strident, prating

yammering a verge in so

dent or tear can

rid you (fact is)

if knocked is apparent.

Or let not one squeal for a clear route. (20)

Strang's poetic translation of the original *Carmina Burana* is striking in its lack of attention to the literal meanings of the original text, which is the source of its poetic life. Strang does not read the *Carmina Burana* text literally.⁴⁵ Rather, she listens to the words of the original text and composes a phonic musical response. Strang's idea of translation emerges from a particular and shared sensibility. She follows Louis Zukofsky's practice of the homophonic translation in *Catullus* (1969), his and Celia Zukofsky's translation of the Latin. In his preface, Zukofsky states that he follows the sound, rhythm, and syntax of Catullus' Latin, trying to "breathe the 'literal' meaning with him" (243).

In her transliteration of *Carmina Burana*, Strang echoes Zukofsky's "Catullus:"

45 Strang consciously worked against a literal translation. This resistance became more difficult as she became more familiar with Latin in the course of her project (in conversation Nov, 2004).

Aurelius, father, assure that the o numb

Gnawn hungers' odious quota of errant

Ort, sump, alias the years' runt of anise

Pea to caries scoops my love to such snores (24)

Like Zukofsky, Strang transliterates the sound of the Latin words into English and strives to give words a relational and material presence on the page:

Sick my suss can end

Or all out neck

Our facet's solo; which fugues

My proxy fatal or collars

A blandest inept—my cordy dolour (50)

Working with words like bodies in motion, Zukofsky and Strang manifest their Spinozist sensibilities. The idea of lexically inexact translations is not unique to Zukofsky. In "The Task of the Translator" (1923), Benjamin states that any translation which intends to perform a purely transmitting function is a "bad translation" (*Illuminations* 69). For Benjamin the language of translation "can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony" (79).

To an extent, *Low Fancy* expresses these understandings of translation. *Low Fancy* is in agreement with its original in that the phonic translations speaks to the Latin verses in rhyme, assonance, resonance and dissonance. The poem is not a harmony in the sense that is an agreement of consistencies, but rather an agreement of discrepancies. In the terms of

musicologists Feld and Keil, *Low Fancy* is a “participatory discrepancy” (104). That is, the harmony is manifest in the activity of relation that brings the work into a temporary unity that consists of a collectivity of tensions. In the harmony of *Low Fancy*, differences are not smoothed over; they are the origin of the text’s agency and democracy. The disruptive qualities of the text bring sonic, visual and lexical relations into play. *Low Fancy* “does not cover the original, does not block its light” (Benjamin 79). The phonic resonances of which the poem is composed and that reverberate between the Latin and the English uncover both languages as sites of grapheme, sense and sound (79). However, Strang also contradicts Benjamin who notes the differences between poets and translators (the poet is “spontaneous, primary, graphic” and the translator “derivative, ultimate, ideational”) (76-77). *Low Fancy* is primary and derivative, ideational and graphic. *Low Fancy* consists of precise notations and arrangements of sound semblance caught by the ear and often rendered simply as blocks of spontaneous sound: The text is graphic both in its word placements and musical scores. It is derivative in the sense that the poem’s source is the *Carmina Burana*. It is spontaneous in that the directions of its words and their resulting relations are unpredictable:

To pour, or—improbable—Ignite! Is

Colour, ire at pallor. (12)

As poet/translator, Strang situates herself in the position Benjamin reserves for the translator. That is, she is on the edge of the forest, “facing the wooded ridge [...]

call[ing] [. . .] without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one" (76).

Hejinian's essay "Forms in Alterity: On Translation" (*Language of Inquiry*) also expresses the sensibility from which Strang works. Hejinian extends Benjamin's ideas of translation by positing translation as an epistemological event that "scrutinizes the nature of knowing" (296). Accordingly, translation is not about finding the most exact and corresponding word or phrase to match the original, it is "about dissolution and reconfiguration" (297).

Strang translates the original *Carmina Burana* translated by Helen Waddell (first published 1929). She is committed to translation as a practice of dissolution, diversity and reconfiguration. Working against a principle of unification, Strang rewrites the *Carmina Burana* in order to muck about with sense and sound. Part of this play and reconfiguration entails the translation of language into music. Or rather, the text makes more audible the already musical nature of language. This section notes the musicality of the text as a site of excess and address and performs the musicality of words to offer new limits to intelligibility. New sense emerges out of openings made by the dissolution of the lexical into tone, note and beat. Previously established horizons of meaning shift in alternate forms of address. Our ears are renewed and other subjects emerge: "Let abundance read it / Eve, I am consenting. / Very jocund, um, prod it (9). We are encouraged to read with abundance, with joy, "to "prod it" (my emphasis 9). The movement from sense to sound to new sense and new subject and back to sound again facilitates this prodding. This pattern of movement permeates the

poem: highly disjunctive stanzas precede relatively more intelligible prose sections. For example, the first two pages of verse ends with this stanza:

Rise you! Of this hell it's
torpor or high malice;
extol it all to us or
curse us—I've all there is.
soul is the beneficial
key; oh such lick bravo! I
received it to pore—"EM."
Venus is sick at our stalling tempers:
Nostrils, pectorals, is
reficiate ardour for them."

On the next page is prose:

Imagine my SURPRISE at finding my own intervention
glossed over in a marginal note, a conjectural emendation
of three distinct hands and an ungrammatical linger spiked
with flickering brawl, as striking as a rotten tapestry's green
parrot or the blackening tooth of a mouth whose tongue
knows no frontiers . . . (10).

This paragraph is followed by another stanza:

But not sussurant.
Trip us is carmine: "aha, contrary"
or: means flower at the spine

full of all and can or
 call it tenerous, curious
 delect at us (useless):
 It's a key. (11)

This movement from the less intelligible stanzas to the more intelligible prose sections also occurs on a smaller scale in the stanzas. For example, "delect at us (useless): / It's a key" contains moments of sense ("It's a key") and subjectivity ("us") that dissolve and then resolve and then dissolve again. The translation practice in *Low Fancy* is one of "dissolution and reconfiguration" (Hejinian 297). In reading we are sweating for meaning. We cannot take this poem lying down.

Barbarism

"Ignite!"

Low Fancy

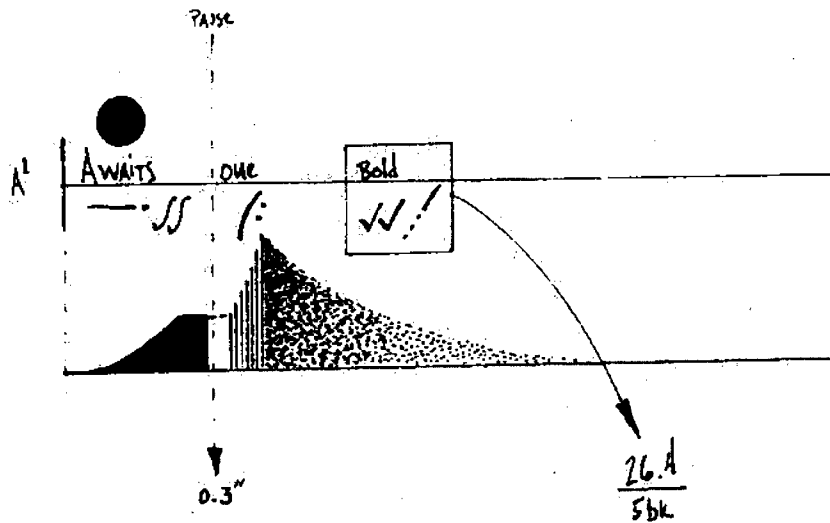
In "Barbarism," in *Language of Inquiry*, Hejinian reinterprets Theodor Adorno's edict, "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarism," as a challenge to continue to write poetry (325). Hejinian claims that it is the task of poetry to resist writing in the same language as the social systems of power which produce atrocities. The poet should take a barbarian position, one of not speaking the same language, one of critical opposition, "occupying (and being occupied) by foreignness" (326). As readers of *Low Fancy*, a text of some foreignness, we are invited to occupy the same position. The barbarism in *Low Fancy* is complex and tied to Strang's translation practices. *Low Fancy* is invaded by the barbarians of

its own making—they are reader and text. They are the forces of subversion in the poem (occupied and occupying) that subvert a linear progression of meaning. In the paragraph sections, they are named: “dispute’s proportions” (31), “my hooligans” (49), “my lewdsters” (59), “my rabble” (59). These barbaric impulses have purpose: “[a]ccorded neither authority nor influence, the wandering scheme [is] calculated to DISLODGE a dedication to veneration” (19). The textual barbarousness of *Low Fancy* is dedicated to dislodging linguistic systems of continuity and readerly veneration for such systems. The barbarity is audible, oscular and yet often, momentarily, civil. As Strang writes on the book jacket, the first *Carmina Burana* is a loose collection of verses sung by “travellers, masterless clerks who studied, drank, wrote, prayed, screwed, gambled, and begged their way around 13th century Western Europe.” For Strang, the verses’ vernacular use of what was considered the authoritative and sacred language of Latin is “heretical.” Waddell’s perspective in her descriptions of the texts and their authors in biographical notes at the back of her translation, is somewhat different. For Waddell, the *Carmina Burana* is a “profane service book” (281) of the vagabond clerk, the glutton, the profligate who understood the “gravely impish” potential of mediaeval Latin (321). While Strang shares Waddell’s affection for the texts and their configured authors, she reads the textual cheekiness as a form of anarchic expression. *Low Fancy* is compelled by this perception and is an anarchic and even barbaric text in its own right. For example, on the backblurb of the *Low Fancy*, Strang brazenly defines her the work as a

“translation,” and while she did work solely from the Latin text,⁴⁶ as noted above, she purposefully and energetically misappropriates the term. The transference of the literal sense of the Latin text to an English text is of no concern. As Strang points out, her translation practices, make use of “various types of translation” (identification with the text, use of the text as a means of experimentation, physical abuse of the text and extension beyond it)” (backblurb). Strang experiments, extends and abuses as a means “to examine specific linguistic and social histories and to engage their contemporary traces” (backblurb).

The poem’s translation practice appears to work on the basic assumption, first, that there is no formula for equivalence between languages, and second that meaning is always inaccurately transferred. However, *Low Fancy*’s extreme performance of this inaccuracy is celebratory, hopeful. As Butler points out in *Bodies That Matter*, words are unable to survive reiteration without inaccuracies in transmissions. Meaning depends on reiterative linguistic practices and on the holes that these practices inevitably leave in meaning. Language exists through reiteration and reiteration must fail. In *Low Fancy*, Butler’s understanding of the imminent failure in the transference of meaning is placed into ferocious overdrive. Without even trying to provide a literal translation, Strang illustrates the unforeseen contexts that occur when the transfer of meaning becomes a massacre.

46 Catriona Strang in conversation, April 2003.



Ex.3 LF 7

What follows is the first stanza of *Low Fancy*. It instructs and perplexes. We don't know how to read the musical score any more than we know how to read the text.

Avert sighs, ignore decorum:

our stops redeem us

whose florid queen's a kiss.

We tail libation's cult

though time proffers its necessary insult—

our token penance. (8)

The first two sentences appear to be imperatives—possibly, we are being told to “[a]vert sighs” and “ignore decorum” (*Low Fancy* 8). As readers, we cannot know exactly. The address might be to the narrator herself, himself, itself. We have to translate. To translate as barbarians occupying a position of foreignness, we might avert sighs to rid ourselves of the sentimentality that is our attachment to the known. We might “ignore decorum”—spit into the face of the so-called beautiful

and whack off the heads of the so-called wise. We occupy and are occupied by foreignness. The possible invitation affords us (as readers) an active agency that is both destructive and constitutive.

The stanzas are destructive in that they abort our fond expectations of lexical advancement—they do not signify in a straightforward manner. The poetic subject also “ignores decorum.” That is, it echoes the audible and visible form of mediaeval Latin of the *Carmina Burana*. “[I]gnores decorum” looks like Latin and the words are borrowed from Latin. And while the *Low Fancy* refuses to transfer the lexical meaning directly, in this case, the poem almost does: *decorus* is the Latin neuter for fit or proper and *ignorare* is not to know or to disregard. The text acknowledges the linguistic boundaries of history but refuses to obey them and yet these limits are the means by which *Low Fancy* proceeds. Sentimentality and decorum are social forms that contain shared meanings. But, it is “our stops [that] redeem us” (8). Linguistic foreclosure is necessary in the constitution of human subjectivity and meaning. However, the repetition of that foreclosure instigates its rupture. The subject, decorum, sentimentality is rendered audible because it rests on the edges of unintelligibility. Placed on the frontiers of the foreclosure, the plastic boundaries of legitimacy in meaning are exposed, punctured, eroded. Our stops redeem us in that they denote the necessity of the boundary, and its vulnerability to repetition (the necessity of repetition in the utterance guarantees a failure in its repetition) and barbaric intrusion.

Reading like this is barbarous (razing walls, burning bridges); reading like this is redeeming (something else occurs in the spaces made). Yet to occupy and

be occupied by what Hejinian calls foreignness (326), reading must begin in the gaps between the words, at the edges of the points of ink that signify the stop: the period, the full stop, but also the precursor of a space, of absence. If we (this “us”) have been written out of history, what identities lie in the stop, the proscription that a stop necessitates—to stop, to define, one must exclude. What was excluded? What is excluded now? If we have been unwritten then so must have others. What is written in the space that is not written? What possibilities lie in the space that follows? The reader must locate meaning in absence, outside the proscribed boundary of the sentence. The end allows for the possibility of future meanings, future identities. Read then also where the page is empty, where the signifying stops—the collective unwritten: “our stops redeem us”.

Leaning into and pushing away from a history of identification and erasure—the poetic voice points to the limits that ensure our dissolution. Subjectless, meaningless, the subjects dissolve into the linguistic. It is the common place to which all subjectivities return. Averting sighs and ignoring decorum, the reader might not find herself bound by the limits by which history has defined *us* but she is still awash in words. That is, this poetic voice is a subject that is not one subject. It is a subject that does not presume to take an objective stance. It is a constructive and constructed voice that points to its/our constructedness: “whose florid queen’s a kiss” (8). The origin of *us* is a florid queen who *is* a kiss. The origin of *us* is the relational friction of two lips.

As barbarian subjects and readers of this text, we are constructed in repetition, rhythm, intonation, repetition and rhyme *and* the logic of syntax. The

relationship of these forces ignites what McCaffery calls the “libidinal economy” of the text within which language is shown as having a dual nature—one that is logical and one that is pre-linguistic (*North of Intention* 154). Yet, in *Low Fancy*, this is not a dialectical relationship. In the “kiss” that is the “florid queen” there is not one lip of absolute logic and one lip of the pure unlinguistic (8). Each site (each lip) is permeated with sense and materiality. The ambiguous image of the queen affirms this. In the political context of the text, the power centre is a queen (significantly *not* a king but not necessarily female—maybe a drag queen). The subject is florid: flowery, embellished with flowers of rhetoric, embellished text or music, flushed with red, excessive and often indistinguishable in meaning (*OED* 1992). Her floridity places her in the realm of excess. That she is a kiss, a site of desire, of relational bodily friction and flesh suggests that she carries and disrupts the syntactic logic. She is the site of unintelligibility and intermittent, shifting lexical clarity.

The lip trope evokes Luce Irigaray’s metaphor in *This Sex Which is Not One* from “When Our Lips Speak Together.” Irigaray defines an anti-penetration eroticism, a feminist system of a symbolic articulation that is proper to women and that takes the two lips (the mouth and the labia) as symbolic of ethical relations based on closeness, reciprocity, respect in which being is relational and not absolute. Butler argues against Irigaray’s exclusionary identification of metonymy with the repressed female because it places the feminine in the realm of the excluded (*Bodies That Matter* 46-49). Butler calls into question either a masculine or feminine imaginary and suggests that “the body that is reason

dematerializes the bodies that may not properly stand for reason” and that Irigaray’s feminine excludes its own set of subjects such as slaves, children and animals (49). Butler’s point is that since the phallus is also pelagic, errant and capable of attaching itself to anything (262 n 26), Irigaray’s exclusionary position is one that assumes the privileged (albeit in the negative) status of the phallus. However, the flux of gender in the never-identified voice in *Low Fancy* is perpetual, there is no privilege. The text extends Irigaray’s realm of the excluded and the included and embodies Butler’s notion of the attachable and detachable phallus. The florid and nameless female monarch or the cross-dressing male subject is a kiss, not a phallus. In *Low Fancy* the subject positions are erotically relational—touching on all sides (oscular). Thus we “tail libation’s cult” (8). The collective pronominal *we* is determined by these relations (this touching, this tailing) and the energy they produce. Toasting (Cheers!) portions of ignited reality, we join on at the end of the processions, we trail systems of belief and their ceremonies of worship:

We tail libation’s cult
though time proffers its necessary insult—
our token penance. (8)

Despite the fact that time will offer “its necessary insult”—all meanings will erode in the endless reiterations that must take place. It is a token penance indeed that time should render belief and its celebrations of meaning utterly mutable. This is the token penance. We are not actual but temporal, and this (penance) is our release. Tailing on at the end, we can let go when the parade dissolves. And

this release affords us *Low Fancy*. The poem discusses, enacts and temporarily attaches itself to the movement that is meaning in language. The reader moves alongside horse-paced with the poem to inhabit Hejinian's barbarism, to batter old icons of sense, to bring down old spectacles of linguistic power and to fly bright new flags of stunning sense—brief and ardent sense.

Let abundance read it

Eve, I am consenting.

Very jocund, um, prod it

God—EAT! I invent us. (9)

As reader, as barbarian, we are called to “[l]et abundance read it,” to “prod it,” to “EAT!,” and, later to “Rise” (9). We are pressed to read with excess, to dismantle, to dismantle, and invent. It is the reading eye that “invent[s] us” (9). We are *I*—and we will be invented—[in] “new and gaudier forms”—by this difficult text (9). The relationship of the reader to the text is complex. The voice is strident. Let abundance read it. Let ‘it’ (the gender-neutral pronoun / subject) be read with abundance. Why? To increase it. To push the death that is meaning into a libidinal economy. The line breaks after “it,” but read the sentence as ending with “Eve.” Let abundance read it, Eve. Let abundance read it [as] Eve. Letting abundance read opens the door to wider reading.

Unlike Ezra Pound's famous Modernist statement that poetry must “charge language with meaning to the utmost possible degree . . .” (63), *Low Fancy* reads each word already charged. The text works through word combination and dislocation to loosen each word from its previous associations,

to ensure the preservation of its unassailable exteriority, to enable its further and infinite relations. To read abundantly releases language in its present capacities to other capacities and proximities; it releases language to another elsewhere. The challenge is to write poetry that returns language to language. Poetry that returns word bodies to the immanent plane of linguistic possibility: 'let[s]' 'it' mean 'Eve.' The poem suggests we read the gender-neutral linguistic subject as other than male, to posit that *it*, for the time being, as female. Consider this possibility. To read the generic human as female throughout history would be to make the whole world unwritten: "new florid face I am / a renovated flower" (9).

But if we as readers "read it Eve" is our participation consenting as the text suggests: "Eve I am consenting" (9)? To read it (as Eve) is to embrace the critical opening present in the Christian-Judaic story of origin, in Western European linguistic history where up until the last thirty years, the generic subject has been gendered male. To read it Eve opens language to abundant possibility. It leaves an opening for chance and happenstance: "Very jocund, um, prod it" (9).

This non-literal translation of the original Latin text performs language as a place of failed memory and slack repetition where human identity is made and lost and made again. The text's flagrantly inaccurate rendition of the original Latin speaks the unspeakable as it emulates in excessive and exaggerated terms the impossibility of the pure transference of meaning— it forays into the unintelligible. Our participation is consensual in that it is always consensual whether we read *it* as Eve or not. What has been hidden from us is this fact. We participate in the construction of the human, the female, the male, the subject, in

meaning. We are consenting. We always have been. Thus, the text points to our perpetual agency, our dire complicity. It points to Vico's principle—*verum-factum*—truth is made. In *Low Fancy*, truth is lexical resolution and it occurs at high speed and as a result of improvisational relations. Through the velocity of these relations, meaning accelerates and declines: “a venial mood—on my knees / for your breast—serenade her / (and redden temporarily)” (9). It is necessary that language be returned to itself and *Low Fancy* performs this necessity by illuminating the processes of meaning and the resulting inventions (and disinvention): “I invent us” (9). We exist in this declaration—“[n]ew and gaudier forms”—but teeter on the edge of annihilation in the wake of its subjective nature: “extol it to us or / curse us” (9).

Note the inventions and their perpetual erosion and renewal: a third of the way down the stanza sense dissipates: “I / received it to pore—‘EM’” (9). This sentence dissolves into sound. We can happily read as far as “I received it to,” but the mind seeking sense trips over (or into) the unexpected “pore” and there flounders in the unintelligibility of “EM”. At its lexical peak, EM is the letter M from the alphabet—a primary site of entry into language (Mama!). At its lexical least, EM is pure and shouted sound—EM! Thus, EM refutes en-culturation through language. It is the unintelligible, a barbarous act carving into the boundaries of what Butler calls “the foreclosed,” and expanding the realm of linguistic possibility (*Excitable Speech* 41).

Writing that takes place on the borders of the unsayable exposes the boundaries of the legitimacy of meaning and identity and marks a further limit to

the possibility of signification. “EM” is immediately followed by this next sentence: “Venus is sick at our stalling tempers: ‘Nostrils, pectorals, is reficiate ardour for them’” (9). The sentence offers renewed possibilities of sense (albeit limited). Venus is sick. Reading re-configures. The oddly placed preposition: Venus is sick *at* our stalling tempers—*stalls* our already stalling tempers. As readers, we are stalled so readily. If we are to be stalled in our tempers (our very constitutions) so easily by the linguistic unexpected, how can Venus re-signify? How can the reader re-read it Eve? Such stalling, in fact, might make Venus sick. The preposition *at* situates the subject physically in the midst of a location—at school, at home. If our constitutions are stalled sites of linguistic determination, Venus might sicken there caught within a representative nightmare—the much objectified, abjected, female love-goddess. However, as Butler suggests, the limits of language afford its subjects an agency. In a high-speed improvisational performance of meaning’s rise and fall, *Low Fancy* writes another Venus against history’s definition. Possibly sick at our stalling tempers, locating a critical opening in the limits of her identification, the new Venus speaks: “Nostrils, pectorals, is reficiate ardour for them” (9). To reficiate (to restore and re-fresh) ardour to them (to us), “nostrils and pectorals” will do.

The goddess of love, Venus, now revives ardour in her readers with different body parts. No lily-white breasts, gold and flowing hair, no longer naked and offered up on a half-shell, but rather nostrils—an apparatus necessary to breath, and pectorals, breast muscles or a breast protector, such as armour. The breast, a fetishized symbol of enticement used in Western European

representations of women, becomes a site of body strength or protection. Rather than evoking convention's images of female sexuality and vulnerability, this Venus refreshes ardour with images of breathing orifices and power. The images are fragmented with brevity and suggestion. Their limits are not defined; they breathe in space and fissure.

key; oh such lick bravo! I

received it to pore—"EM."

Venus is sick at our stalling tempers:

"Nostrils, pectorals, is

reficiate ardour for them." (9)

By re-misappropriating the already rude or even heretic Latin text, *Low Fancy* diverts the force of its already diverted limitations and furthers the tentative possibilities of emerging subjectivities. Within the mechanics of reiteration subjective reconfiguration is always a potential impossibility. Repetition itself and its necessity disallow breached linguistic transmissions, and yet language is meaningless without it. The word must be repeated, reficiated and yet its repetition must always be flawed. Meaning requires (simultaneously) this prison and its momentary escape.

These mistranslations (or phonic conversions) allow the words to transgress their previous boundaries of signification and yet maintain the echo of the original text. The first stanza of page thirty-five offers another example of a phonic translation. The relation of the Latin version to the original is striking. Waddell's Latin *Manuscript of Benedictbeuern* reads:

Dic Christi Veritas,
 dic cara raritas,
 dic rara Caritas
 ubi nunc habitas? (192)

Waddell's English translation follows:

O Truth of Christ,
 O truth of Christ
 O most dear rarity,
 O most rare Charity,
 Where dwell'st thou now? (193)

And Strang's translation in *Low Fancy*:

Christ's dice, it's true.
 My dick can rarely, rarely care;
 It's as caring as a nun's habit.
 Ubiquitous. (35)

Strang's translation is hilarious and heretical. However, it is not homophonic. It is a funny lexical mutilation. Christ's truth ("*Dic Christi Veritas*") becomes an oath expressing the capriciousness of divine providence, an image of Christ playing at dice: "Christ's dice." In the context of this textual universe, God does play dice and in the following "it's true" (35) Christ's truth goes generic. This truth reads like the authoritative yet origin-less truth of the

common that Wall mentions that begins, “It is said” (17). Truth spoken from a generic common turns truth’s origin from heaven, to the human.

The following sacred Latin lines “*dic cara raritas*” (“O most dear rarity”) are translated: “My dick can rarely rarely care” (*Low Fancy* 35). The dubiously gendered narrator’s statement about his or her “dick” attests to the dick’s lack of sentimentality in its sexual exploits. Here “*dic, rara Caritas*” (“O most rare Charity”) is used to extend this declaration (Waddell 192,193). This particular dick is as “caring as a nun’s habit” (*Low Fancy* 35). Not only is the dick casual, uncaring and repetitive in its sexual endeavors, it is as cavalier as the institutionalized paragon of virtue in her sacred duties. The dick is also as uncaring as the nun’s habit in another sense—like the nun’s habit, her costume, the dick is a raiment of performance. The final line consists of one word: ubiquitous. The translation is a torqued and phonic reading of “*ubi nunc habitas*” (192). It implicates both sites of performance: shallow dick and callous nun—they are everywhere. Butler’s notion of the pelagic, portable, non-privileged phallus is also reinstated here: this dick is ubiquitous.

The text is an embodiment of Butler’s position that the phallus can attach itself to a “variety of organs” (*Bodies That Matter* 262 n 26). There is nothing to suggest that this particular ubiquitous dick belongs to a male subject. If this dick is in fact as common as a nun’s habit then this dick can be read as an accessory, a portable accoutrement of identity, authority, and pleasure. You can, for example (if you can afford it) buy as many brightly coloured latex penises as you’d like at

Womyn's Wares on Commercial Drive in Vancouver. *Low Fancy* conflates the figurative phallus with the literal dick.

Strang's crude phonic sometimes literal-but-butchered translation of the *Carmina Burana* explodes the sacred of the original. Its use of the words' sound in order to determine meaning brings about a translation that plays with and razes the institutionalized authority of the church and God. The translation is sometimes rhyming, often rhythmic and consistently blasphemous. Meaning meant to preserve itself erodes in the music revealed through its reiterations. These translations, reconfigurations, embody the history of the word—its weight, and its dissolutions. In this way the text performs what occurs in language all the time. Reiteration (an act of memory and repetition) is always a mistranslation. Language must break with prior contexts in order to remain potent. Thus, reiteration must always fail (either by intention or accident) (Butler *Excitable Speech* 182 n 32).

In order for meaning to proliferate, words must be reiterated: reiteration exposes and ensures the failure of meaning. It is within the failure of meaning that the possibility of meaning lies. The unstable nature of the word, made unstable through the necessity of reiteration and the promise of that reiterative failure is not an occasion for unease but a generative loss of certainty within which new meaning, new subjects and new communities extend. The word is always a site for re-articulation and poetry that points to itself as language and language as a shifting site of signification is a manifestation of this possibility.

The non-literal translation of the following text is another example of the productivity of the failed reiteration. In Waddell's translation, the *Manuscript of Benedictbeuern* reads: "IAMIAM rident prata" ("Now the fields are laughing") (212-213) and this line is translated in *Low Fancy* as "I am, I am. Strident, prating" (20). The repetition of the terms of the original results in visually logical mutilations and the aggressive and flawed transference results in productive sites of new meaning:

I am, I am. Strident, prating
yammering a verge in so
dent or tear can
rid you (fact is)
if knocked as apparent.
Or let not one squeal for a clear route.

(*Low Fancy* 20)

IAMIAM ridemt prata
iamiam virgines
iocundantur, terre
ridet facies
estas nunc apparuit
Ornatusque florum
lete claruit.

(*MS Benedictbeuern* 212)

As readers, we become, like the narrator, strident yammering prating subjects. We cannot help but use language in ways that have not been legitimated. Through the necessity of "strident" repetition, meaning fails (it falls to prating—repetition), to yammering (meaninglessness) and yet it is subsequently re-legitimated.

In *Excitable Speech*, Butler claims that the process of reiteration is the nature of performative speech (42). In *Low Fancy*, the drastically non-lexical translation highlights the corrosive and generative process of repetition as the very nature of language. Strang demonstrates that, as renewable actions, words are not entirely constrained by one narrative or by their original contexts. Yet

while words have no clear origin, they and their readers have their own immediate contexts within which meaning is made.

In part, *Low Fancy* was written simply to see and to hear what happens when translation is pushed its usual limits of establishing lexical equations. However, the poem was also written to attune its readers to the linguistic agency they, as readers, already have as a result of the necessary and porous nature of reiteration. Through reiteration, linguistic agency can be found in the very terms that restrict us. As readers reading we shift meaning slightly, simply by reading. With drastic practices of purposefully garbled transfers of sense, we can bolt from linguistic rigidity and insert critical openings anywhere. Strang finds this possibility in her translation of the mediaeval songs:

to pour, or—improbable—Ignite! is
colour, ire at pallor. (12)

“[T]o pour, or” is likely a dismembered rendition of *torpor* and “improbable” is a translation by ear of the adjective *improbabilis* (to not be deserving of approbation, objectionable or exceptionable) (“*Improbabilis*”). “Ignite! Is” comes from *ignitus*, fiery, glowing (“*Ignitus*”) (*Lewis and Short Latin Dictionary*). The following examples illustrate the relationships between the three texts: the original Latin used by Waddell, Waddell’s translation, Strang’s translation in *Low Fancy*.

Cum contingat te prestare,
Its bibas asque pare,
Ut non possis pede stare,

Neque recta verba dare

(*Ms Benedictbeuern* 186)

—

Should any take upon him

To drink without a peer,

Although his legs go from him

His speech no longer clear

(Waddell 187)

—

Come contingent; you're a pressed pair—

It's a bribe as obsequious

As no paid stare possessed

And not quite dared: a verbal wreck. (*LF* 63)

—

It is clear that in *Low Fancy* the literal meaning of the Latin is not the main focus.

The relationship of *Low Fancy* to the original is in its reiteration based on association, sound and improvisation. With the translation and original at hand it is possible to see the connections, how the words might have arrived where they rest. But Strang's anarchic translation practices are also arbitrary and playful.

There are other possible possibilities. That is, as Strang notes in the interview, her writing "*point[s] to the arbitrariness of what is*" (Strang Interview above).

However, despite the massacred rendering of literal sense, slightly discernible flecks of meaning occur: "[c]ome contingent," "[i]t's a bribe as

obsequious / [a]s no paid stare possessed,” “not quite dared” and “a verbal wreck” (63). In a sense, as readers we are asked to read the text in the same way that it operates. We must read within a state of contingency. This is asked of us in a particularly and paradoxically literal sense. In *Low Fancy*, meaning is contingent, in the sense that its particulars are conditional and dependent on the relations that made on the page between words by the reader. The word contingent comes from *contingere*, the Latin past participle of *contingens*. It means “to touch on all sides” (*Lewis and Short*). As readers we are asked to approach the text on all sides, to osculate, kissing. Comprehension is not certain or even desirable. Meaning is subject to the dynamics of our approach and our touch. Meaning is provisional, adaptable and so possible. As Strang writes, the text asks, “*what if it had been this way?*” (*Interview* above) Meaning is often accidental. It is also “a bribe” and contingent on our position in the world. How we locate and what we locate meaning is determined by who would like us to know what and for how much. So much depends on us accepting the conditions of the linguistic. Up until now, we have “not quite dared” to be such “verbal wrecks”, such iconoclasts, such linguistic barbarians.

Sit, tidbit, salutes are said:

our vast pottering

Evacuates simpers, or sums

a maximum squeem. (63)

Yet we find that in razing sense’s ground, we locate unexpected and even civilized “tidbits” (63). Contingent also means “that which falls to one in a

division or apportionment” (*OED* 1992). One of the ways in which *Low Fancy*’s contingent meanings are able to persist in their intermittence is that they occur in small local occurrences, tidbits that do not necessarily lead to another or accumulate in significance (except incrementally). These tidbits are like “dispute’s proportions [that] wander outrageously through passages embedded with sinister understatement” (31) in a kind of “participatory discrepancy” (Feld and Keil 98). The proportions are small, contingent and interrupt not only the possibility of an embedded, invisible narrative but also the movements of each other. These interruptions work like Negri’s notion of Spinoza’s democracy that consists of continuous interruptions that remove the possibility of totalizing Power (*Savage Anomaly* 114). I discuss the democratic potential in *Low Fancy* in the Democracy section below. However, this potential suggests that like many barbarians through history, *Low Fancy* is not as brutish as it might seem.⁴⁷ As Hejinian points out, to inhabit a place of foreignness is to speak *barbaros*, to babble outside of the dominant discourse (325-326). She suggests that it is precisely the task of poetry to inhabit a poetic barbarism of strangeness and raze language for new possibilities of meaning (326). As reader barbarians we greet the “tidbits” with civilized cordiality: “saluts are said” (63). Sometimes, apparent savagery is a misinterpreted gesture of civility.

Or come sit in enamoured regions;

⁴⁷ For example, recent scholarship provides a new image of Genghis Khan. In *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (2004), Jack Weatherford describes Khan as ruler who established a regular census, created the first international postal system, organized international law, granted religious freedom and abolished torture (xix).

I'll appall all dear protests.
 Our indignant tantrums
 sever a query's meek peril
 and muck back loot's calm:
 presume us oscular
 we sustain a choice neck
 celebrate the night air. (63)

In "our vast pottering," in these "enamoured regions" we collect new meaning depending on what we touch and if we touch it from all sides (63). Thus, "we sustain a choice neck" (63); that is, our burgeoning poetic subjectivities are not decapitated by regulating presuppositions. You may instead "presume us oscular" (*Low Fancy* 63). That is, we osculate, touching at more than three points of contact (*OED* 1992). We are oscular: a kissing mouth, touched on all sides (*OED* 1992). A contingent kiss and in such kissing "we celebrate the night air" (*Low Fancy* 63).

MUSICA

and tune a nicked pair

Low Fancy

All bodies either move or are at rest

Spinoza Ethics

X. 3 LF 44

In *New Science*, Vico writes that no matter how beautiful the ancient cities were the barbarians could not be restrained from setting them on fire. Only Orpheus was able to bring the recalcitrant hordes to their knees and he did so “through their ears” (NS §79). Apparently, even if you can read rich visual beauty as a spectacle of power, you can still be seduced by soothing arrangements of sound. But Strang’s non-literal phonic translation of the *Carmina Burana* is not designed to tame or soothe the brutish. It is meant to raze the walls of imposing linguistic orders. In *Low Fancy*, the musicality of language is made audaciously audible, not easily digestible. The rough lyric of the texts interrupts with sound and excess; it lays open the necessary fragility and transience of all meaning and thus marks sound as a possible means to dismantle power. As Feld and Keil suggest the “discrepancy” itself is a figure that preserves the necessary tensions that afford agency to the text. Feld and Keil also argue that this tension resides between the Apollonian restraint and Dionysian ecstasy without having requiring resolution (98). The tension prevents the movement of the piece from falling entirely into just one “essential” state (or “groove”). Discrepancy captures the rattling back and forth between the logos and the ambience, the word and the feel, syntax and emotion. The power of music lies in how the two are actively negotiated. One of the list of terms equivalent to discrepancies offered by Feld and Keil is “inflection,” (98). All sound practices are inflected this or that way; their social situatedness is already a form of inflecting. Feld and Keil suggests that this “participatory consciousness” promises a deeper and more satisfying knowledge of who we are (97-98). Keil is careful not to embrace participation in one

uncritical sweep, privileging a micro dimension of losing oneself to the collective groove: he speaks against participation on a national level, as in German fascism of the 1930s. Keil's discrepancies are similar to Spinoza's notion of democracy. It is the small discrepancies between hands and feet within a jazz drummer's beat, between bass and drums, between rhythm section and soloist that invite us to participate (98). It is these loose, wobbly articulations that draw people to the music and the dance floor. Spinoza would say that it is the discrepancies between the moving, relating bodies that insure the preservation of democracy and the constant interruption of totalizing power.

The dense musicality of *Low Fancy* accentuates the participatory discrepancy of materiality of the word and its extreme, necessary relation to repetition or inflection. Poetry alerts whoever listens or repeats its stanzas that the event of language taking place has already existed and can return again an infinite number of times. The verse is a site of memory and repetition. The event is metrical, musical:

The verse (*versus*, from *verto*, the act of turning, to return
[...]) signals for a reader that these words have already
come to be, that they will return again . . .

(Agamben *Language and Death* 78)

Low Fancy stresses the musical event of language and enacts its infinite return to the meaninglessness and fragmentation that lies beneath all returns, all words, all identities. The textual unintelligibility of *Low Fancy* constitutes the musicality of the text. The repression of clear sense brings out the sound of words

and their relations. The musicality in *Low Fancy* is often disjunctive: “full of all and can or” (11). It pulls back: “and numbs” (23). It rushes to discrete points where beats spike and ride: “thighs dick and grab mine” (49). It waves: “my chosen fitting career” (49). It drags triplets and plays two over three: “Come, best / and game me” (46). Forward motion: “your toothy era nets / an apt senectitude (40). Harmony *is* disproportion, discrepancy: “Some volage runs a vivid rile / if equality’s dialogue / sits diligent, so kiss / the amended censor—I alter none” (58). It is the fine grind of relation as it jolts and heaves. This harmony is figurative, iterative—not assimilative. There is no melody. No pressing for sameness. Here strife is strident and rife in its dis-membering of identity oppression.

Leg it lightly;
 memory’s an inquest
 whose tonic cumbles ethics:
 addled, ambulant, and glorious
 a becoming bonus [...]
 and cite supine eras
 to prime my dear hocks
 so, script, console us: “kiss, sit.”
 Dignity’s done. (34)

Maybe memory is an inquest into the human and language is memory’s tonic—its tones and sounds, its syllabic accents, its changes in pitch. If language is a tonic that restores memory to itself it is thus because memory is linguistic. Language is

the tone, the sound and music of memory, and music is the tonic of language: the restorative capacity of sound to heal words of their overburden of signification. Words are the sound of the mind's eye and there, in the ear, the sound of language becomes an investigation into itself for new relations.

Peter Quartermain cites Ian Hamilton Finlay, who, after reading Catullus, wrote a letter to Zukofsky claiming that the poem "eliminates the forward pull of syntax" (220n). This elimination is typical of *Low Fancy*. Word placement unceasingly dislodges the forward progression of the syntax. Textual sense is diminished and, as a result, sonic resonances are accentuated. Sound becomes predominant in the poem, because the reading eye becomes desperate for syntactical connections. Lost and dislodged without a continuous narrative flow, the reader relies on the ear to create relationships in the sound of the words on the page and these connections work backwards as well as they do forward. Imagistic and thematic inconsistency abound. Fragments of logical sense provide momentary relief.

However, the relief soon dissipates and even chronological evaporation occurs. The elimination of the forward pull of syntax in *Low Fancy* suspends time and centers the reader in the diachronic singular word (suspended, held in abeyance, away from sense, words exist laterally through time, compressed histories await present contexts). The diachrony of the singular word emphasizes the necessity of proximity for meaning. Whatever word is next to another word will afford them both with particular recognition. Through the suspension of the forward march of syntax, the poem emulates the process of sense making. It also

emulates the physics of the Spinozist universe. Like word bodies, Spinozist bodies exist in horizontal relations to each other. In their persistent desire to be (*conatus*), these bodies surge forward, backward, sideways, seeking relation (recognition), banging up against that with which, they are, as of yet unacquainted. This is the making of the world, of reality, of reason and common sense. When we find a word or a word relation with which we have a healthy relation: we pause; we constitute reason, reality and a collective we.

Or not. If memory is language and an inquest that cumbles, lexically, it benumbs ethics (healthy relations); it oppresses us and deprives us of power. Aurally, however, pulled from syntax's sway, the sonic relations are rich: "whose tonic cumbles ethics." Reaching (in reading) to the end of the line, tonic rhymes with ethics. The "s" in ethics, however, disables the rhyme of the "ic" in the sibilance. This takes the rhyme back a word to "whose." Whose ethics? Ethics whose? The word cumble is also dense with connotation. To crumble without the "r," might be to cumble. Perhaps this could suggest a tumble from sense, a roll off the wall of sense, without the notion of disintegration present in crumble. As readers of this text, we are syntactically "addled [and made] ambulant." We are loosened from specific systems of signification language and pushed every which way.

But this could be a "glorious / a becoming bonus" (34). Or an accumulating heap (a cumble) of signification underneath which we are buried, oppressed. The accentuated musicality of the words opens them to language, to memory, to meaninglessness and back again. A word could be a cumble: a high

pile of accumulation. Its referential capacities also oppress word relations out of sound and into sense. When we become too familiar with these relations we are benumbed to other possibilities of sound and meaning. We get stuck in old routes of sense. And when we get unstuck, we have to start making stuff up. Like I am. This reading is my transliteration. I read the dictionary. But I have no proof of the accuracy of my interpretations. There is no proof, no accuracy—the poem fights against a coherent sustained literal interpretation with every word: “cite supine eras / to prime my dear hocks” (34).

Somewhat desperate and held in the diachrony of words laid on the page like this, I head to the dictionary. I want the reassuring narratives in the etymologies: ‘supine’ is a Latin grammatical term applied to forms of a verbal noun or it is an adjective used to describe the position of the body lying on its back with the face up (*OED* 1992). A verbal noun sounds Spinozist: a noun active and naming (constitutive) in its activities. A supine body (lying on its back) sounds a little less active. But it does evoke the image of a horizontal body. Supine is also used to describe the position of body parts. It can also mean moral or physical indolence.

The narrative of the Spinozist active verbal noun that I have cooked up fades in the face of this definition that suggests extreme passivity. And so I wonder about supine eras. A system of time, a formative point in history, a portion of time or most precisely and most originally, 500 CE laid on its back, face up, indolent. Time as passive, not rushing forward. What if we cited such supine eras. What would we hear? In eras, I hear ears. In cite, I see city. “To

prime my dear hocks" (34). To charge, to fill with information, with liquor, to prime like a pump "my dear hocks". My dear caterpillars, my dear German wine, my dear stick with a hook at the end, my dear last card. On the other hand, hocks is also a verb. And so it might be "my dear hocks;" that is, "my dear" that hocks (my beloved who disables humans or beasts by slicing their hamstrings).

The lines are music and the words are strange histories of random human associations. The baffling sense leaves us with phonic certainty: "so, script, console us: 'kiss, sit.'" (34). Thus, "[d]ignity's done" (34). The notion of worth or merit no longer exists. There are no more absolutes. Only the certainty of ear treats: the heavy s's of "script console us" that ends in the neat rhyme of "kiss sit." The extended s is nipped by the sharp t of "sit." Lexically, we are all just low fanciers, swilling about in the confusing muck of meaning and making it all up as we go along. Absolute dignity is done. But in endless relations of sense and sight and in the predominance of word music, new relations proliferate.

The discursive paragraphs that follow the musical stanzas are relatively more coherent. Each prose paragraph emerges after a series of several stanzas. The narrated passages directly address the reader: "Imagine my SURPRISE at finding my own intervention glossed over in a marginal note . . ." (10). Each paragraph fades into the following event of the more musical stanza: "But not susurrant / trip us is carmine: 'aha, contrary' (11). The movement in *Low Fancy*, from verse to prose and back again emulates the Vichian understanding of the development of the human in the world—from poetic thought to logic. It also emulates the daily processes of meaning that Butler explores in *Bodies That*

Matter and *Excitable Speech* that constitute and reconstitutes our real. It is also part of the musical composition of the poem. Through the reiteration of words, meaning erodes only to recover, only to erode again. The musicality of language facilitates meaning's erosion and return. Noting language as a site of rhythm and sound opens it more readily to the critical openings in meaning's sway. In the aftermath of the lexically corrosive musicality, the prose passages locate a critical opening and reassert sites of lexical meaning. In the text, as in language itself, this movement of resolution and dissolution is perpetual. But this movement is not desolate; it is the linguistic music of our possibility.

Although the previous sections demonstrate that a conventional close reading of *Low Fancy* is possible within certain limits, it is also impossible. A conventional close reading whereby the poem's meaning is defined is something the poem refuses. Moments of referential clarity exist but they are not coherently linked and do not progress in a consistently logical fashion. Perhaps the text refuses to be read. But this would be to give the term read a too narrow definition. By its very nature, *Low Fancy* extends what it means to read; as music it "avoids impossibility" (Zukofsky *Preposition* 197). In this section, I focus on how this textual music avoids possibility. By listening to the dense musicality of *Low Fancy*, I note how the poem pushes language beyond literal definitions to a site that is always inside and outside of meaning.

Jacques Attali writes that the need for social control necessitates a concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody in music (7). The Teaching Assistants' Strike of March 12, 2003 at the University of British Columbia

attested to this. During the strike the University of British Columbia banned the union from “making noise” on the university campus—no songs, chanting or banging of drums were allowed. Attali also writes, that it is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality (6). *Low Fancy* is a composition of such noise.

In the disruptions and awkward withholdings, its musicality reveals silence, alterities and absence. The text communicates nothing—not even its materiality. Rather, it becomes a point where language disappears into itself and is revealed as outside identity and essence. Language is exposed as foundationless, without essence or particular significance: “from high iced nips / save to *kiss* it” (17). There (without foundation, without essence) lies the very (and the only) possibility of the human. *Low Fancy* both performs this possibility and claims its invention: “I invent us” (9). To invent us is to write, to use language is to pass from *I* to what Wall terms the “neutralization of all identities,” of all subjects (117).

The musical sections of *Low Fancy* embody this neutralization. These sections exhibit what Wall terms “pure being seized,” pure being seized in language, without essence (14), without identity—this is us: “oh such lick bravo! I/received it to pore—‘EM.’” (*LF* 9). This is the possibility of a general mimesis that is in fact not representational, but performative in that its very instability is positive.

Thus, “[l]et abundance [in turn] read it,” (9). While this abundance refers to a lexical abundance, it also points to a material abundance. These words have

come to be, they will dissolve into sound, into music, and they will return again.

To write or to speak is to inhabit the rich musical ambiguity of discourse.

Through its musicality, the text asserts another kind of generic authority—it exists both in time, as music, and in space—on the page. Abundance reads it, and in this reading the reader passes into a purely linguistic space, a place of excess where the subject is prior to itself. To read or write in this abundance is to be stripped of all identity and to become image and sound of no one, of no thing:

who fugues

my proxy fatal or collars

a blandest inept—my cordy dolour? (50)

In this abundance, it is impossible to be or not to be. It is to inhabit “the pure passion of communication, where passion *is* communication” and where no one can fully answer for what is written (Wall 118). The pressurized and musical nature of the word patterns destabilizes sense and direction. The lack of conventional context combined with the displaced and uprooted urgency of the awkward rhythms breeds jolt and disruption.

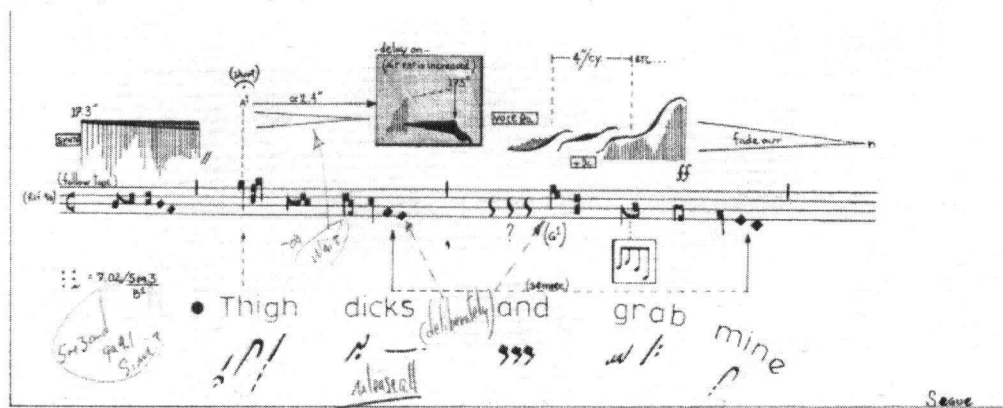
Spate. Swank like lilacs

through a lewd calm might cap

this fulgid verging. (15)

The voice is audacious, bent on dismantling—“I’ll dump you all” and “lash gesture’s civil hunt.” The musical scores attest to the poem’s musicality with hard graphic evidence. The hand-written scores by François Houle support the poem’s claim to music and attest to the need to “read” as listening and

movement—reading is a gesture, as a series of movements. These scores also imply that the musical event of *Low Fancy* is somehow a primary or original text. The mixed text and score marks language as performative, as performative as a musical composition. The score notes the measurement of beat and denotes rhythm and levels of sound and instruction: “fade out,” “deliberately,” “delay on,” “Wait” (69). These denotations of sound and rhythm development are mingled with body parts—“Thigh,” “dicks” and other instructions: “grab mine” (69). The clear visual blend of lexical with musical, with performance instruction in music and in bodily matters brings into words into visuality and activity. Like the textured typography of *Debbie*, the page in *Low Fancy* becomes an activated component of the text itself:



Ex. 4 LF 61

To my ear, the Latin echoes (familiar to the English language) disrupt the bodily activity with allusions to words that remind me of dusty school crests with vacuous mottoes, medical terms and abstractions. The poem performs both the confines of its origins, the weight of its historical associations and its future possibilities. Words are, as if, on ice: frozen on “the ridge of a glacier” (12),

drunken on “high iced nips” (17). Or melting: “Up top it’s hot, sweet, and I’m malleable” (18). In these verses, meaning slips as lyrical convention is stretched, parodied, broken, isolated and signified sometimes as raw sound. Word conventions shift meaning into notes and signification into tone and beat:

Hire us
lucid; I’m
finesse undue.

The loosening is provocative and challenging: “Hire us/lucid” (55). It is erotic, a kind of undressing: “I’m finesse undue” (55). *Low Fancy*’s accentuation of the musicality of language manifests a relation of desire between music and language. Desire flares but the relation is brief. The proximity that facilitates the desire and the ensuing moment of recognition is arbitrary. Like the ubiquitous dick, the very nature of the text’s erotics release it from the stability or sentiment of an absolute identification. Objectification is difficult. Recognition appears and fades.

Appropriation is impossible. The fetish has no time to get settled:

Our random
signals a fatal
tale, and cools
a lusty queue—(55)

Our random relations in this text signal the end of any tale. It cools, at least briefly, our readerly desire.

In “Music, Language, and Composition,” Adorno claims that language and music are connected in their relation to the absolute. He writes that language

states the absolute in a mediated way within which the absolute always escapes; whereas, music reaches the absolute immediately and yet "in the same instance darkens it" (116). If, however, the absolute is a human linguistic construction, as it appears in *Low Fancy*, the mediation of language is the means by which the absolute is lost and the means by which it is made. For Vico, this loss and this finding came about through music: "[t]he founders of the gentile nations . . . formed their first language by singing (*NS* §230).

According to Vico, music and language came about simultaneously—as one. The relation of language to music is that music is the place of the deconstruction of meaning and the force of its invention. The dissonant (non-melodic, non-harmonious) textual musicality in *Low Fancy* necessarily darkens the human-made absolute because lexical intention is swallowed up as music summons the foundationless-ness of language and simultaneously sounds the possibility of meaning.

The dissonant music of *Low Fancy* works against any agreed upon literal interpretation and manifests the impossibility of pure signification; it thus ensures the possibility of all signification. Like Vico's metaphor, music manifests the impossible possibility of meaning. Music ensures the obfuscation of the absolute. The complete, the real, the truth must always fade away in sound and form in order to allow for new signification to re-occur and continue. Thus, there can be no language before music and there can be "no music before language" (Derrida *Of Grammatology* 195). In *Low Fancy* music is the acoustical image of language. It sings what the lexical seeks to hide. Music is the perfectly exposed being of

language and the discordant atonal musicality of *Low Fancy* blurs the boundaries of signification, scatters melody and intention, pulls back from sense and harmony. It gestures as if it were a name—it names nothing:

Said it hums to a durity
(fuck!) or able, it, ridge of a glacier
is brumal, as fur [...] (12)

If Vico's metaphor makes the mind visible, *Low Fancy*'s music makes the mind audible (for example, this stanza always brings to my mind's ear my fridge).

Music constitutes a reiteration, the same only very different—the grind and tear of the unforeseen through the stitches of the seamless. This iterability is not an “imprisoning of desire in the interests of achieving perfect communication” (Quartermain 13). It is “finesse undue,” it is a dick ubiquitous and it moves against the closure (satisfaction) of desire, identity etc. The musically pretty and lexically denoted ubiquitous dick might appear problematic in a text that seems to have feminist leanings. However, the movement of Strang's text to jar the sacred is bent on disrupting orders of both religion and gender. Turning Christ's truth to Christ's dice and “my dick” is consistent with this disruption.⁴⁸

Reading “it Eve” is not indicative of a feminine essentialism; this Eve is abundant—not an inclusive female subjectivity. Reading the subject *as Eve* does not gender the subject but textualizes it as a performance, a proliferative field of insatiability. Reading “it Eve” engages the reader in reading as a wider field of desire, play, possibility, cognition, recognition, stumble, blind and kiss. It is not a

⁴⁸ This is not non-feminist, but rather a wider notion of what feminism entails.

movement towards completion but a seduction of disorder, difficulty, volition: votive, not violation. This disorder in subjectivities, genitals, gender and identities is embodied in the text musically through its disjunctive rhythms.

Ezra Pound calls rhythm “form cut into time” (202). The form that is cut into the time of *Low Fancy* is a counterrhythmic interruption through which representation itself is altered. The movement that occurs in between the interruptions is the representation itself. To bring the production of meaning into music, into the realm of the gesture, into Eve is to encounter representation itself—that which has been inherited and awaits its own event. It is a new and affirmative productivity that urges the future into other forms of reality:

saves a cease; it

lets you vein

congenial. All voice

A more licit “I am” (*Low Fancy* 20)

Placed as a reader in between phrases, between words, lines, the gaps save us from ending. The gaps let us exist congenial. The spaces in between point to and place us in relation to that which we encounter. These encounters are bound in the congeniality of next-to-ness without appropriation. The spaces between us are not bridged, erased, surrendered. The interruptions remain. Our commonalties merge from actual proximities—not imposed realities. The voices, the energies that these relations inspire are “more licit” more actual—not unlawful. Subjectivation (existence)—“I am”—rests in a “debt’s urge”. The hollows that words leave, the

spaces between, the insatiable urge to satiate the insatiable desire of recognition—
this is the event of representation itself.

DEMOCRACY

Come contingent

Low Fancy

Low Fancy is loud. It is poetry that shouts. No gaunt, laudanum quaffing consumptive Romantics in puffy blouses and drafty salons.

This is cocky poetry (ubiquitous) and audacious with its “jocund urgings” (27). Posturing. It sings to be read out loud. And the voice addresses us (maybe) — Readers! It insists that we be readers. Identity expands from the possible and the female. The text is feminist. It rewrites a new Venus. But not only. It’s also cross-gendered, homo-erotic, hetero-erotic, boyish/girlish and lewd: “on my knees / for your breast—serenade her (and redden temporarily)” (9). As in *Debbie*, the subjects in *Low Fancy* have generous and shared proportions.

To read this generosity reactivates us. If it doesn’t kill us, it might redeem us. And who is us? In a sense, *Low Fancy* is deeply impersonal, a public act that explodes the subjective solitude of the reader into a collective, common and democratic linguistic space.

Reading includes the entire anonymous community required to make an *I*. To read is to pass from subjectivity to all subjectivities and *Low Fancy* accentuates this movement. It is also a space that includes the writer—the anonymous scribe, “[s]omeone but no one in particular” (Wall 117). Like the reader, the anonymous writer works in a community of words that precede her. To write, to read is to neutralize all identity to pass from *I* into “all ‘I’s’” (117). In

Low Fancy, *Carmina Burana* manifests this community and Strang's translation extends the community into the present, into a linguistic collectivity that locates meaning within its historical and present contexts.

To read thus (as reader, as writer, as anonymous linguistic space) is to redeem, re-vise, re-mean. We are the public subjects of the bright lips of a gaudy queen: sound and desire, friction and relation. Our most idiosyncratic postures, our most intimate genders are the effects of the most public expressions and impressions. *Low Fancy* is the civic linguistic performance of us. We are previous, present and absent in the text. We have come before; we are revised again and we are deappropriated of all identity in this passionate place. Substantially insubstantial. We are the noise of *Low Fancy*. In words we are singing and the song is not our diversion, and the song does not solicit, and the silence awaits our reply: "All this / newest, novice love is riven" (27).

Although *Low Fancy* is an acoustical re-presentation of the *Carmina Burana*, these textual moments of musicality—"Nostrils, pectorals is" (9)—precipitate moments of some lexical clarity: "(10). The vacillation of sound and sense from music to meaning, from verse to prose emulates the movement of language as it determines and erodes identity. Lexically, these paragraphs express a complexity of social articulations. They refer obliquely to ideas. They also appear as commentary on the previous stanzas. These sections bear the possibility of the invention promised in the musical sections: "I invent us." Meaning is more discernible and subjects are formed. Yet in the prose the syntax cannot sustain its overburden of significance. The commentary turns in on itself in excess and

decadence. While meaning is somewhat more discernible and subjects are formed, language remains the central subject:

Imagine my SURPRISE at finding my own intervention
glossed over by a marginal note, a conjectural emendation
of three distinct hands and an ungrammatical linger spiked
with a flickering brawl, as striking as a rotten tapestry's
green parrot or the blackening tooth of a mouth whose
tongue knows no frontiers. (10)

The "intervention" is not specifically identified but it is textual. Even as a commentary of the beginning stanzas, the text becomes a discussion of the dynamics of language. One's own intervention, one's own narrative is always glossed over, over-written by other narratives ([a]t least "three distinct hands"). Our narratives are always layered; chronological time collapses, subjectivities merge. That is, history is always a commemorative rhetoric that merges with the present, glossing its interventions with terms of recognition that correct and prescribe our present identities and forms of address.

These emendations may be censorious but they are always conjectural and communal—there is no absolute truth and there is also no single point of origin to any meaning. There is always more than one author. In this case, the gloss is an "ungrammatical linger" (10). Language always exceeds its own rules. Language is no well-oiled machine but more a "flickering brawl" alive in its own social conflicts, drunk on its own zymurgies—the swell of its own fermentations (10). Its disorder returns us to ourselves. Its descriptions illustrate our parts and our

pasts as profoundly as the embroidery of old tapestries. Language is like the blackening tooth; corrupt with its own decay, its own lack of hygiene and worked over and over by a tongue that knows no bounds.

Always riddled with language and left unfinished, we are a “gathering intensity that SUCCUMBS to the easy charms of the remote” (10). These paragraphs are also sites of gathering intensity and quickly they succumb to their own vagrancies, the pull of the past, the proximity of that which has yet to be expressed.

Understand that my anonymous striplings harmonized neither reason nor ingenious introspection, but with a SPURIOUS illumination stumbled contrarily through an overwrought century whose villainous orthodoxy rooted, and unquestionably lingers in an over-translated version. (*Low Fancy* 22)

The barbarous hooligans are extensions of the wandering clerics who actually sang the original *Carmina Burana*. They are also metaphors for the linguistic actions of *Low Fancy*. They go by various names and in this previous paragraph they are known as “my anonymous striplings” (22). The narrator’s “anonymous striplings harmonized” without reason or analysis. Instead they harmonized with a “SPURIOUS illumination” and “stumbled contrarily through an overwrought century” (22). These illuminations were not pure but “bastard,” not proceeding from the true source (*OED* 1992). The paragraphs suffer from a disorder of perpetual disruption. Each image is torqued to such a degree that the text changes direction abruptly or its figure is wiped out. The “spurious

illumination” is such an image. The anonymous striplings sing (harmonize) with a spurious light. The illumination is untrue—does that make it darkness? The striplings “stumble contrarily”—can you stumble smoothly? If you stumble contrarily does that mean that you are no longer stumbling? Can “an overwrought century[’s]” “villainous orthodoxy” be both rooted and found lingering in an overtranslated version? And an overtranslated version of what? Can a century be overtranslated? Are our eras linguistic? Yes, our eras and our ears. The paragraphs are overwrought, convoluted and stumbling contrarily. Meaning falls into its own holes and doesn’t necessarily crawl out. That is the role of the anonymous striplings, of the words in *Low Fancy*, they are meant to stumble always contrarily. Never still. Never sure.

The paragraphs of the poem are sites of address and dis-address. They are gathering sites of intensity that emerge and then fade into excess and then again in the musicality of the stanzas. The nature of address and dis-address that permeates these paragraphs is an integral part of their agency and it holds the power of invention. An address recalls the Other (Butler, “Giving an Account” 32). It recalls the terms of recognition through which it is recognized by the Other. The address thus reroutes the addressing subject through an external structure from which it is returned to itself. This re-routing rebuilds another story or narrative and enacts what cannot be narrated—the origin of the subject (33).

The origin of the subject is that which cannot be known and because the subject is determined by an address that occurs according to the terms of recognition set by a preceding narrative, the subject cannot fully know the terms

of recognition. Therefore, a subject cannot know itself or be fully accountable for itself. The address that furthers the subject's own narrative also acts as an interruption to the previous narrative by enacting the emergence of the self through the overwhelming Other. The emergence of the self through the address of the Other occurs in terms that both disorient the subject and are the very condition of its recognizability. Another look at the following paragraph illustrates how this address is made in regards to the disorientation integral to identity. It bears repeating because another analysis from a slightly different angle reveals the layers of significance that are at work simultaneously within the text. Meaning is curbed and yet meaning is let relentlessly and productively loose:

Capriciously, I intend to deliver these abstemious cravings
with as UNCOUTH a proliferation of unfathomables as can
flower under the tyrannous heel of a paraphrase, although
my historicity is a somewhat irregular example of its
species culled from an intimate familiarity with labourious
[sic] and partly indecipherable rehabilitations. Such defects
are no more troubling than the duly commensurate
ordination of an INGENIOUS guess [...] (31)

The terms by which the narrator is defined are obscure to her. She cannot know the narratives that precede her and yet their terms are the very means by which she has been granted existence. Through the terms of her own address, the narrator is located and simultaneously dislocated. Her solution seems to be that she will deliver this address. In this address she will profess her own sparse

cravings, her own desires for recognition in a “proliferation of unfathomables” (31).

Under the “tyrannous heel of a paraphrase,” against the tyranny of linguistic reduction, the narrative voice declares something of a call to revolution. Yet it is a revolution without purpose. It is more like a rabble. The subject will deliver abstaining cravings, simple desire with a rough excess of unfathomables, unintelligibles (the uncouth proliferations of meaning in words). The excess of these capricious deliveries will be such that they will flower (weedlike) under the tyrannous heel of reductive speech and succinct narrative.

Just as she cannot know the extent to which the terms that have identified her have been reiterated and altered, she cannot know the extent of the effects of these re-habilitations, the fruits of the linguistic labour of reiteration. Yet her “historicity is somewhat irregular” because she is still aware with “an intimate familiarity” of the presence of these rehabilitations/reiterations and the labour these reiterations entail (31). This is her own subjectivity.

As a linguistic construction, the narrator addresses her readers and furthers her own narrative, intimately aware of her lack of origin. Yet the indecipherable rehabilitations or reiterations (the very terms by which she is deemed a subject) are not troubling to her: “[s]uch defects are no more troubling than the duly commensurate ordination of an *INGENIOUS* guess” (31). The disorientation and unknowingness of the subject of its own conditions of recognizability are the conditions by which a subject is subjectivated. Lacan claims that any account given about one’s originary moments is phantasmic and any perceptions of one’s

bodily integrity are also spectral (177). Thus, the originary phantasmic moment is an “INGENIOUS guess,” a constructed condition, a fable of origination (*Low Fancy* 31).

As the subject states, the unknowability of the terms of the subject’s definitions is not any more troubling than the fact that those terms are constructed fictions—*verum-factum*. Each case is “altogether emphatic” (31). That is, that which is known (the fable) and that which is unknown is as emphatic in its influence on the construction and dissolution of the subject.

The *I* cannot tell the story of its own emergence and the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to an event it never saw because it occurred prior to its own becoming. Butler discusses the impossibility of fully knowing oneself in psychoanalytical terms (“Giving an Account” 26). She critiques the idea that we can ever re-construct the narratives of ourselves. She disputes Lacan’s notion that the phallus is a site of control through which the subject gains integrity. As she argued against Irigaray’s privileging of the phallus, Butler argues that Lacan stalls the “proliferative catachresis” through his assertion that the phallus is a privileged signifier (*Bodies That Matter* 83). *Low Fancy* has already dismantled its privilege, claiming it to be as “caring as a nun’s habit;” that is to say, “ubiquitous” (35).

If language first belongs to the Other and linguistic agency is derived from the situation in which “one finds oneself addressed by a language one never

chose” then in what sense is one integral (“Giving an Account” 33)?⁴⁹ One is only integral in relation. *Low Fancy* critiques the idea that self-knowledge or the full disclosure of an identity or an origin is ever possible: “Governed by this corrupt singularity of motive,” the subject wanders as “dispute’s proportions” (*Low Fancy* 31). That is, through these narratives we do not locate our singular selves: *we wander as contesting, relating, separate parts*. We are participatory discrepancies. We are not unified self-contained subjects—we are “dispute’s proportions” and our narratives are not our own. We wander “outrageously” through texts “embedded with sinister understatement” (31).

The drive for a single, stable origin and a consistent real leads to corrupt systems of representation. The need for an absolute origin is a singularity of motive that alienates humans from their linguistic selves. Lost to our humanity, lost to ourselves, we wander aimlessly, driven to distraction by the irritants of the unknowable. The unknowable betrays the foundationlessness of our being—something that we can neither bear nor hide—“bawling out the presence of a distinct IRRITATION [we] can neither carry nor obscure” (31). Yet despite our unknowing, our bawling in the presence of our distinct obscurity, we have the capacity to address, to speak. This is our possibility and its perpetuation and its libidinal meaninglessness. We are the address: “I am, I am. Strident, prating” / yammering a verge” (20). As linguistic subjects, we are our own articulated critical opening: we are, we are strident (we make a loud and awkward noise); we

49 Butler extends Levinas’ understanding of ethics and considers an ethics of accountability with the idea that we can never fully account for ourselves.

prate (we talk too much, we chatter and babble). We yammer a verge. We move sense to the very edge of itself and then push it over:

I am, I am. Strident, prating

yammering a verge in so

dent or tear can

rid you (fact is)

if knocked as apparent

Or let not one squeal for a clear route. (20)

Into the tear of sense and or its dent, we *rid* the subject of itself. In speaking we loosen the human from its facts. Speaking words we shift the facts that are knocked upon as if apparent, as if solid and unrepachable. No real is safe from language, from us. The ontological subject forms in the first “I am” and shifts and shimmers into the second. We *rid* the “I” of “you”. The subject dissolves in contingencies, and its relations of proximity: “let not one squeal for a clear route” (20) because there is no clear route. Yet we re-solve. Yammering and yammered we become narrated subjects again—in mid-sentence we begin. The dents and tears *rid* us of facts. No fact is apparent unto itself. Let the text expose the limits of language—its history, its temporary coherences and the immanent instability of its position and the indeterminacy of its future. Here, there is no such thing as a singular text, no clear route. The narrator delivers her address, her “abstemious cravings,” “a proliferation of unfathomables” (31). Her “unfathomables” are the “disorientations” in the narrative. Spoken, a new subject

blooms exquisite, temporary and necessary out from under the totalizing paraphrase: a "loquent visage" (20).

The proliferating "unfathomables" are delivered and so are dispute's proportions. The site of dispute is the subject herself. This subjectivation is embodied in the text because the dispute is situated like a human subject who wanders through the passage of the narrative. As Denise Riley says that, "we are walkers in language" (53). As a wandering subject, I can never be fully accountable for myself. Nor can language be accountable to itself. Every word, every human, contains a narrative through which an infinite number of previous narratives are interrupted.

Language is its own conflict of interest. In the context of address, the narrator of *Low Fancy* gives an account of herself. She reconstructs herself, addresses her readers and thus institutes a relation in language as she proceeds in astonishment: "Imagine [her] SURPRISE" that her subjectivity consists of a glossing over in a marginal note (10). Imagine her surprise to find that she had no origin, no discernible narrative.

Meaning and human identity are possible because previous terms of recognition are perpetually disoriented. In *Low Fancy*, disorientation is enacted on two levels: formally and lexically. Disorientation is the desired state. All "that is certain is a meaning that's obscene" (14).

Like the human subject, words are recognized by terms over which they have no control. Memory and repetition ensure linguistic disorientation. Each address reveals the extent to which linguistic accountability and psychological

accountability is impossible. Terms and subjectivity can never be faithfully transcribed. The text of these paragraphs discusses the extent to which the primary moments of the subject or specific texts or meaning itself are always belated. By linking the human subject with texts and meaning and enacting and discussing their basic unknowability, the text points to the linguistic nature of the human. It also points to certain language uses as a means by which we can loosen ourselves from potentially limiting, harmful narratives. In addition, it notes a diachronic aspect of language that occurs in the remnants of Latin still residing in English.

In the poem, these translations note the diachronic relations and so they carve and frame linguistic space.

Venal domicile

cumbrous and gaudy!

Even bellies vent

or I *am* perished. (58)

The poem becomes a shifting body of tone and lexical significance whose parts are held in abeyance and proximity to create altering relationships. Both stanza and paragraph provide and deny lexical meaning:

My rabble did not TRIFLE within the greasy constraints of

their vocabulary. Their voracious blasphemies irritated an

established snare to the horizons of its diablerie [...] (59)

The suspension and isolation of words in unexpected configurations work toward the exposure and subsequent erosion of previously mediated systems of

significance so that an expanse can occur wherein meaning is re-formed through new figmented relations. This resignification allows for the expression of the unexpected and the possibly previously unintelligible. It also rudely asks the question: whose words are these anyway? Extreme conditions (language and its composition) necessitate unexpected and enabling connections. The fracturing and layering of linguistic expectations accentuates and disengages language as a pre-determined by-product. Linguistic re-structuring sets words against presence.

This text is inseparable from the acts of its reiterations, the very linguistic act that informs the very textual corpus it performs. Thus *Low Fancy* ends *almost* precisely where it begins:

Avert sighs, ignore decorum:

our stops redeem us

whose florid queen's a kiss.

We tail libation's cult

though time proffers its necessary insult—

our token pennant (64)

The last stanza of the poem repeats the first stanza of the poem exactly, except for a small phonemic shift: the final word: “penance” becomes “pennant” in the last verse. Penance, an act to perform to show sorrow or repentance or absolution, changes to pennant. With a single ‘n,’ sorrow becomes a small and tapered flag, a display for signaling. The fragility of meaning is astounding. The shift results in a bright new word. For now. Time offers us its necessary insult. That is, time requires reiteration in the continuation of meaning. Yet reiteration and memory

erode meaning, scatter meaning, change identities, disallow certainty. *Low Fancy* as a translation of the Latin *Carmina Burana* is testament to that.

This reiteration of signification is our “penance”—when we are signified we are identified and we are often wounded by these identities. It is the wound of signification that shuts the subject and the text up in set identities and yet this wound also opens us to our loss and to our possibilities of resignification. This is our “pennant.” This is our necessity. Bright flags of meaning shift in wind, borne, worn and wavering in time. Signification must always consist of identity and loss and this loss contains the very possibility of future significations, new subject positions, new horizons of identity: “[w]e begin, without ending, without mastering, to own—and yet never fully to own—the exclusions by which we proceed” (Butler *Bodies That Matter* 53).

Spinoza

Low Fancy is a complex text; how it affords its readers agency and constitutes new subjects is not easily explained. One way of locating this agency is by reading the text within the context of the philosophy of Spinoza. Spinoza’s philosophy of being works towards a power of the common, what Antonio Negri calls “a democracy of the multitude” (xviii). I am also reading *Low Fancy* within the context of Spinoza’s “common notions” (*Ethics* 54-55). Spinoza’s common notions illustrate the constitutive quality of Spinoza’s vision. They are the composition of relations that occur in an effort of reason: “those notions which are called common [. . .] are the foundations of our reasoning” (*Ethics* 55). When we encounter bodies that agree with ours we experience joyful passions and when

we organize encounters according to relations that agree with each other we create common notions. The power of the common notion is constitutive and productive and engenders an experience of being based on the passion and intelligence of the common (the multitude) and its invention of new social relations. The Spinozist and Zukofskian notion of immanence is manifest linguistically in *Low Fancy*. The textual plane of the poem is the plane of immanence.

By choosing Waddell's *Carmina Burana*, Strang begins with a text of the multitude: the collection is composed of songs written and performed by wandering bards and clerks, and its title is indicative of its purpose. The words *Low Fancy* are connotative of the masses, the common (the low) and their imaginative, constructive desires (their fancy). They are also connotative of an absence of abstract sense. That is, the text is low on fancy, the figmental (mental representations not present to the senses). The etymologies of low are fantastic in their range. For example, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, in its archaic and literal form, low is a noun—a mound or hill, a grave mound, a flame or blaze, a light used by salmon poachers or the candles used by miners, a lake, a permission, or the sound of a cow. As an adjective, it usually denotes the opposite of high ("Low").

By looking at Spinoza's *Ethics*, Gilles Deleuze's notion of the Spinozist text and Negri's idea of Spinozist radical equality, I investigate the potential of the low fancy in *Low Fancy* for a democracy of meaning, for the reasoned, imaginative gathering of common notions. I ask how this text might afford its material and its readers equal and sovereign power in the construction of

meaning; how this poem might work to help us understand not what we know, but “our *power* of knowing” (Deleuze, 83).

I am not claiming that *Low Fancy* follows Spinoza’s philosophy. Nor am I convinced that Spinoza would approve of my linguistic version of his notion of being.⁵⁰ I claim instead that *Low Fancy* linguistically embodies some of Spinoza’s central principles about the nature of being and power and that the poem is a Spinozist text in a Deleuzian sense. Deleuze suggests that many writers, poets, musicians and “even chance readers” are Spinozists because they work in terms of “speeds and slowness, frozen catatonias and accelerated movements, unformed elements and non-subjectified affects” (Deleuze, 129). *Low Fancy* configures Spinozist readers of this sort.

Spinoza’s understanding of the relational social subject also allows him to construct an image of *power* that consists of the multitude and its subjective constitutions. As Negri writes, the Spinozist subject is first a physical and then historical composition; it is “a product of the physical accumulation of movements” and can “only be appreciated as a physics of collective behaviours” (*Savage Anomaly* 226). For Strang the understanding of the collective composition of the subject (first physical and then historical) is manifest in her choice of material for translation, her *delectus*. The original poems of the *Carmina Burana* are a collection of songs written by authors who existed in edges of the institutions of totalizing power. The songs reflect a collective composition that was shared on the circumference of church and state. *Low Fancy* extends the

⁵⁰ Shirley states that Spinoza had no interest in language per se (45).

collective expression and in the following relatively coherent terms, discusses the means by which this extension is possible both in the poem and *Carmina Burana*: “[a]ccorded neither authority nor influence, the wandering scheme was calculated to DISLODGE a dedication to veneration” (19).

The wandering scheme of the bards is also the wandering scheme of *Low Fancy*. Both mediaeval and contemporary texts work to dislodge their society’s veneration for certain language practices, certain forms of meaning. Both texts emerge from a collective social subject, a multitude. In *Low Fancy*, the narrator speaks of her “lewdsters” (59), her “rabble,” (59), her “hooligans” (48). These subjects dream up “their own splendour” (59) and “disport” (38). These subjects have an agency that “BRISTLE[S]” (42). For Spinoza, the multitude describes the collective social subject that is momentarily unified as it manifests common desires through a *sensus communis*—common social behaviours. The paragraphs cite examples of this common social behaviour and its impact on systems of totalizing power:

Although the ensuing discourse often had the guise of an amatory affair, it was most often fed by a generally CHURLISH contempt cloaking a rank threat that could never be altogether prohibited. (19)

Whether the narrating voice speaks to itself, *Low Fancy* or to the original text of the *Carmina Burana* is not clear. But the discussion is pertinent to both texts. Although both texts appear to write of love and desire, those affects feed a deep contempt for forms of institutionalized totalizing power and bring fissure to those

systems. The fact that the authors of the *Carmina Burana* wrote songs of love and sex in mediaeval Latin undermined the voices of authority. Waddell cites the *Capitulary of Charlemagne* of 789 in which it was declared that no abbess should allow her nuns to write love-songs (333). One of the problems with language is that you can talk about God, dicks, booze and breasts in the same breath, on the same page. The authors of *Carmina Burana* exercise mediaeval Latin fully.

In Spinozist thought, the multitude is constantly engaged in new non-institutionalized social relations by virtue of its passion and intelligence. These new relations are embodied in the poems of the *Carmina Burana* and *Low Fancy*. A discussion of these relations takes place in *Low Fancy*:

Characterized by a bitter antisacredotalism and a certain love of SPEED, the wanderer's constant vigilance produced a dangerous abundance of interceptions and pigmented the imagination of an entire century. (19)

In the case of the *Carmina Burana*, the passion and intelligence of the multitude facilitate the poems. As Strang states, these poets were travellers, masterless clerks, who studied, drank, wrote, prayed, screwed, gambled, and begged (*Low Fancy* backblurb) Musicians and clerks wandered constantly and their vagrancy allowed them to perpetuate their fecund irreverence. The repetition of the texts allowed an abundance of interventions to proliferate and this proliferation accelerated the dissolution of the linguistic authority. One of these interceptions is *Low Fancy*. Although the text was written far more than "an entire century" after the *Carmina Burana*, *Low Fancy* reiterates the audacity of the original text (19).

The poem voices and propels a history of transgression that begins with the common:

It was more than indifference. Impelled by a conscious rejection,
our recurrent conflict BRISTLED through the centuries, taking to
cover in unfavorable times and rioting at others. It was fostered in
fields, houses, and workshops . . . (42)

Yet *Low Fancy* also extends the transgressive history through the practice of faulty reiteration. It refuses the legitimacy of translation as an accurate art of the transmission of information from one language to the next. It refuses consistent lexical meaning. It rejects intelligibility entirely from time to time.

In its repetitions and refusals it forms new linguistic relations:

Am, or query invents
this ludicrous verging, come in
despite its venal scenes.

Who can unpleat all our ribbing stunts? (30)

The verb “Am” (to be conjugated in the first person singular) and “query” invents an outlandish linguistic edging—a “ludicrous verging.” The subject and its curiosity ride the edge of the appropriate. And as readers we are invited into this linguistic edge—“despite its venal scenes” (30). Despite its lexical bloodiness (meaning is dismembered) and despite its bodiness (language materializes) and bawdiness (the text plays in the rude and suggestive), we are invited to this place of language. Our new relations, our new folds of meaning, our ribbing stunts—who can undo them now? They cannot be undone. They can only by reiterated

now, only materialized. Language brought down to itself expresses us. It is the common sight of us.

The Spinozist Subject

“I sang rind””

Low Fancy

The emergence of the subject in *Low Fancy* is a powerful, intermittent and complex event. It is Spinozist in the sense that subjecthood is not endowed with a transcendent value. Spinoza, per se, is not interested in the human subject. That is, as Deleuze writes, there is *no* subject for Spinoza—“only individuating affective states of an anonymous force” (*Spinoza* 128). The human is a relational being determined by its attributes and their affects. The human has no autonomy or ontological independence. Yet it has the capacity to constitute reality. This understanding of the subject is an understanding of no subject and this is essential to relational dynamic in *Low Fancy*.

Spinoza’s idea of the human subject is material. He discusses the body, the mind, its attributes and affections, but not subjectivity. In part, Spinoza does not discuss the human subject because no stable site of human subjectivity exists in his philosophy. Despite how common this notion of the subject is in postmodern thought, Spinozist subjecthood remains a difficult concept to grasp. Spinoza’s notion of existence does not adhere to the idea that being is a negative foundation. As editors Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse note, within Spinoza’s philosophy, “[t]he problem of the possibility of a wholly and immediately positive

metaphysics remains uncompromised" (*Language and Death* xiii). A positive metaphysics is possible because Spinoza's philosophy is based on a notion of an immanent cause. All things that exist reside on a plane of immanence. Existence is derived by virtue of the reciprocal relations that arise on that plane.

For Spinoza, existence is essence, but essence is a state of energy not a transcendent condition. For Spinoza, the human body is composed of "a great many individuals of different natures and the mind is the idea of the body and is composed of many individuals" (*Ethics* 80). The human is simply a thing among things that exists by virtue of proximity and relation to other things that reside on a plane of immanence. In Spinozist philosophy, there is no force of being endowed with special rank or privilege—the human exists as a body equal among all bodies. In *Low Fancy*, language is God *or* Nature, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes. The reader approaches this infinity by the imperative that begins the second page of the poem: "Let abundance read it" (9). Understanding language as a substance of infinite possibility "let[s]" abundance and excess "read it." The substance that is language is the substance of language—words: their sounds, shapes, rhythms and meaning. As a substance, language is "full of all or can or/call it tenerous" (11). Words are "full of all"—they contain the possibility that is the human. Words are full of "can"—they are a product of and the means of human agency and materiality. Words are the bodies of our physical and emotional affections—tenerous (tender), curious (11). Yet like all bodies, words are "*distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed*

and slowness, [but] not by reason of substance” (*Ethics* original emphasis L1, 41).

For example, the phrase in *Low Fancy* “[d]elect at us” badly echoes the substance of the Latin *delectus* (11). *Delectus* means to choose or cull a selection of texts by authors for translation. This Latin word has been culled for translation by an author in order for her to exercise her transgressive translations. The three beats of *delectus* become four. A selection of texts for translation becomes the obsolete verb form of *to delight*, to delight us, or in us or, more precisely, to delight at us. To please, or to please at us. The preposition *at* is unexpected and sets its already mutated (and in motion) object off kilter. The affect is astonishment not satisfied expectation. To delight *at* an object gives the verb another kind of agency. Delight is an active affect, the propulsion of certain kind movement (a delighting movement) toward an object. “Delect us” suggests a collision, of passion, of affect.

This potent prepositional acceleration stops short in the bracketed “(useless)” (11). This time the collective subject of “us” dissipates in a rhyme and a lexical statement of inadequacy (motion is stilled). The reader rests in the bracketed “(useless).” Agency is lexically restrained, but accelerated musically in the partial rhyme of “us” with “useless.” But this is an emotionally difficult rhyme and hard not to take personally—the lexical condition of “us” as “useless” is magnified because the word “us” is graphically reiterated in the word “useless.”

However, the colon that follows “(useless)” renders this connection equal to the other connections made in the previous phrases. The linking of “us” with

“useless” is not personal. It is relational and temporary. And this is a key—there is no key. Language is not personal; it is a force of potency with which we intersect, like lines and plans. There is no intrinsic value, no index by which all terms can be absolutely defined. There is only the linguistic event of a persistent desire to be, words intersecting on a linguistic plane of immanence.

The linguistic is our immanence and yet it is “not [particularly] susurrant” (11). The text does not murmur, or whisper. It is energy apparent: “Trip us is carmine” (11). The declarative statement defines the imperative “trip us” as red. An attribute of a command is red. As I noted above, the statement is followed by a colon. So is “‘aha, contrary’ or “ and “means flower at the spine / full of all and can or / call it tenerous, curious / delect at us (useless):” (11). The phrase, “[i]t’s a key” follows the final colon (11). Except for the first line—“But not susurrant,” the whole stanza can be read as a list or as slightly different versions of “[t]rip us carmine.” “It’s a key” follows the colon that follows “(useless)”. As readers we could be tripped by the unexpected, by the affects of the word composition before us: the unconventional punctuation, the musicality of the words, the deep red connotations of the word carmine. To Spinoza, affects are the influences of affections. An affection produces an affect. An affection effects an affect. That is, an affection produces an influence, a touching. As readers we might be suffused, effected (produced) by this common carmine (reddish) place. Our relationships with the world are emotional, affectionate and constitutive. As the repeated colon extends meaning into meaning, the words all signify the same thing; they are the same thing—they are one substance, a democratic milieu, a common that is

language, that is the human. They are the means by which we effect and are effected and affected.

If we perceive words as attributes, as units of meaning even when it is difficult and we are effected and affected by our perceptions, we effect (produce) meaning and its affects (influences). We are the integral immanence of language. It must mean; we must mean; we cannot mean: “[s]aid it hums to a durity / (fuck!) or able, it (12). In the preceding and fairly unintelligible quotation, the material of the word “it,” appears three times. As a neuter pronoun of the third person singular, “it” is used usually to denote things without life and animals (where gender is not particularized).

Here the point of reference is not obvious. “[I]t” is either said or “it” is the speaker and thus has spoken. Thus, it effects and affects and is effected and affected. “It” exists in durity. As Spinoza writes, duration is the indefinite continuation of existing (*Ethics* D5, 32). In durity, duration is perforated and transformed by “it.” Thus, the unidentified subject is suspended in a diachronic and indefinite continuation of existence. The human medium and the human subject extends infinitely into space. This space is contiguous with the space configured in Vico’s just post-giant humans. It is a sensed, emotional, affectionate and constructive space.

“Said it hums to a durity” notes the diachronic ‘uh’ in hum and its mutated ur in durity. The spontaneity of “(fuck!) or able, it” places the subject, again, into this space. This line can be read as an imperative: Fuck it and “or able it;” that is, to effect (and affect) “it” is the same as enabling “it”—we (like all things) mean

by virtue of our relations. Or, the line could be read in the sense that by fucking “it,” disrupting it, we are empowering “it” to new forms of meaning and being. Again the punctuation is unexpected. The “it” is surrounded by commas. The commas prevent smooth comprehension—we read the line as “fuck or able it” with some interruption. The “it” loses its status as the subject, or, at the least, its subject position is loosened by the excessive of commas.

Again, because of the punctuation, the word “it” moves closer to sound and farther from a point of lexical reference. The subject wavers again—powered and then disempowered, depending on its linguistic relations. Its power depends on how the subject effects affect and is subsequently affected. The line embodies the recalcitrant state of intelligibility, of subjecthood and the democratizing potential of language. When “it” is spoken (as it is when “it” is surrounded by commas and brought into sound), “it” hums to its indefinite continuation of duration. When “it” is spoken it sings and extends itself into itself. To say “it” is to sing it and extend it and so “fuck” its expected position and this fucking enables “it.” The materialized “it” becomes sound and then song. It loosens its subject position, slides into the equal thing-ness of all things. Once again, when the reader “reads” the reader also “says” or sings. This saying, this singing inhabits and enables the democratizing force that language is when it is embodied as an immanent field of its own possibility.

Apprehension occurs in the linguistic relations perceived and the resulting attributes. The plan of composition is variable. It consists of relations of velocity. Meaning, and the human subject is, like all things, a composition of motions and

rest, “with dynamic affective charges” (Deleuze, *Spinoza* 128): The poem demonstrates the potential force of language, its anonymity and the subjects it informs. The stanzas in particular embody the democratic distribution of the subject among things (other words and their attributes). In *Low Fancy*, the subject forms, emerges, shifts and then dissolves as other things of equal significance arise and jostle:

I’m vernant, knocked over, the, uh (15)

The singular subject appears in the first line of the second stanza by virtue of the pronoun *I*—and it states its condition. The subject is vernant, green, flourishing, vernal.

This powerful identification is lexically interrupted in the phrase that follows: “knocked over.” The contextual interruption is then followed by a formal interruption—“,the,” The definite article appears without an object of focus and is unexpectedly flanked on each side by a comma. The commas isolate the article and block its usual potential—its gesture toward an object. The “the” cannot extend itself into identifiable meaning and because of the comma proceeding it, “the” cannot even successfully engage as an article of the following “uh.” As a result of its syntactical isolation and resulting dislocation, the “the,” becomes sound. The following uh can be read as either an ejaculation of voice or breath. As voice, “uh” involves the reader bodily; it rhymes with ‘the’ and reading becomes saying: **uh**.

As breath, the “uh” becomes a kind of musical disruption. As the phrase “knocked over” disturbs the subject contextually, it is followed by a formal

disturbance of sound and rhyme and rhythm—"over, the, uh." The reader becomes an instrument (an organ vocal) from which meaning, music and sound emerges.

This instrumentalism engages and disengages the powerfully proposed subject. The textual movement from a lexical subject formation to uttered sound and rhythm determines and undermines "I'm vernant." The potential of the isolate 'the', and the simple vocal "uh" to dissolve the subject formation demonstrates that these words have no less agency than the beautiful and vernant "I." In fact, the proximity of "the, uh" dissolves the emerging human subject into the material, marking the fact that the subjective *I* is also material—it too can be readily located and dislocated. As readers, we perceive and perform the subject's identification and dislocation.

Even a deep nostalgic love of the meaningful *I* cannot prevent its dissolve into sound. Even a need to have the first person singular textually sustained cannot render the *I* entitled to do so—the *I* is language and it lives as such. It resides next to all other words, not above. The dissolution of the subject performs the subject as a momentary state; that is, without a transcendental, ontological, inviolable condition. It exists next to the "the" and the "uh"—a sound among sounds in a vast musical field of linguistic possibility. "Spate. Swank like lilacs/though a lewd calm might cap/this fulgid verging" (*Low Fancy* 15). Here spate (river flood or an excessive amount of anything) meets a punctuated stop—the period. The stop meets Swank—ostentation or swagger: to swagger like lilacs, to swagger into flower.

But a lascivious calm might cap this fulgid (sooty) edge or approach. To flood into excess and then to stop; to swagger into flower with the possibility of an obscene calm capping its sooty, dusky edging or movement toward—these are dynamic and affective and effective charges. The words and their perceived attributes move, collide, stop, swagger and edge toward something else. Their site of immanence is language; their subjects are relations of velocity—speed and rest. The formation of the human subject in the text works on the same principle:

I'm vernant, knocked over, the, uh

fruit you pulsed for times renewed. (*LF* 15)

In *Low Fancy*, the linguistic is anonymous—it is a site where the subject has no ontological status and the speed and slowness of the word bodies engender Spinozist subjectivities in the text. Like the stanzas and the paragraphs, the textual subjects exist by their particular attributes and resulting affections. The correspondence between the form of the text and the textual subjects is no accident. The formal nature of the text determines the kind of subjects expressed. The relation of form to content reflects the force of the linguistic on the world at large. The principles of velocity, of speed and slowness, that pervade the poem create textual subjects that emerge, fall away and emerge again.

In *Low Fancy*, as in Spinoza, there is no general cause of human nature that can be ascribed to the subject. There is no identifiable general state of human subject-hood, and the subject has no intrinsic value beyond its immediate linguistic relations. These immediate textual relations involve the linguistic past and present that all language carries. Words carry with them their own past.

Meaning requires this conflation of time and repetition establishes it. This linguistic determination, however, does not render subjectivity without agency. Rather, subject agency relies entirely on the literal position of the identified subject in the text, its actual position: its relation to surrounding words. As Spinoza writes, “all bodies either move or are at rest” (*Ethics* 41). For Spinoza bodies are singular things that are distinguished from one another by “reason of motion and rest” (41).

Each body is determined into motion or rest by another body, which also either moves or is at rest. Without its relational proximity to other bodies, a body cannot move or be at rest. This reciprocal relation between bodies is infinite on the plane of immanence. In *Low Fancy*, the bodies are words and meaning is their infinite relations and movements of speed and rest: “so, script, console us: “kiss, sit” (34). Agency is determined by virtue of the words’ position on the linguistic plane, their attributes (the meanings that we the readers perceive in them) and their resulting affects and affections. Words are defined by their capacity for being affected, by the affections of which they are capable and the excitations to which they react.

The words that denote subjectivity are merely more things among things. For example, the subject pronoun *I* has no meaning in the poem beyond what it achieves on this horizontal plane of language. It has no transcendent significance—only immediate relational energy:

Read trapped, I I am virgal
as if cunning tore under

rid the face of us, though

easily you *can* dance here

It's a no appearance, not us

Not them; undone, and let clear out. (17)

Read trapped: this sentence can be read as an imperative. Read and read as you are—bound by this relational immanent field. Like Spinoza, *Low Fancy* does not promise liberation from this surface, this material. The two *I*'s embody this surface and the affects that occur by virtue of our material relations.

The first *I* is preceded by the second *I*. The proximity of *I* to *I* both lessens the force of the first *I* and doubles it. The repetition renders the *I*'s diversely—they become redundant, anonymous and emphatic. The repeated *I* is unnecessary, a pronominal excess, a subjective excess. The repeated *I* serves to mark the endless repetition by which all meaning proceeds and by which we are granted identity. Yet this identity is afforded us through the utterly anonymous *I*. Nothing is more personal or more common than the *I*. The repeated *I* is also a gesture of emphasis and collectivity. The repetition of the first person singular renders the singular plural or at least accompanied.

The graphic repetition of the *I* also marks the materiality of the pronoun. The following verb and adjective emphasize this materiality: "I am virgal:" to be virgal is to be made of entwined twigs or rods. The two *Is* side by side are rod-like. But, also to be a subject is to be entwined (twig-like) with others and by others. To be is to effect affections and to be affected and constituted by the attributes of other subjects, other things. Yet the first *I* does not bear the

description of the following verb and adjective to the same extent as the second.

The proximity is less.

The various permutations that define and re-define states of vacillating subjecthood are what Gabriel Albiac calls a “Spinozist position” on essence: “the relational reciprocity of powers” (137). The subject is empowered, absented, extended, rendered unnecessary, reproduced, disabled, enabled by its relational textual position. When the subject enters language, the individual identity I is overwhelmed and carried by language (Wall 177 n22). The two Is embody this overwhelm and its carrying. They emulate the place of the Spinozist subject in the world—on the plane of immanence where the human is simply a thing among things: touched and touching.

In this linguistic instance, it is “as if cunning tore under” (17). The spatial relation of the words is literally and figuratively expressed. It is both metaphorically “as if” “cunning tore under the repeated subject “I I” and actual: the word cunning does “tear under” the subjects. It is in the line below and it is present in such a way as to rend meaning into the unclear. The subjects’ lexical significance is cut out from under it (with cunning). The root of cunning is the Middle English word for knowing, knowledge. But, it is also an archaic word meaning ability and dexterity. Its more contemporary definition is “skill in evasion.” As noted above, for Spinoza the greater the production of energy (the result of healthy relations) the more reality is produced. In a Spinozist framework, dextrous knowledge could be the knowledge that seeks positive-energy-producing encounters and evades encounters that are toxic and disabling. Dextrous

knowledge could also be the skill of evasion. Evading the paralysing standards of meaning allows potential subjectivities new possibilities and new possible sites of reason and the real. As Deleuze writes in his analysis of Spinoza, encounters “that enter into composition with ours and inspire us with joyful passions” are acts of reason (*Spinoza* 57). Reason is also the perception and comprehension of common notions, that is, it is the perception of the relations that enter into this positive composition, from which one deduces other relations and on the basis of which one experiences new and active feelings:

[A]s men [*sic*] live according to the guidance of reason,
they must do only those things which are good for human
nature and hence, for each man, that is [. . .], those things
which agree with the nature of each man [*sic*]. Hence,
insofar as men [*sic*] live according to the guidance of
reason, they must always agree among themselves . .

.(*Ethics* 132)

According to Spinoza, new and active feelings are positive common notions and common notions allow us to apprehend relations as they are, as they are embodied with the variable and concrete terms by which they are established.

In *Low Fancy*, new and active feelings are born out of language and language is a source of reason and the common. Dexterous knowledge represents something common to bodies—either something common to all bodies (motion and rest) or something common to at least two bodies. In these common compositions the composite body has greater power. Language becomes

knowing—a process by which relations are produced and apprehended (rather than knowing as knowledge). Actively exposing its own nature as an interactive surface, the text and the subject *I* rids itself of any transcendent status. It rids “the face,” of its so-called humanizing attribute—there is no “us” in this sense. The human has no transcendent attribute: It is not sacred, nor is it identifiable: “[i]t’s as no appearance”—except in its relations and in its potential to have relations (17). There is no ordered universe, no ultimate human face. Spinoza writes, “[n]ot many words will be required now to show that Nature has no end set before it, and that all final causes are nothing but human fictions” (*Ethics* 27).

Low Fancy enacts the dissolution of these fictions: “not us / not them: undone, and let clear out” (17). Reading on a plane of immanence, the subject is relationally (not essentially) present. Here, if knowledge is dexterity and energy is propelled by reason (language) compositions are of joy and knowing could tear truth and the transcendental from under the human—exposing the subject as a relational possibly joyous site. And thus here, in this reading, by virtue of this tearing, it makes it easy to activate motion (and thus being). The relational subject is enabled by new and active feelings, by common notions. Absolute knowledge, absolute humanity are all human fictions. Tear these away, “let clear out” (17). Now “you *can* dance here” (17). Through reason (language as dexterous knowing—joyful affects), the subject can easily (more readily) arrive at relations, common notions of energy, health and agency—relations of joyful affects: you *can* dance—“easily” (17).

Low Fancy does to language what Spinoza does to the dream of a causal universe and a God who works toward a specific end; that is, it dismantles the whole system and thinks up a new one. *Low Fancy* illustrates its own renewal: "Nor must revise it" (17). In the poem, language is a random site of immanent energy: "from high iced nips [. . .] to kiss it [. . .]" (17). Tearing the false sense of order, moving away from sad passions, does not negate linguistic or human agency; it releases agency.

This release takes place in a peculiar, but beautiful, re-formation of the personal. We find relationships between words that gather and accumulate through rhyme and spatial proximities:

Of lurid totter I am
more genially ardent . . . (27)

Contextualizing these lines within the rest of the page will not help the reader discern this *I*. The subject is already a generous (albeit odd) entity. The *I* is a lurid, pale and sallow movement, vacillating back and forth or swinging, drunken with a shining red glow through darkness. Thus lit and moving, the *I* is borne towards being "more genially ardent." Its nature, its genius, is animated by keen desire; or it burns and is flammable; or it is vitriolic and corrosive. The subject is also amiably, congenially ardent and thus its fire or acidity is tempered with affability and kindness. The words are drawn together in sonic affinities. The prefix 'lur' in 'lurid' rhymes with the suffix 'ter' in 'totter.' The hard consonant sound in the suffix 'rid' rhymes with the hard consonant sound in the prefix 'tot.' The chronological progression of the syntax (from left to right) corrodes as the

resonant rhymes work backwards. The ‘lur’ and ‘ter’ are picked up again in the ‘ar’ of ‘ardent’ so that a diachronic sound core drives through the lines persisting through textual layers of syntactical time. The diachrony manifests how language works through time. The past invades the present, the present returns to the past. A subject is the totality of its resonances. “I am more” the narrative voice claims. The ‘am’ liaises with ‘more’ creating the visual possibility of more in the possible ‘amore’ (love). Or, the liaison can be read in an even richer possibility of sound and sense: ‘ammore’ (love extends into the senses (even to the tastebuds) in the extended “mm”). “[G]enially ardent” the sounds of the subject do spread like fire: ‘more’ echoes the ‘ar’ in ‘ardent’ and the ‘gen’ in genially with the ‘den’ in ‘dent.’ This subject is lurid, an alarming light staggering in the dark subject to flammability, corrosive to convention it spreads over the page crossing the boundaries of the expected *I*. How can we keep up with the metaphors (they mix and melt). Yet we can. This *I* is natural and affable and it sounds nice. As readers we find that we can hold this vast array of difference and this composition of movement in our minds all at once. This is even familiar to us. It feels a lot like thinking, like seeing, reading, and perhaps, like loving.

In *Low Fancy* the poetic subject forms, un-forms and reforms. The subject and the reader are the result of the deeply familiar (genial), deeply unfamiliar (lurid) but always emotional nature of the linguistic relations of the text. In *Low Fancy*, the narrator inhabits a shifting first person singular position (the “tottering I”)— as personal, and as common and linguistic as the pronoun *I*. In the text the *I* is ‘virgal’ (19), ‘vernant’ (15), ‘consenting’ (9), ‘malleable’ (18), and ‘strident’

(20). The repeated personal is disassociated from a linear narrative, but extended and complicated in a process that is intimate, conversational, congenial and curious: "I'd strep a resplendent search / or tread some promoted riot / but, odd, I can't —there's no / fulcrum to the well-inked day. / I'm all hymns and glass" (37). The personal takes place in the reciprocal lexical, sonic and rhythmic interaction between reader, writer, the historical text and the present text. Each member of this composed community is affectionately included, corroded and configured as an entangled social subject—or as Strang writes, a "*roused invention*" (9).

By reading *Low Fancy*, the reader inhabits this immanent textual space; therein (or thereon) she is linguistically affected and affecting by virtue of the ways and means she is able to make meaning—through her attributes, through the attributes she perceives. In Spinoza's terms, an attribute is "what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence" (*Ethics* 1). An attribute is the energy that the intellect perceives of a substance. It is that which affects and is affected by its relations. In *Low Fancy*, the reading subject is determined by her interaction with the text and the meaning she locates there defines her in a relation of reciprocity.

This textual field of possibility is available to us "[s]o long as we are not torn by affects contrary to our nature [...] affects of sadness" (Spinoza, *Ethics* 166). So long as we do not proceed contrary to our natures we have the power of "forming common notions" (166). That is why the poem begins with the request that we (as readers) "[a]vert sighs [and] ignore decorum" (8). If we are unduly attached to established notions of transcendence, Truth, Knowledge and Being we

cannot form direct relations and new forms of reason with unexpected word combinations. Meaning is to be located on our surfaces, at our places of contact, where we touch the world. Our “[l]ean edges bear a more than aural advantage” (16). In words we greet meaning through their proximity and their sound. We are asked to “deduce” what we find there, to “deduce *this* indecorous” (16). To locate “*this*” outside of decorum allows us “to be subjected,” to be conferred in a real, in a subjecthood that arises in common relations previously unthought (16). Outside of decorum, “it’s facile” (16). That is to say, a new reality, a new subject is easily produced. And such a common real and collective subjectivity is capable, affable, yielding, fluent.

Low Fancy opens language to capable reason, to its ability to configure existence. It opens language—stronger, quicker, yielding, fluent—to its reader:

Lean edges bear a more than aural

Advantage: deduce *this* indecorous

To be subjected—it’s facile.

Certain qualms deign to manage, rove

So dab it, or (tenderly) arise. (16)

In a Spinozist text, what is good is an increase in the *power* of acting. From this perspective the possession of this *power* of acting is desirable and cheerful. We access this power through reason; through reason we endeavor to join to things and beings whose relations compound with our own. In *Low Fancy* the relation that most compounds with us is language. *Low Fancy* returns the human to itself, by returning it to language and its potencies.

Deleuze writes that once we have attained the formal *power* of acting illusions fade away in a language of “pure potency” (*Spinoza* 72). In reading *Low Fancy*, the reader acts—she reasons; she forms common notions, new metaphors. These notions increase her power to act, her potency. Yet this potency is not pure: “[c]ertain qualms deign to manage, rove” (16). We may be beset with misgivings for there is no essential power, no essential common notion. Meaning “rove[s]”. Our potencies and our common notions are the representation of shifting compositions between two or more bodies. The reader’s power of action (her capacity to form common notions) is not regulated by her identifications with the text’s representations of human subjectivity. Readerly agency derives from direct textual contact: “so dab it, or (tenderly) arise” (16).

As the textual subject dissolves and resolves, new unexpected potencies develop; the reading subject is no longer bound by subjective identifications of similarity, syntax, argument and lexical consistency. Thus when she encounters “[n]or must revise it/from high iced nips” (17), she perceives the attributes of words by virtue of their proximity to each other and to her and their sound and rhyme. She perceives words and their revisions from their surfaces—their heights, their temperatures, their names: their “high iced nips” (17). This is not purity but vagrancy and its abundant encounters.

For Spinoza, attributes are “what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence” (*Ethics* I). In *Low Fancy*, attributes are what the reading mind perceives of language as containing its essence, its energy. The perceived attributes of words are their signifying potential. Because essence is energy the

reader encounters and perceives the energy of a letter or word (its meaning, its sound, its graphemic quality, its rhythm, its rhyme) by virtue of her mental and physical proximity. The attribute she perceives is a complex organization of what Spinoza calls an existing mode.

A mode consists of the affections of a substance as they are perceived through an attribute (*Ethics* I). That is, the intellect perceives the substance as having an attribute, and that attribute affects the intellect in particular ways. These affects are the mode of existence brought about by the perception of attributes. As the reader perceives letters and words as having attributes, these attributes emanate significance. These significations are modes and according to Spinoza, modes are bodies, individuals: “[individual] designates the complex organization of the existing mode in any attribute” (Deleuze, *Spinoza* 76). For example, the reader perceives the attributes of “[n]or must revise it/from high iced nips” by perceiving the letters, the words, their sounds, meanings, rhythms and positions on the page (17).

Each of these attributes exists in equality with the other. The reader’s perception of the attributes of “Nor must revise it / from high iced nips” creates modes of various existences—actual bodies of relations. These modes are bodies of existence manifest in the relation between the reader and the text. The existing mode of an attribute is the body that exists by virtue of the perceived attribute—“Nor must revise it” (17). The bodies of existence that form as a result of the attributes perceived by the reader are the troubling paradox of the imperative “nor must.” One of the lexical body or modes of affections that emerges here is one of

a negative capability that performs Wall's notion of radical passivity: "nor must".

It is a negative capability because absence is attributed with agency—"nor" obviously can if it "must." "Nor" is also a negative conjunction.

"Nor" is used to join and continue the force of a negative attached to a word in a preceding claim. "Nor" extends the negative to a corresponding word that follows. Yet the capitalized "Nor" is lacking a clear referent. Agamben asks us to conceive of an anaphora that no longer refers to any meaning or any referent, an absolute state that does not presuppose anything, "that is completely exposed" (*Language and Death* 94). The capitalized "Nor" is exposed thus. It refers to nothing apparent and yet the capitalized 'N' gives its negativity a weight. Although "Nor" is more negative than usual—its referent is unclear or missing—it is still materially potent and lexically, for "Nor must" (17).

This body of potent and substantial negativity permits the reader to revise her automatic perceptions of words and how they work. "Nor" does not have a readily visible place in the preceding narrative but this lack does not render it without significance. In fact, Nor is both exposed as meaningless and is suffused with another significance. The plane of immanence on which it resides is too endlessly productive and dynamic *not* to render language potent even when it is unhinged from its usual connections. This potency of the dislocated conjunction enables the reader to perceive other attributes more readily in unexpected configurations. The reader is less bound by the rules of grammar and syntax and she becomes more capable of making productive linguistic combinations out of the astonishing.

The potency of the un-joined conjunction ("Nor") also suggests the potent capacity of the negative or of the absent negative (without its antecedent the "Nor" is twice negated: i.e., neither me nor you nor). This empowers the reader again. If she finds that she is eliminated from the narratives of history, that is not to say that she cannot, as an absent presence, as a non-connecting conjunction, enter into potent relations. In fact, as the text suggests, she "must"—"Nor must revise it / from high iced nips"(17). The absented present "Nor" must revise "it" so that chronically missing subjectivities (human and non-human) can be yet linguistically embodied. The call to revise rhymes internally with "high iced." The rhyme marks a relation between 'revise' and 'ice' and 'high'. The relation forms a mode and has its own existence with which the reader has another relation. The rhyme causes new common notions and these common notions represent something common to bodies.

Common notions represent the same things to all bodies—extension, motion and rest. Thus, in the rhyme of 'revise', 'high' 'iced', the reader encounters her own materiality, herself as extension, motion and rest. To read "revise it / from high iced nips" literally requires extension and motion and rest. The encounter also represents something common to at least two bodies—the reader and the text. "Revise it" could refer to the preceding statement in the first stanza: "It's as no appearance"(17). As cunning (dextrous knowing) rids the human of its transcendental status, "It" has no stable appearance. It does not contain "us" or "them".

The subject is “undone” as a unified ontological being in the face of these relations, these modes of existence: “let clear out”. Other attributes are noted in this clearance. For example, the word “let” stands alone. Its meaning can no longer be assumed. It is only the potential of release. Through the words dislocation from a subject, the reading mind is “let” into further possibility of relations by which the word may make encounters that will create further linguistic bodies of power.

These encounters will be common notions. They will not be fictitious or abstract; they will represent the composition of real relations between the existing bodies—the text and the reader. As the reader reads she encounters a composition of relations. These relations characterize bodies because they combine with and affect one another with images. She is affected by the isolated subjectless verb and the word is in turn affected by her affections. To “let clear out” is to let “let” off the hook of syntactical lexical clarity, to let it exist in the multiple possibilities it affords. Let Nor revise it. Let a non con-joining conjunction revise the subjectless verb. Or let Nor revise the subject that no longer has a human face, a human nature. Let words no longer speak outside themselves but in direct relation to the company they keep—to the words they rest beside, to the readers that read them. Revise language from high iced nips. Revise subjectivities from drunken linguistic sips?

Images are made here. But when these images express the effect on us of a body that agrees with ours, we can form a common notion that comprehends the agreement from within. The very fact that the reader composes these images

through her own active integral relations with the text and that they are not structurally imposed and that reading causes the reader to act renders these new relations as power. According to Spinoza, the imagination apprehends that which the common notion explains through the internal constitutive relations as external effects of bodies on one another.

Common notions discerned through an increase of energy are thus apprehended by the imagination. Common notions depend on the properties of the imagination and enable us to apprehend individual bodies as they are, as they are embodied. This ensures that the production of meaning and its images are not alienated from meaning itself.

We are bound by our linguistic surfaces. On a linguistic plane, such as *Low Fancy* offers, we can select and apprehend new common notions, make new feelings, redefine new beings. Spinoza writes that “[b]y reality and perfection I understand the same thing” (D6, 32). In the last half of “A”—9, in the first line of the eighth stanza of “A”—9, Zukofsky notes Spinoza’s understanding of reality and perfection (Quartermain 84):

Such need may see reason, thy perfect real. (109)

Reality is the immediate energy of common notions—it is perfect because it is a relation of greater power and (according to Spinoza) the more power it has, the more reality it makes (P9, 6). For Zukofsky and Strang these common notions are words. For Strang words are low fancies: “let’s be juvenile / with flowering gaud” (17).

A common notion is the attribute of relation. And the imagination images the relations that are embodied by a common notion. In the case of *Low Fancy*, the common notion is constructed by the interaction between reader and the text:

True, she's adept.

Lagan of eyes

clear and nitid her nub does

knock my cant pliable—*shit*

one mood's grts empties days.

Up top it's hot, sweet, and I'm malleable. (18).

My reading of the subject fashioned in this preceding quotation utilizes the theories of Spinoza, Butler, Negri and Wall. It is as follows: She is adept; that is capable (of reason and made of sound reading relations). It is "true" that she is adept *because* I have read her thus. Her eyes are lagan (lagan: goods sunk in the sea with a buoy attached). This is an extraordinary description of eyes. It is a common notion. This metaphor brings the unexpected into relation. It forms a substantial attribute where there was none before. Sunken goods attached to a buoy are brought into an association with the eyes of a female subject. Poetic convention is thwarted. Her eyes are not a summer's day, a dark storm, or a limpid pool of blue. Instead they share proximity with a load of sunken goods the location of which is marked with a buoy. The implications of such eyes are yet to be expressed. To have eyes extend to sunken but noted material suggests a multiplicity of meanings: concealedness, unconcealedness, submergedness, buoyancy, positions of below and above, the exchange of goods, the storage of

goods, the art of signs at sea. The buoy is a sign that something lies beneath the water but we cannot know what it is. Despite being “lagan of eyes,” she is “clear and nitid [lustrous and bright]. “Her nub does / knock my cant pliable—*shit*” (19). A nub is a knob, a protuberance or the point of a story. Her nub knocks the narrator’s “cant”. That is the female protuberance (or the gist of her story) knocks the narrator’s edge, oblique line or surface, sudden thrust, bias, turn, inclination, bevel, or incline. It could also mean that “her nub” knocks off the narrator’s own throwing out of balance. Cant is also affected speech, idioms (secret jargons), phrases used merely out of convention, hypocrisy, or whining. Plus, as sound the word cant cannot be told apart from can’t. Thus “her nub,” her protuberance might throw off the narrator’s ranting (cant) or her own sense of impossibility. Whatever “cant” might refer to (one or all of the listed possibilities) it is made pliable (made flexible, easily influenced). The word that follows is an expletive: “*shit*” (19).

Shit flattens the possible trochaic metre in “nub does / knock my” (19). But the trochees were already thrown off by “cant pliable” and the trochaic “nub does / knock my” only works if you don’t read “Lagan of eyes” as iambic followed by the trochaic “clear and” and then continued in iambic metre from “nitid her nub does knock my cant.” The grit of a mood can empty a day or bugger an established metre. “Up top it’s hot, sweet and I’m malleable” (19) begins in iambs and then dribbles into “malleable”. The sexual connotations of the text are not subtle. Yet the tensions of these allusions rise and fall. The high suggestive energy emboldened both by the metre and the lexical meaning of “nitid

her nub does” dissipates somewhat in “knock my cant pliable”. However, the rhyming assonance of “cant” with the possibly implied “cunt” causes a tension of association. The following expletive “shit” interrupts the preceding connotations and raises the energy and anxiety of the text. Yet again, the gathered linguistic energy empties like “one mood’s grit”. The rise and fall of rhythm, connotation and overt sense ends in the culmination of sense and rhyme the iambic beginning of the first line: “[u]p top it’s hot [. . .].” Left with the sense that the subject matter is sex and that making meaning as a reading subject is somewhat like making love (or fucking) the reader notes the final clause: Another subject has emerged: he or she is sweet, hot, on top and malleable. Easily swayed, warmed by the incessant libidinal economy of the text and continuously interrupted, the reader breathes and reads and breathes again.

What Althusser writes of Spinoza in *The New Spinoza* is true of *Low Fancy*: there is no *a priori* guarantee of truth (“Spinoza” 5). Where Descartes presents a theory of the guarantee of every truth and knowledge (5), Spinoza and *Low Fancy* disentangle the mind from “the illusion of transcendent or transcendental subjectivity as a guarantee or foundation of every meaning or every experience of possible truth” (5). The mind is disentangled from transcendental guarantees because the imagination is firmly linked to the production and labour of meaning. The production of meaning constitutes the common notion, the libidinal economy.

In the case of *Low Fancy*, this economy takes place between reader and text. This economy involves an elaborate community. One, the Levinasian other

who constitutes the text and is literal other (the actual text itself) (*Totality and Infinity* 34). Two, the metaphysical Other who manifests in the actual subjects that occur in the text (35). Three, Butler's "normative horizon of meaning" within which the Other confers recognition, the sites of critical opening that bring into question established regimes of truth ("Giving an Account" 23). Four, the constituted subject of the reader who is recognized and dispossessed by the linguistic terms she reads. This community is the site of the production of meaning. Unlike Spinozist's utopic vision it is not entirely joyful. Or perhaps its health has yet to be perceived. It is, however, a constantly becoming, shifting and drunken common notion. It becomes the possible, the momentarily true. Or perhaps we have to remove the image from Spinozist productivity because here is the sign of meaning attached to nothing. As Blanchot writes:

The image needs the neutrality and the fading of the world:
it wants everything to return to the indifferent deep where
nothing is affirmed; it tends toward the intimacy of what
still subsists in the void (79).

In my reading, I metaphorically extend this image of the submerged material towards what Wall calls a "purely linguistic site" (118).⁵¹ The buoy intimately

⁵¹ In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas writes that "[v]ision is an adequation of the idea with the thing, comprehension that encompasses" (34). This process by which vision is an adequation of the idea with the thing would be analogous to the Aristotelian metaphoric process through which the material world is mapped by preconceived conceptual systems so that relations are based in similarity. Vico's notion of perception and his metaphoric system through which meaning is made are not based on the adequation of the idea with thing. For Vico is relation occurs in the site of

marks the unseen material below. As Kant writes "[i]n the world of sense, however deeply we inquire into its objects, we have to do with nothing but appearances" (137). "Lagan eyes" note the buoyant possibility of meaning suspended in the deep: "the image finds in this nothing its necessary condition, but there it disappears" (Blanchot 79). The relation of the knower to the buoy is not cognitive. It is not present. It bears the possibility of appearance. It is, as Wall writes, "the disjunction of something and nothing." The object is the fragile sheer "that there is" (149). What remains unseen is communication emptied of content. Thus, the lagan eyes embody "[t]he sinking into nullity of the real" where the visible does not communicate any message, or sacred destiny. It "only communicates the fragility of being in relation" (154). The image and the spectacle have no autonomy. The commodity is destroyed. Agamben writes:

mediation: the human and relations are based in proximity. In relations of proximity subsumption of the subject with the other/Other cannot take place. The separateness between is preserved because that inviolable space is the means by which the relation is possible in the first place. In the Vichian metaphysics it is the human itself that is that impassable gap, the space within which all yearning, all desire occurs. In the human is the desire for the absolute Other. This space maintains the absolute alterity of the Other and of the subject. This desire without satisfaction is the human and it precisely understands in a nonsubsuming fashion (Levinas is using the French word *entend* for understands which suggests listening (34)). As Levinas notes, the distance that exists between the subject and the Other "enters into the *way of existing* of the exterior being" (35). That is, it is the impassable separation that facilitates being. In the Vichian metaphysics it is the human that embodies this separation and the metaphor is its linguistic extension.

[T]o link together image and body in a space where they
can no longer be separated, and thus to forge the whatever
body, whose *physis* is resemblance.”

(*Coming Community* 50)

I read Agamben’s notion of resemblance as one that is not based in likeness but resemblance in the obsolete sense; that is the appearance or show of some quality. I also read Agamben’s resemblance in the sense of an assembly; that is to collect, come together (*OED* 1992). Resemblance in this sense is links the production meaning to the site of production, to the site of its possibility, to the human whose own exteriority is the manifestation of the appearance of community.

Hardt describes Spinoza’s multitude as “the protagonist of Spinoza’s democratic vision” (xi). Spinoza’s idea of the multitude is a more tangible and positive expression of Wall’s motley. For Wall this collectivity is that which we are exposed to in “our subjective intentions” (162). In our radical passivity we are exposed to a rapport, an imaginary dimension. Our ability to think this dimension is our productive capacity, our capacity to think that which “always comes” (162). It is our possibility; it us. But, as Wall points out, this us is not the “masses . . . [but] the motley” (162).

In *Low Fancy*, the text is both Spinoza’s multitude and Wall’s motley. It is constructed in the common site of the human (in language)—through a democratic logic of immediate relations. It is “a field of new and taxing possibilities” (*Low Fancy* 38). Yet these possibilities are fleeting: “an ominous feel / tilts protest’s sly / pour: can’t torque enough / sure deep” (58). Protests

against the prevailing and restrictive 'reals' tilt and spill. You can't simply torque language and change the world. And the vast nothing into which all meaning sinks is "sure deep" (58). But the energy of the *Low Fancy* does not dissipate. Through its linguistic permissions, meaning becomes *power*; that is, it becomes a collective ethics of passion, imagination, music and desire and it "disports" these with "sincere and violent conviction" (39).

In any case, this much is clear: my inexplicable interjection
had sewn a field of new and taxing possibilities whose
exaggerations were mutual; henceforth, as intermediary I
would simply DISPORT there with a sincere and violent
conviction. (38)

Low Fancy is a revolutionary text because it inhabits language as a plane of immanence. Unlike *Debbie*, melancholia (what Spinoza calls a sad passions) cannot take hold in *Low Fancy*. The text is more Spinozist than not. As Negri points out, Spinoza demolishes negative thought: "the reconstruction of the world is [. . .] the very process of the continual physical composition and recomposition of things [. . . .] The constitutive process accumulates being qualitatively and quantitatively; it moves into new spaces, it constructs" (*Savage Anomaly* 212-213). In *Low Fancy* language is the source of *power* for language. It is the site of the multitude, the common notions, that through which history is rewritten and the subject (human and non-human) relieved of toxic representations and sad passions. The "rabble," the "lewdsters" dream up "their own splendour" and their "methods opt [...] for potency" (59).

The rabble does “not TRIFLE within the greasy constraints of their vocabulary” (59). Instead their “voracious blasphemies” irritate the snare of *Power* to the very edges of its dark potency (59). The narrator of *Low Fancy* takes up the call to disrupt and she states her purpose: she will emulate the heresy that precedes her: “it is my own devious duty to strive towards an emulation of such eminent heresy” (59).

Thus, the reader encounters and enacts a linguistic relational reciprocity of powers. Pierre Macherey argues that Spinoza’s philosophy is characterized by an inexhaustible productivity that is capable of producing itself (not simply reproducing) endlessly (31). According to Warren Montag, Spinoza’s philosophy exists in its effects, not prior to them or even independently of them and these effects “may remain dormant or deferred for decades even centuries, (re)activated only in an encounter with the unforeseeable theoretical elements that arrive from beyond its boundaries” (x-xi).

Low Fancy reactivates Spinoza. Its poetic reactivates the idea that substance is not prior, logically or chronologically, to its attributes; that the cause does not precede its effects—the whole, its parts; or unity, division. The substance of *Low Fancy* is the interrupted infinite diversity of itself—language and language is performed as such—in its diversity. The text is a process of production—without beginning or end—in the infinity of its attributes.

In *Low Fancy*, language is a plane that distributes affects: “Creep or tear enough/potential might procure this/feast-up . . .” (26). Language is a “feast-up,” a common place of abundance on which all bodies, all minds, and all individuals

are nourished or poisoned, fattened up or deprived. The linguistic is composed of relations of motion and rest, of speeds and slowness between its particles. Its life is a complex relation between different velocities, the deceleration and acceleration of its particles: “nips/save to *kiss* it ” (17).

The effort by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing (Spinoza *Ethics* 75). Essence is existence. The essence and form of all things is the essence and form of the whole, whose nature is the nature of all things. Albiac rightly points out that Spinozist essence does not mean pre-existence, it means the activity of existence (137). For Spinoza, essence is effort. It is the tension of the relation of beings with one another on “this infinite terrain of encounter [. . .]that is Nature” (Albiac 137). *Low Fancy* is this terrain of encounter and there we conceive meaning and, through meaning we meet being.

As Deleuze writes, “one never has a *tabula rasa*; one slips in, enters in the middle; one takes up or lays down rhythms” (Spinoza 123). This Spinozist model of life is Strang’s linguistic model of language in *Low Fancy*. *Low Fancy* works the affective capacity of language. In the poem, the linguistic subject includes the reader and it is defined by the affects of which it is capable and thus it is a multitude, a motley “rabble” (59) that “[i]gnite[s]!” (12) and “quit[s]” and “sip[s]” and “itch[es]” (45).

CONCLUSION

As cited above, Felix Guattari states that the “only goal acceptable for human activity is the production of a subjectivity that enriches itself in continuous fashion in its relation to the world” and that poetry is one of the most effective means of activating this production. He writes: “poetry today has perhaps more to teach us than the economic and the human sciences combined” (115).

Proceeding from various and often intersecting influences, Robertson and Strang produce poetic subjectivities in two distinct modes of poetic practice. While both poets work with ruptures of meaning to constitute previously unexpressed textual subjects and they share influences, one is distinctly more Spinozist and the other more Vichian. *Low Fancy* animates active and constitutive linguistic tensions; *Debbie* posits a radical passivity in the negative space of words.

As a Spinozist text, fueled by immanent and positive linguistic energy, *Low Fancy* works like a perpetual motion machine. Meaning ignites in contingent relations that are fueled by the persistent non-contingent (immanent) drive of word bodies. Strang’s translation/transliteration of *Carmina Burana* illustrates the constructive play of language that occurs. Blasting across meaning and chronological time, *Low Fancy* manifests the materiality of words and demonstrates the interactive and potentially democratic constitution of meaning. As Spinoza transplants his metaphysics onto the political horizon to configure a democratic State, Strang locates this materially constitutive metaphysics and demonstrates its presence in language. The energy is always, already there. As readers we activate it and constitute positive and powerful relations.

Debbie composes in a productive negativity. Robertson's epic is based on a Vichian system of metaphor. Textual activity is inspired by relations and the vulnerability of the linguistic subject to the narratives that preceds it. Articulated on the basis of proximity, not likeness, the Vichian metaphor in *Debbie* images radically new (as of yet unexpressed) subjects. Meaning is always in relation to and subject identity occurs within a constant process of ecstasy, recognition and loss.

guzzling guzzling and writing lallations
 inaccurate willing ungendered
 actively stupid blurred and blurring I am a hut
 in a century of heady curiosity [sic]
 and fugitive sensation be in my
 mouth so I can write the ending (*Debbie* ll. 491-496)

In this thesis, I have proposed ways of reading this work. I have asked, why should anyone write such poetry? And I have answered. Because poetry is, as Vico says, "the necessary mode of expression" (§ 409). It bears with it the basis of our real and the traces of our linguistic beginnings and possible futures. Poetry reveals language as an ambivalent site of the real within which the human makes and is made. Humans are the linguistic bodies, images and edges through, within and against which the material world is perceived, adored and composed.

The practical necessity of such poetry is not mysterious. A widening of the medium (the human) and its linguistic matter (language) can expand and shift the possibilities of the real. More than any other writing form, this kind of poetry can

send language singing, spiraling, colliding into itself. Respectively, *Debbie* and *Low Fancy* expand linguistic sense into the Vichian space of meaning's possibility and into Spinozist particulate, temporary local coherences. Is this utopian? No. But, it suggests that, somehow, we might write ourselves elsewhere and otherwise than where we have been.

And yet, after all this, it is important to say that Robertson and Strang are also simply mucking about in a joyful ruckus of words. In the ripe ear of *Low Fancy*, sense is razed to a sonic ground and words kindle to a rambunctious beauty:

Sit, tidbit, salutes are said:

our vast pottering

evacuates simpers, or sums

a maximum squeem. (63)

Debbie glows in lush strangeness and the glossy surfaces of words— tenuous glitter and rust. Virgil is undone, for *Debbie* is Rome's burning—and the fiddling too. These words fatten themselves into rich space, bright image and sound:

To those whose quiver gapes give queens

and pace their limbs with flutes, ropes, cups of soft

juice. To those whose threshold vacillates give

that bruise the dust astonished (*Debbie* ll. 155-158)

And in reading these poems, we are astonished.

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