

Poetry and the Arts (ENG 266)
Professor Jeff Dolven

Readings for Monday (3/21)

Elizabeth Bishop, "Sestina"
Anton Chekhov, from his notebooks
Mark Strand, "Chekhov: A Sestina"
Robert Haas, "A Story about the Body"

Readings for Wednesday (3/23)

Sir John Davies, *Orchestra* (excerpt)
Emily Dickinson, "I Cannot Dance upon My Toes"
Terence Hayes, "I Don't Know How to Hold My Body"
James Merrill, "Charles on Fire"
Marianne Moore, "Arthur Mitchell"
Wallace Stevens, "Life Is Motion"

Plus:

Vilem Flusser, "Gesture and Affect"

Exercise (due 5PM on Sunday 3/20)

Consider the Bishop and Strand sestinas. Using the six end-words the class generated, write a sestina in either lineated poetry or prose. Think about how a word can mean something or do something different each time it repeats: change context, association, part of speech, etc. How does the repetition of the end-words progress and become intrinsic to the narrative? As usual, supplement your sestina with a short account of what you did, and how it relates to the questions of the class.

We would like to print and share two or three of the sestinas at the start of class. If for any reason you would prefer not to have your shared, please just say so in your essay.

Sestina
Elizabeth Bishop

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now; but the child
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house.
Tidying up, the old grandmother
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house
feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.
I know what I know, says the almanac.
With crayons the child draws a rigid house
and a winding pathway. Then the child
puts in a man with buttons like tears
and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,
the little moons fall down like tears
from between the pages of the almanac
into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

NOTEBOOK OF ANTON CHEKHOV

Translated by S. S. KOTELIANSKY and LEONARD WOOLF, 1921

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12494/12494.txt>

This volume consists of notes, themes, and sketches for works which Anton Chekhov intended to write, and are characteristic of the methods of his artistic production. Among his papers was found a series of sheets in a special cover with the inscription: "Themes, thoughts, notes, and fragments." Madame L. O. Knipper-Chekhov, Chekhov's wife, also possesses his note-book, in which he entered separate themes for his future work, quotations which he liked, etc. If he used any material, he used to strike it out in the note-book. The significance which Chekhov attributed to this material may be judged from the fact that he recopied most of it into a special copy book.

* * * * *

Ivashin loved Nadya Vishnyevsky and was afraid of his love. When the butler told him that the old lady had just gone out, but the young lady was at home, he fumbled in his fur coat and dress-coat pocket, found his card, and said: "Right."

But it was not all right. Driving from his house in the morning, to pay a visit, he thought that he was compelled to it by conventions of society, which weighed heavily upon him. But now it was clear to him that he went to pay calls only because somewhere far away in the depths of his soul, as under a veil, there lay hidden a hope that he would see Nadya.... And he suddenly felt pitiful, sad, and a little frightened....

* * * * *

In his soul, it seemed to him, it was snowing, and everything faded away. He was afraid to love Nadya, because he was too old for her, thought his appearance unattractive, and did not believe that young girls like Nadya could love men for their minds and spiritual qualities. Still there would at times rise in him something like a hope. But now, from the moment when the officer's spurs jingled and then died away, there also died away his timid love.... All was at an end, hope was impossible.... "Yes, now all is finished," he thought, "I am glad, very glad."

* * * * *

He imagined his wife to be not Nadya, but always, for some reason, a stout woman with a large bosom, covered with Venetian lace.

Mark Strand

Chekhov: A Sestina

Why him? He woke up and felt anxious. He was out of sorts, out of character. If only it would go away. Ivashin loved Nadya Vishnevskaya and was afraid of his love. When the butler told him the old lady had just gone out, but that the young lady was at home, he fumbled in his fur coat and dresscoat pocket, found his card, and said: "Right." But it was not right. Driving from his house in the morning to pay a visit, he thought he was compelled to it by the conventions of society which weighed heavily upon him. But now it was clear that he went to pay calls only because somewhere far away in the depths of his soul, as under a veil, there lay hidden a hope that he would see Nadya, his secret love. And he suddenly felt pitiful, sad, and not a little anxious. In his soul, it seemed to him, it was snowing, and everything was fading away. He was afraid to love Nadya, because he thought he was too old for her, his appearance unattractive, and did not believe that a young woman like her could love a man for his mind or spiritual character. Everything was dim, sharing, he felt, the same blank character. Still, there would rise at times in him something like hope, a glimpse of happiness, of things turning out all right. Then, just as quickly, it would pass away. And he would wonder what had come over him. Why should he, a retired councillor of state, educated, liberal-minded, a well-traveled man; why should he, in other words, be so anxious? Were there not other women with whom he could fall in love? Surely, it was always possible to fall in love. It was possible, moreover, to fall in love without acting out of character. There was absolutely no need for him to be anxious. To be in love, to have a young pretty wife and children of his own, was not a crime or a deception, but his right. Clearly, there was something wrong with him. He wished he were far away . . . But suddenly he hears from somewhere in the house the young officer's spurs jingle and then die away. That instant marked the death of his timid love. And in its vanishing, he felt the seeds of a different sort of melancholy take root within him. Whatever happened now, whatever desolation might be his, it would build character. Yes, he thought, so it is only right. Yes, all is finished,

and I'm glad, very glad, yes, and I'm not let down, no, nor am I in any way anxious. No, certainly not anxious. What he had to do now was to get away. But how could he make it look right? How could he have thought he was in love? How out of character! How very unlike him!

(1990)

from Great American Prose
Poem. David Lehman, ed.
Scribner, 2003.

A Story About the Body

The young composer, working that summer at an artist's colony, had watched her for a week. She was Japanese, a painter, almost sixty, and he thought he was in love with her. He loved her work, and her work was like the way she moved her body, used her hands, looked at him directly when she made amused or considered answers to his questions. One night, walking back from a concert, they came to her door and she turned to him and said, "I think you would like to have me. I would like that too, but I must tell you I have had a double mastectomy," and when he didn't understand, "I've lost both my breasts." The radiance that he had carried around in his belly and chest cavity--like music--withered, very quickly, and he made himself look at her when he said, "I'm sorry. I don't think I could." He walked back to his own cabin through the pines, and in the morning he found a small blue bowl on the porch outside his door. It looked to be full of rose petals, but he found when he picked it up that the rose petals were on top; the rest of the bowl--she must have swept them from the corners of her studio--was full of dead bees.

-- Robert Hass

Main Text

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Orchestra Or a Poeme of Dauncing.

5 1

Where lives the man that never yet did heare
Of chast *Penelope*, *Ulisses* Queene?

Who kept her faith unspotted twenty yeere
Till he returned that far away had beene,

5 *And many men, and many townes had seene:*

Ten yeere at siede of *Troy* he lingring lay,
And ten yeere in the *Midland-sea* did stray.

2

Homer, to whom the Muses did carouse,
A great deepe cup with heavenly Nectar filld
The greatest, deepest cup in *Joves* great house,
(For *Jove* himselfe had so expresly willd)

5 He dranke off all, ne let one drop be spilld;

Since when, his braine that had before been dry,
Became the welspring of all Poetry.

3

Homer doth tell in his abundant verse,
The long laborious travailes of the *Man*,
And of his Lady too he doth rehearse,
How shee illudes with all the Art she can,

5 Th'ungratefull love which other Lords began;

For of her Lord false Fame long since had sworne,
That *Neptunes* Monsters had his carcasse torne.

4

All this he tells, but one thing he forgot,
One thing most worthy his eternall song,
But he was old, and blind, and saw it not,
Or else he thought he should *Ulisses* wrong,

5 To mingle it, his Tragick acts among.

Yet was there not in all the world of things,
A sweeter burden for his Muses wings.

5 5

The Courtly love *Antinous* did make,
Antinous that fresh and jolly Knight,

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Which of the gallants that did undertake
To win the Widdow, had most wealth and might,
Wit to perswade, and beautie to delight.
The Courtly love he made unto the Queene,
Homer forgot as if it had not beene.

6

Sing then *Terpsichore*, my light Muse sing
His gentle Art and *cunning curtesie*:
You, Lady, can remember every thing,
For you are daughter of Queene Memorie,
But sing a plaine and easie Melodie:
For the soft meane that warbleth but the ground,
To my rude eare doth yield the sweetest sound.

7

One onely nights discourse I can report,
When the great Torch-bearer of heaven was gone
Downe in a maske unto the *Oceans* Court,
To revell it with *Tethis* all alone;
Antinous disguised and unknowne

pg 92

Like to the spring in gaudie Ornament
Unto the Castle of the Princesse went.

8

The soveraigne Castle of the rocky Ile
Wherein *Penelope* the Princesse lay,
Shone with a thousand Lamps, which did exile
The shadowes darke, and turn'd the night to day,
Not *Joves* blew Tent what time the Sunny ray
Behind the bulwarke of the earth retires
Is seene to sparkle with more twinckling fiers.

9

That night the Queene came forth from far within,
And in the presence of her Court was seene,
For the sweet singer *Phæmius* did begin
To praise the Worthies that at *Troy* had beene;
Somwhat of her *Ulisses* she did weene
In his grave Hymne the heav'nly man would sing,
Or of his warres, or of his wandering.

10

Pallas that houre with her sweet breath divine
Inspir'd immortall beautie in her eyes,
That with cœlestiall glory she did shine,
Brighter then *Venus* when she doth arise
Out of the waters to adorne the skies;
The wooers all amazed doe admire,
And check their owne presumptuous desire.

11

Onely *Antinous* when at first he view'd
Her starbright eyes that with new honour shind,

Was not dismayd, but there-with-all renew'd

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The noblesse and the splendour of his mind;
And as he did fit circumstances find,
Unto the Throne he boldly gan advance,
And with faire maners, wooed the Queene to dance.

12

GOddesse of women, sith your heav'nlinesse
Hath now vouchsaft it selfe to represent
To our dim eyes, which though they see the lesse
Yet are they blest in their astonishment,
Imitate heav'n, whose beauties excellent
Are in continuall motion day and night,
And move thereby more wonder and delight.

13

Let me the mover be, to turne about
Those glorious ornaments that Youth and Love
Have fixed in your every part throughout,
Which if you will in timely measure move,
Not all those precious Jemms in heav'n above
Shall yield a sight more pleasing to behold,
With all their turnes and tracings manifold.

14

With this, the modest Princesse blusht and smil'd,
Like to a cleare and rosie eventide;
And softly did returne this answer mild,
Faire Sir; you needs must fairely be denide
Where your demaund cannot be satisfied.

pg 94

My feete, which onely nature taught to goe,
Did never yet the Art of footing know.

15

But why perswade you me to this new rage?
(For all disorder and misrule is new,)
For such misgovernment in former age
Our old divine Forefathers never knew,
Who if they liv'd, and did the follies view
Which their fond Nephews make their chiefe affaires,
Would hate themselves that had begot such heires.

16

SOle heire of Vertue, and of Beautie both,
Whence commeth it (*Antinous* replies)
That your imperious vertue is so loth
To graunt your beautie her chiefe exercise?
Or from what spring doth your opinion rise
That Dauncing is a frenzie and a rage,
First knowne and us'd in this new-fangled age?

17

Dauncing (bright Lady) then began to be,
When the first seedes whereof the world did spring,
The Fire, Ayre, Earth and Water did agree,
By Loves perswasion, Natures mighty King,
To leave their first disordred combating;
And in a daunce such measure to observe,
As all the world their motion should preserve.

18

Since when they still are carried in a round,
And changing come one in anothers place,
Yet doe they neyther mingle nor confound,

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But every one doth keepe the bounded space
Wherein the daunce doth bid it turne or trace:
This wondrous myracle did Love devise,
For Dauncing is Loves proper exercise.

19

Like this, he fram'd the Gods eternall bower,
And of a shapelesse and confused masse
By his through-piercing and digesting power
The turning vault of heaven formed was:
Whose starrie wheeles he hath so made to passe,
As that their movings doe a musick frame,
And they themselves, still daunce unto the same.

20

Or if this (All) which round about we see
(As idle *Morpheus* some sicke braines hath taught)
Of undevided *Motes* compacted bee,
How was this goodly Architecture wrought?
Or by what meanes were they together brought?
They erre that say they did concur by chance,
Love made them meete in a well-ordered daunce.

21

As when *Amphion* with his charming Lire
Begot so sweet a *Syren* of the ayre,
That with her Rethorike made the stones conspire
The ruines of a Citty to repayre,
(A worke of wit and reasons wise affayre)
So Loves smooth tongue, the *motes* such measure taught
That they joyn'd hands, and so the world was wrought.

pg 96

22

How justly then is Dauncing termed new
Which with the world in point of time begun?
Yea Time it selfe (whose birth *Jove* never knew
And which indeed is elder then the Sun)
Had not one moment of his age outrunne
When out leapt Dauncing from the heape of things,
And lightly rode upon his nimble wings.

Orchestra Or a Poeme of Dauncing.

Printed texts: 1596, 1622.

MS.: LF.

Text from 1596, except for stanzas 127[A]–132[A] and all marginal glosses, which are found in 1622 only.

1.1. Drummond of Hawthornden reports that Ben Jonson 'scorned such verses as could be transponed

wher is the man that never yett did hear
of faire Penelope Uliesses Queene—
of faire Penelope Uliesses Queen
wher is the man that never yett did hear.'
(Jonson, *Works*, i. 143.)

1.3 Who] which LF

1.5 ital. 1622: rom. 1596

1.5. A paraphrase of the *Odyssey*, i. 3.

1.6 yeere] yeares LF

1.7 ital. LF: rom. Print

1.7. *Midland-sea*: a literal translation of the *Mediterranean Sea*.

2.1. *carouse*: drink a toast to, usually by draining the cup at a draught.

2.5 off 1622: of 1596: up LF

3.2 *Man* 1622: man 1596

3.2. *Man*: the first word of the *Odyssey*. Greek syntax depends on inflexional endings, not word-order, and thus a writer can, more easily than in English, place a word in an emphatic position. On this point Chapman remarks:

The first word of his *Iliads* is *μῆνιν*, *wrath*; the first word of his *Odysseys* *ἄνδρα*, *Man*—contracting in either word his each worke's Proposition. (*Chapman's Homer*, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (London, 1957), ii. 4.)

3.4. *illudes*. Davies intends a double meaning: Penelope evades or eludes the suitors by deceiving or illuding them (cf. 'illusion'). She promised to choose a new husband when she finished weaving a shroud for her father-in-law; but every night she undid the day's work.

3.5 ungratefull ... which] unwellcome ... that LF

3.5. *ungratefull*: unwanted.

3.7. *Neptunes*. The enmity of the god of the sea was the major cause of Ulysses' misfortunes.

4.3 old, and blind] blynd and old LF

4.7. *burden*: load; and, in music, the bass or accompanying song.

5.1. *Antinous*: in Homer, the leading suitor to Penelope, and thus a principal enemy to the hero, Ulysses. He little resembles Davies's courtier.

5.7 beene. ed.: ~, Print

6.1 Singe then my Muse skilfull *Terpsicore* singe LF

6.1. *Terpsichore*: the Muse of dancing, daughter of Jove and Mnemosyne (memory).

6.2 ital. 1622: rom. 1596

6.3 You, Lady, ed.: ~_^ ~_^ Print

thing, ed.: ~_^ Print

6.6 For the soft meane] For longest tyme LF

6.6. *meane*: intermediate musical range, e.g. alto or tenor.

ground: melody. Davies is asking the muse to sing in the middle range, that is, to grant him a moderate degree of

inspiration. He is not attempting to 'sing Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme'; his invocation is to the 'light Muse' of Dancing, not the epic or heavenly muse.

6.7 eare] eares LF

7.1 One onely] Only one LF

7.1–4. Davies invents this incident; mythology does not record any 'revels' involving Apollo and Tethys, the wife of Oceanus.

7.2 When] what tyme LF

7.3 Oceans LF: rom. Print

7.4. *all alone*: an implied macaronic pun, probably prompted by Davies's reading of Cicero:

The word *sol* [sun] [is] from *solus* [alone], either because the sun 'alone' of all the heavenly bodies is of that magnitude, or because when the sun rises all the stars are dimmed and it 'alone' is visible (*De nat. deor.* II. xxviii. 68).

8.3 which] that LF

8.4 The shadowes darke 1622: The dim darke shades Σ

9.2 her] the LF

9.4 *Troy* 1622: rom. 1596

10.6 The] Her LF

11.3 Was not dismayd, but] nothinge amased LF

11.4 noblesse and the splendour] nobleness and splendor LF

12.1. Here, and at stanzas 14, 26, 97, 102, and 119 the present edition follows 1596 in using enlarged capitals to indicate a change of speaker.

12.6. *continually motion*. To Platonists, including Cicero, motion means life. That which causes motion is more excellent than that which is moved; whatever moves continually is immortal.

13.1. *mover*: her partner in dancing; the *primum mobile* to her if she will 'imitate heav'n' by joining the dance.

13.2 that] which LF

13.3 your, LF: you, Print

13.5 those] the LF

13.7 with their aspects and turninges manifold LF

14.1–7

With this the modest Princes blusht & smild,
like the sweete eveninge of a Sommers Daye,
and softly did returne this awnswer milde,
daunce (gentill Sir) I neither can nor maye,
I never Lov'd my weaknesse to [displaye] bewraye
By counterfeitinge madnesse when I might,
With sober carriage beare my selfe aright. LF

15.1 But wherefore should men love this newe found rage LF

15.2. Penelope refers to the common notion that the world has been declining since the Golden Age, as in Ovid, *Met.* i. 1–150; Spenser, *F.Q.* V, Proem i-ii.

15.5 the] their LF

16.1 *Display capital ed.*: Sole Print

17.1 *Dauncing* 1622: rom. 1596

17. 1–5. The idea that Love reconciled the warring elements is implicit in Hesiod's *Theogony*, where Eros is said to be among the oldest of the gods. After quoting from Hesiod and Parmenides, Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, I. iv) attributes to Empedocles the notion that love and strife were the causes of motion: strife is the tendency of opposites to repel one

another, and love the affinity that draws opposites together; thus, fire is repelled by earth, whereas iron 'loves' the loadstone. The strife of the elements is described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, i. 5–20; the role of Love is found in Plato's *Timaeus* (31B–32B) and his *Symposium* (178) and Ficino's commentary on it. Cf. Davies's *Epithalamion*, 2–4, and Spenser's *Hymne in Honour of Love*, 78–91.

17.2 spring, 1622: ~_Λ 1596

17.3 Water 1622: l.c. 1596

17.4 perswasion] perswasions LF

18.4 doth keepe the] observes his LF

18.6 devise, 1622: ~_Λ 1596

19.1 he] Love LF

19.3. *through-piercing and digesting*. By 'digesting power' Davies means the ability to arrange in order; therefore the line concerns Love's power of intellectual penetration of the 'confused masse'.

19.4 formed Σ: framed 1596

19.6 frame, 1622: ~_Λ 1596

20.1. *All*: a translation of the Greek *to pan* and Latin *cuncta*, meaning 'the whole "body" of the universe' (Macrobius, I. xvii. 5).

20.2. *Morpheus*: god of dreams.

20.2–3. *sicke braines ... Motes*. In N.T. 215–16 Davies rejects the Epicurean atomic theory that everything is formed by the haphazard conjunction of atoms floating freely in space. Although a somewhat similar denial of this theory appears in Montaigne's 'Apologie of Raymond Sebond' (*Essays*, II. xii. 254), Davies's passage seems more clearly indebted to Cicero's *De nat. deor.* (II. xxxvii. 93–4):

At this point must I not marvel that there should be anyone who can persuade himself that there are certain solid and indivisible particles of matter borne along by the force of gravity, and that the fortuitous collision of those particles produces this elaborate and beautiful world ... colliding together at haphazard and by chance ... The fact is, they indulge in such random babbling about the world that for my part I cannot think that they have ever looked up at this marvellously beautiful sky.

20.3 *Motes* 1622: motes 1596

20.4 goodly] godly LF

20.6 They rave and lye that saye it was by chaunce LF

21.1. *Amphion*: see N.T. 381–2 and note.

21.2 *Syren* LF: rom. Print

21.3 That] as LF

21.6 *motes* 1622: rom. 1596

21.6–7. *motes ... joynd hands*. The atoms in Epicurean theory were regarded as tiny round bodies with hooks; as the bodies floated about, the hooks linked with one another by chance. In Davies's story, the attractive force of Love, through music, directs the atoms to join together purposively, as in a dance.

22. Dancing is almost coeval with Time, which came 'into being along with the heaven' (Plato, *Timaeus*, 38B).

22.3 Yea] When LF

22.4 indeed is elder 1622: is far more auncient Σ

23.2 ital. 1622: rom. 1596

23.2. *Time the measure of all moving is*: Aristotle, *Physics*, iv. xi, 220a.

23.3 measure: ed.: ~, Print

So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
I'm going, all along.

c. 1860

1864

325

Of Tribulation, these are They,
Denoted by the White –
The Spangled Gowns, a lesser Rank
Of Victors – designate –

All these – did conquer –
But the ones who overcame most times –
Wear nothing commoner than Snow –
No Ornament, but Palms –

Surrender – is a sort unknown –
On this superior soil –
Defeat – an outgrown Anguish –
Remembered, as the Mile

Our panting Ankle barely passed –
When Night devoured the Road –
But we – stood whispering in the House –
And all we said – was "Saved"!

c. 1861

1891

326

I cannot dance upon my Toes –
No Man instructed me –
But oftentimes, among my mind,
A Glee possesseth me,

That had I Ballet knowledge –
Would put itself abroad
In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe –
Or lay a Prima, mad,

And though I had no Gown of Gauze –
No Ringlet, to my Hair,

Nor hopped to Audiences – like Birds,
One Claw upon the Air,

Nor tossed my shape in Eider Balls,
Nor rolled on wheels of snow
Till I was out of sight, in sound,
The House encore me so –

Nor any know I know the Art
I mention – easy – Here –
Nor any Placard boast me –
It's full as Opera –

c. 1862

1929

327

Before I got my eye put out
I liked as well to see –
As other Creatures, that have Eyes
And know no other way –

But were it told to me – Today –
That I might have the sky
For mine – I tell you that my Heart
Would split, for size of me –

The Meadows – mine –
The Mountains – mine –
All Forests – Stintless Stars –
As much of Noon as I could take
Between my finite eyes –

The Motions of the Dipping Birds –
The Morning's Amber Road –
For mine – to look at when I liked –
The News would strike me dead –

So safer – guess – with just my soul
Upon the Window pane –
Where other Creatures put their eyes –
Incautious – of the Sun –

c. 1862

1891

AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Terrence Hayes

I'm not sure how to hold my face when I dance:
In an expression of determination or euphoria?
And how should I look at my partner: in her eyes
Or at her body? Should I mirror the rhythm of her hips,
Or should I take the lead? I hear Jimi Hendrix
Was also unsure in dance despite being beautiful
And especially attuned. Most black people know this
About him. He understood the rhythm of a delta
Farmer on guitar in a juke joint circa 1933, as well
As the rhythm of your standard bohemian on guitar
In a New York apartment amid daydreams of jumping
Through windows, ballads of footwork, Monk orchestras,
Miles with strings. Whatever. I'm just saying,
I don't know how to hold myself when I dance. Do you?

Terrence Hayes, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

Charles on Fire
James Merrill

Another evening we sprawled about discussing
Appearances. And it was the consensus
That while uncommon physical good looks
Continued to launch one, as before, in life
(Among its vaporous eddies and false claims),
Still, as one of us said into his beard,
“Without your intellectual and spiritual
Values, man, you are sunk.” No one but squared
The shoulders of their own unloveliness.
Long-suffering Charles, having cooked and served the meal,
Now brought out little tumblers finely etched
He filled with amber liquor and then passed.
“Say,” said the same young man, “in Paris, France,
They do it this way”—bounding to his feet
And touching a lit match to our host's full glass.
A blue flame, gentle, beautiful, came, went
Above the surface. In a hush that fell
We heard the vessel crack. The contents drained
As who should step down from a crystal coach.
Steward of spirits, Charles's glistening hand
All at once gloved itself in eeriness.
The moment passed. He made two quick sweeps and
Was flesh again. “It couldn't matter less,”
He said, but with a shocked, unconscious glance
Into the mirror. Finding nothing changed,
He filled a fresh glass and sank down among us.

James Merrill, *Collected Poems of James Merrill* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

ARTHUR MITCHELL

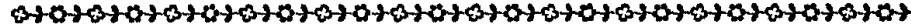
Slim dragonfly
too rapid for the eye
to cage—
contagious gem of virtuosity—
make visible, mentality.
Your jewels of mobility

reveal
and veil
a peacock-tail.



LIFE IS MOTION

In Oklahoma,
Bonnie and Josie,
Dressed in calico,
Danced around a stump.
They cried,
“Ohoyaho,
Ohoo” . . .
Celebrating the marriage
Of flesh and air.



THE WIND SHIFTS

This is how the wind shifts:
Like the thoughts of an old human,
Who still thinks eagerly
And despairingly.
The wind shifts like this:
Like a human without illusions,
Who still feels irrational things within her.
The wind shifts like this:
Like humans approaching proudly,
Like humans approaching angrily.

Gesture and Affect

The Practice of a Phenomenology of Gestures

As a matter of courtesy, as well as for other reasons, a writer should define his concepts. In this essay, I will do this for the concept of “gesture” but not for that of “affect.”¹ I hope that the reader will excuse this impropriety. My plan is to feign ignorance of the meaning of *affect* and, by observing gestures, try to discover what people mean by this word. It is a kind of phenomenological effort, through the observation of gestures, to take *affect* by surprise.

I will start by attempting, for the remainder of this essay, to define the word *gesture*. I believe that many people will agree that gestures are to be considered movements of the body and, in a broader sense, movements of tools attached to the body. But many would also agree that the term does not apply to all such movements. Neither the contraction of the pupil, for example, nor intestinal peristalsis is an instance of what is meant by *gesture*, even though both are movements of the body. The word refers to specific movements. These movements can be described as “expressions of intention.” That gives us a good definition: “Gestures are movements of the body that express an intention.” But this is not very serviceable. For “intention” needs to be defined, and because it is an unstable concept that involves issues of subjectivity and of freedom, it will surely get us into difficulties. Still, the manner of bodily movement that is called “gesture” can also be defined methodologically, which helps to avoid the ontological trap just mentioned. For example: surely all movements of the body can in principle be explained by spelling out their causes. But for some movements, such an explanation is unsatisfactory. If I raise my arm, and someone tells me that the movement is the result of physical, physiological,

psychological, social, economic, cultural, and whatever other causes, I would accept his explanation. But I would not be satisfied with it. For I am sure that I raise my arm because I want to, and that despite all the indubitably real causes, I would not raise it if I didn't want to. This is why raising my arm is a gesture. Here, then, is the definition I suggest: "a gesture is a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation." And I define *satisfactory* as that point in a discourse after which any further discussion is superfluous.

This definition should suggest that the discourse of gestures cannot end with causal explanations, because such explanations do not account for the specificity of gestures. Of course, causal ("scientific," in the strong sense of the word) explanations are needed to understand gestures, but they don't produce such understanding. To understand gestures, these specific physical movements that we perform and that we observe around us, causal explanations are not enough. Gestures have to be properly interpreted, too. If someone points to a book with his finger, we could know all the possible causes and still not understand the gesture. To understand it, one must know its "significance." That is exactly what we do continually, very quickly and effectively. We "read" gesture, from the slightest movement of facial muscles to the most powerful movements of masses of bodies called "revolutions." I don't know how we do it. I do know that we have no theory of the interpretation of gestures. But that is no reason to take pride in, for example, our mysterious "intuition." In prescientific times, people had the wit to know what was going on when they saw stones falling. But only we who possess a theory of free fall really understand it. We need a theory of the interpretation of gestures.

The so-called humanities appear to be working on such a theory. But are they? They work under the influence of the natural sciences, and so they give us better and more complete causal explanations. Of course, these explanations are not and perhaps never will be as rigorous as those in physics or chemistry, but that is not what makes them unsatisfactory. The most unsatisfactory aspect of the human sciences lies in their approach to the phenomenon of gesture. They consider it to be simply a phenomenon rather than one that also confers a codified meaning. And even when they admit the interpretive character of a gesture (that which

was once called its “mental aspect”), they still tend to reduce the gesture to causal explanations (that which was once called “nature”). They do this to win the right to call themselves “sciences.” But it is exactly what keeps these disciplines (psychology, sociology, economics, historical area studies, linguistics) from developing a theory of the interpretation of gesture.

Of course, there are newer research fields called “communication research” that are rapidly accumulating knowledge and that appear to be particularly concerned with working out such an interpretive theory. In contrast to the phenomenological character of the other “humanities,” communication research has a semiotic peculiarity. It is concerned with the same phenomena as the other “human sciences” but focuses more particularly on their symbolic dimension. Words such as “code,” “message,” “memory,” and “information” do occur frequently in the discourse of communication and are typical for interpretation. But then something remarkable happens that I think sometimes goes unnoticed. These semiological terms pass from communication research into the causal disciplines and change their original meaning. So we have concepts like “genetic code,” “subliminal message,” “geological memory,” and others. Then these concepts return to communication research, but because they have taken on explanatory meaning, they no longer serve the needs of interpretation. In following a fashion for being “scientific,” communication research, initially a field of semiotics, is very rapidly moving away from interpretation and toward explanation.

I will summarize the preceding: one way of defining “gesture” is as a movement of the body or of a tool attached with the body, for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation. To understand a gesture defined in this way, its “meaning” must be discovered. That is exactly what we do all the time, and it constitutes an important aspect of our daily lives. But we have no theory of the interpretation of gestures and are restricted to an empirical, “intuitive” reading of the world of gestures, the codified world that surrounds us. And that means that we have no criteria for the validity of our readings. We must remember this as we try, in what follows, to read gestures, to discover the affect in them.

The definition of *gesture* suggested here assumes that we are dealing with a symbolic movement. If someone punches me in the arm, I will move, and an observer is justified in saying that this reaction “expresses”

or “articulates” the pain I have felt. There would be a causal link between the pain and the movement, and a physiological theory to explain this link, and the observer would be right to see this movement as a symptom of the pain I have suffered. Such a movement would not be a “gesture” according to the suggested definition, for the observer would have explained it in a satisfactory manner. But I can also raise my arm up in a specified way when someone punches me. This action also permits the observer to say the movement of my arm “expresses” or “articulates” the pain I have felt. But this time, there is no seamless link between cause and effect, pain and movement. A sort of wedge enters into the link, a codification that lends the movement a specific structure, so that it registers as an appropriate way to express the “meaning”—pain—to someone who knows the code. My movement depicts pain. The movement is a symbol, and pain is its meaning. My movement is, according to the standard of the suggested definition, a “gesture,” for none of the theories available to the observer offers a satisfactory explanation for it. Of course, one can claim that such a movement is always the symptom of something else (e.g., of the culture in which it was codified), but that is not the basis for calling it a gesture. A gesture is one because it represents something, because it is concerned with a meaning.

A reader will have noticed that the verbs *express* and *articulate* in the last paragraph were used in different ways. The reactive movement of my arm announces pain, and in this sense, it is to be understood that pain comes to expression through the movement. In the active movement of my arm, I represent pain, and in this sense, it is to be understood that I express something through my gesture. Let us be clear, incidentally, about the way the language nearly demands the use of the word *I* in the description of the second movement and the way it nearly rules out the use of this word in the first. But let us not be overly impressed by this idealistic tendency of the language. From now on, I will restrict my use of the words *express* and *articulate* to the second meaning and say that gestures express and articulate that which they symbolically represent. I will proceed as if I wished to defend the thesis that “affect” is the symbolic representation of states of mind through gestures. In short, I will try to show that states of mind (whatever the phrase may mean)² can make themselves manifest through a plethora of bodily movements but that they express

and articulate themselves through a play of gesticulations called “affect” because it is the way they are represented.

No doubt I will find it difficult to hold firmly to my thesis. There are two reasons for this. First is the fact that with concrete phenomena, it is difficult to distinguish between action and reaction, representation and expression. For example, I see tears in someone’s eyes. What criteria could I use to justify saying that this is a representation of a state of mind (a codified symbol) and not its expression (symptom)? In the first case, the observed person is active, “acts out” a state of mind. In the second case, this person suffers, “reacts” to a state of mind. Both can occur at the same time, or one can be the case and I can read the other in error. The second reason for my difficulties is the ambiguity of the phrase “state of mind,” which opens onto a broad and ill-defined area stretching from sense perception to emotion and from sensibility all the way to ideas. If I want to go on taking affect to be the way states of mind are expressed through gestures, I must first know the meaning of “state of mind.” But I can’t know it without doing violence to it. This becomes circular: to get closer to the meaning of *affect*, I must interpret gestures.

Nevertheless, my difficulties are not so great as they first seemed to be. When I observe another person and see gesticulation, I do in fact have a criterion for deciding between reaction and gesture, between the expression of a state of mind and its codified representation. This criterion is the fact that I recognize myself in others and that I know from introspection when I am expressing a state of mind passively and when I am representing it actively. Of course, I can make a mistake in recognition or deceive myself in my introspection, but the criterion is available. As far as the term “state of mind” goes, I cannot know its meaning, but I do know that it refers to something other than “reason.” And because I have a fair idea what “reason” is, such a negative awareness is enough. And so I can proceed with my observation of affect as states of mind translated into gestures.

So there are two focal points that give these observations an elliptical shape: “symbolic representation” and “something other than reason.” It follows that when I interpret specific gestures as something, I am dealing with affect. But doesn’t that last sentence describe the experience of art, so that seen in this way, “art” and “affect” blend into one another? When I look at a work of art, do I not interpret it as a frozen gesture that

symbolically represents something other than reason? And isn't an artist someone who "articulates" or "expresses" something that reason (science, philosophy, etc.) cannot articulate, or not in the same way? Now whether I agree, in something approaching a romantic manner, that art and affect blend into one another, or deny it in something approaching a classical manner, there is no doubt that the question is not an ethical, still less an epistemological, but rather an aesthetic one.

The question is not whether the representation of a state of mind is false, still less whether a represented state of mind has the capacity to be true. Rather, it concerns whether the observer is touched. If I accept that affect is a state of mind transformed into gesticulation, my primary interest is no longer in the state of mind but in the effect of the gesture. As they appear in symptoms and as I experience them through introspection, states of mind throw up ethical and epistemological problems. Affect, conversely, presents formal, aesthetic problems. Affect releases states of mind from their original contexts and allows them to become formal (aesthetic)—to take the form of gestures. They become "artificial."

At this point, the reader has grounds for objecting that I have taken the long way around and arrived at a banal conclusion. From the beginning, my feigned ignorance of the meaning of *affect* required that I remain silent about affect constructing a state of mind, when saying it would have circumvented unnecessary difficulties for me and for the reader. But the reader's objection would be an error. It is one thing to take up a dubious commonplace about affect constructing a state of mind and quite another to reach this conclusion through close consideration of the meaning of gestures. The difference lies in the use of the word *artificial* or *constructed*. If I just bluntly say that affect is artificial, I run the risk of not noticing that affect, inasmuch as it represents states of mind, is in reality one of the methods through which human beings try to give sense and meaning to their lives and to the world in which they live.

When someone punches me in the arm and when I react by moving my arm, that is an absurd event, meaningless, at least to the extent the punch is not the gesture of someone who lends it meaning. But when someone punches me in the arm and I respond with a codified gesture, the event is charged with meaning. Through my gesture, I release the pain from its absurd, meaningless, and "natural" context and, by inscribing

it in a cultural context, give it symbolic meaning. In this example, the pain is real, although the gesture probably exaggerated it. But that's not especially important. Crucial is the articulation of pain, its symbolic expression to another. Precisely this symbolic aspect, and not the "real" presence or absence of the represented pain, makes the gesture stand for the state of mind. Fernando Pessoa actually insists that it is more difficult to represent real than imaginary pain symbolically; it presents a greater challenge to a poet: "O poeta é fingidor qu' fing' tao perfeitamente que fing' até a dor que de veras sente" (A poet is a swindler so skilled at swindling that he can falsify even the pain he actually feels). It is just this unnatural, represented, symbolic character of affect, exactly this "artificiality," that lends meaning to states of mind (whether real or imaginary) and so to life. One might prefer the formulation that affect "intellectualizes" states of mind by formalizing them into symbolic gestures. In this sense, it is to be understood that as affect, states of mind have become constructs.³

The "artificiality" of represented states of mind is first of all an aesthetic problem. The world and life in it get an aesthetic meaning from the emotion-rich play of gesticulation. If we want to criticize affect, we must do it using aesthetic criteria. The scale of values we use to evaluate may not oscillate between truth and error or between truth and lies but must move between truth (authenticity) and kitsch. I believe that this distinction is critical. When I see a gesture emphasizing feeling, for example, that of a bad actor in the bad play who wants to convey the emotion of fatherly love, I would call it "false." But it would not be right to call it an "error" or a "lie." It is "false" in the sense of "in poor taste," and it would remain inauthentic even if the actor really were a loving father. I consider the distinction important because of the ambiguity embedded in the word *truth*. In epistemology, *truth* means agreement with the real; in ethics and politics, it refers to an internal consistency (loyalty); whereas in art, it becomes a "truth" to the materials at hand. It is very obviously no accident that the same word has these three meanings: all of them participate in what is called "honesty." But it is entirely possible for a gesture indicating feeling to be epistemologically and morally honest but aesthetically dishonest, like the gesture of the bad actor. And it is entirely possible for an emotionally powerful gesture to be epistemologically and morally dishonest and aesthetically honest, as in the case of the gesture

that resulted in a Renaissance sculpture that retrospectively engaged that of the ancient Greeks. In this case, one must judge the gesture to be “true.” On the scale of affect, Michelangelo must be located near the “truth,” and an actor in a Hollywood potboiler at a point close to the border of “kitsch,” quite apart from any consideration of whether the affect they express is real or whether they believe in it.

Yet it is well to remember at this point that, in the absence of a theory of the interpretation of gesture, any judgment remains empirical and “intuitive.” Without such a theory, there is no objective and not even an intersubjective art criticism that would survive a statistical examination, and until there is such a theory, “*de gustibus non est disputandum*” remains in force. So one observer’s kitsch can be another’s true affect. And if one tries to get around the absence of this kind of theory, for example, by saying that the truer a work is, the more observers will be moved by it, then we’ll have to admit that Pavarotti’s affect is truer than Byron’s. And yet there is a kind of intuition that would put Pavarotti nearer to kitsch than Byron on the affect scale. Information theory (this timid step toward a theory of interpretation for gestures) confirms this intuition.

We don’t have to rely on the mathematical detail of this theory to grasp the problem (in my view, much of the effort to develop it has been expended on becoming “scientific”). The theory claims that the more information a gesture contains, the less it is like kitsch, and furthermore, that the quantity of information conveyed by the gesture is related to the gesture’s code. This contention has an important implication. The more information a gesture contains, the more difficult it apparently is for a receiver to read it. The more information, the less communication. Therefore, the less a gesture informs (the better it communicates), the more empty it is, and so the more pleasant and “pretty,” for it can be read without very much effort. So information theory gives us a more or less objective gauge for the fact that the emotion-laden gestures in television series move the “masses” deeply. Yet it is important to note that information theory works much better for kitsch than it does for real affect. It can measure the banality of kitsch, but faced with the originality of true art, it appears to be as empirical as our “intuition.” It can in no sense replace the intuition of art criticism, and still less can it obviate the need for a theory of interpretation.

And yet, on one point this theory can help us: that of the “empty” and the “full.” I have maintained that affect is a method of lending states of mind meaning by symbolizing them. What information theory suggests (and the step it actually takes toward a theory of interpretation) is that a symbol expressing a state of mind can be more or less empty and that the gauge of affect runs between fullness and emptiness, from inexhaustible meaning to empty gesture. At one end of the scale are majestic and rare gestures, whose meaning is still not exhausted after millennia. At the other end are the infinitely many empty gestures we make and see all around us that try to exhaust the “original” meaning our gestures retain by formal reference to the majestic ones. The affect of friendship, for example, is expressed through the gesture of Castor and Pollux and through the handshake, the one a full existence, the other by contrast emptied of almost all meaning. In this way, I think, a criticism of affect (and simply of art) could become less subjective and one day—certainly with great effort—arrive at an interpretation not only of kitsch but also of those great moments in which humanity confers meaning on its actions and sufferings.