

Poetry and the Arts (ENG 266)
Professor Jeff Dolven

Readings for Monday (4/18)

Four short, experimental essays:

Eula Biss, “The Pain Scale”

Brian Blanchfield, “Locus Amoenus”

Wayne Koestenbaum, “The Writer’s Obligation”

Lisa Robertson, “Time in the Codex”

In each case, identify one aspect of the text (a particular moment, a larger strategy) that you consider poetic, and be prepared to explain why in class.

Readings for Wednesday (4/20)

TBD

Second Essay (due via email on Dean’s Date Tuesday 5/3)

Write a five-page (1800-word) essay that analyzes a poem in relation to another art, an art with which you take the poem to be in conversation. The assignment repeats the terms of the first essay, with the difference that you are invited, this time, to experiment with the essay form itself. You might take as a model one of the essays we will read for Monday. Once again, this is an occasion to reflect at greater length on questions we have explored together in discussion and in practice. So: you might write about how a sonnet either represents or invokes painting; how an ode describes or imitates music; and so on. You can choose any poem from the semester (or one we have not read, but please check with me first). The art in question should be one of those that we have discussed. Make use of our theoretical readings, or other sources of your choosing, where they are useful to you, but the assignment is fundamentally a close reading of the poem as it engages different modes, different senses, different ways of making.

THE PAIN SCALE

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THE PAIN SCALE

EULA BISS

SPRING 2005

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No Pain

The concept of Christ is considerably older than the concept of zero. Both are problematic — both have their fallacies and their immaculate conceptions. But the problem of zero troubles me significantly more than the problem of Christ.

I am sitting in the exam room of a hospital entertaining the idea that absolutely no pain is not possible. Despite the commercials, I suspect that pain cannot be eliminated. And this may be the fallacy on which we have based all our calculations and all our excesses. All our sins are for zero.

Zero is not a number. Or at least, it does not behave like a number. It does not add, subtract, or multiply like other numbers. Zero is a number in the way that Christ was a man.

Aristotle, for one, did not believe in zero.

If no pain is possible, then, another question — is no pain desirable? Might the absence of pain equal the absence of everything?

Some very complicated mathematical problems cannot be solved without the concept of zero. But zero makes some very simple problems impossible to solve. For example, the value of zero divided by zero is unknown.

I am not a mathematician. I am sitting in a hospital trying to measure my pain on a scale from zero to ten. For this purpose, I need a zero. A scale of any sort needs fixed points.

The upper fixed point on the Fahrenheit scale, ninety-six, is based on a slightly inaccurate measure of normal body temperature. The lower fixed point, zero, is the coldest temperature at which a mixture of salt and water can still remain liquid. I myself am a mixture of salt and water. I strive to remain liquid.

Zero, on the Celsius scale, is the point at which water freezes. And one hundred is the point at which water boils. But Anders Celsius, who introduced the scale in 1741, originally fixed zero as the point at which water boils, and one hundred as the point at which water freezes. These fixed points were reversed only after his death.

The deepest circle of Dante's *Inferno* does not burn. It is frozen. In his last glimpse of Hell, Dante looks back and sees Satan upside down through the ice.

There is only one fixed point on the Kelvin scale — absolute zero. Absolute zero is 273 degrees Celsius colder than the temperature at which water freezes. There are zeroes beneath zeroes. Absolute zero is the temperature at which molecules and atoms are moving as slowly as possible. But even at absolute zero, their motion does not stop completely. Even the absolute is not absolute. This is comforting, but it does not give me faith in zero.

At night, I ice my pain. My mind descends into a strange sinking calm. Any number multiplied by zero is zero. And so with ice and me. I am nullified. I wake up to melted ice and the warm throb of my pain returning.

← | →

Where does pain worth measuring begin? With a hang nail? With a stubbed toe? A sore throat? A needle prick? A razor cut?

My father is a physician. He treats patients with cancer, who often suffer extreme pain. My father raised me to believe that most pain is minor. He was never impressed by my bleeding cuts or even my weeping sores. In retrospect, neither am I.

My father once told me that an itch is just very mild pain. Both sensations simply signal, he told me, irritated or damaged tissue.

But a nasty itch, I have observed, can be much more excruciating than a paper cut, which is also mild pain. Digging at an itch until it bleeds and is transformed into pure pain can bring a kind of relief.

When I complained of pain as a child, my father would ask, "What kind of pain?" Warily, he would list for me some of the different kinds of pain, "Burning, stabbing, throbbing, prickling, dull, sharp, deep, shallow . . ."

Hospice nurses are trained to identify five types of pain: physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and financial.

The pain of feeling, the pain of caring, the pain of doubting, the pain of parting, the pain of paying.

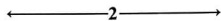
But then there is also the pain of longing, the pain of desire, the pain of sore muscles, which I find pleasurable . . .

The pain of learning, and the pain of reading.

The pain of trying.

The pain of living.

There is a mathematical proof that zero equals one. Which, of course, it doesn't.



The set of whole numbers is also known as "God's numbers."

The devil is in the fractions.

Although the distance between one and two is finite, it contains infinite fractions. This could also be said of the distance between my mind and my body. My one and my two. My whole and its parts.

The sensations of my own body may be the only subject on which I am qualified to claim expertise. Sad and terrible, then, how

little I know. "How do you feel?" the doctor asks, and I cannot answer. Not accurately. "Does this hurt?" he asks. Again, I'm not sure. "Do you have more or less pain than the last time I saw you?" Hard to say. I begin to lie to protect my reputation. I try to act certain.

The physical therapist raises my arm above my head. "Any pain with this?" she asks. Does she mean any pain in addition to the pain I already feel, or does she mean any pain at all? She is annoyed by my question. "Does this cause you pain?" she asks curtly. No. She bends my neck forward, "Any pain with this?" No. "Any pain with this?" No. It feels like a lie every time.

On occasion, an extraordinary pain swells like a wave under the hands of the doctor, or the chiropractor, or the massage therapist, and floods my body. Sometimes I hear my throat make a sound. Sometimes I see spots. I consider this the pain of treatment, and I have come to find it deeply pleasurable. I long for it.

The International Association for the Study of Pain is very clear on this point — pain must be unpleasant. "Experiences which resemble pain but are not unpleasant," reads their definition of pain, "should not be called pain."

In the second circle of Dante's *Inferno*, the adulterous lovers cling to each other, whirling eternally, caught in an endless wind. My next-door neighbor, who loves Chagall, does not think this sounds like Hell. I think it depends on the wind.

Wind, like pain, is difficult to capture. The poor wind-sock is always striving, and always falling short.

It took sailors more than two hundred years to develop a standardized numerical scale for the measure of wind. The result, the Beaufort scale, provides twelve categories for everything from "Calm" to "Hurricane." The scale offers not just a number, but a term for the wind, a range of speed, and a brief description.

A force 2 wind on the Beaufort scale, for example, is a "Light Breeze" moving between four and seven miles per hour. On land, it is specified as "wind felt on face; leaves rustle; ordinary vanes moved by wind."

Left alone in the exam room I stare at the pain scale, a simple number line complicated by only two phrases. Under zero: "no pain." Under ten: "the worst pain imaginable."

The worst pain imaginable . . . Skinned alive? Impaled with hundreds of nails? Dragged over gravel behind a fast truck?

Determining the intensity of my own pain is a blind calculation. On my first attempt, I assigned the value of ten to a theoretical experience — burning alive. Then I tried to determine what percentage of the pain of burning alive I was feeling.

I chose 30 percent — three. Which seemed, at the time, quite substantial.

Three. Mail remains unopened. Thoughts are rarely followed to their conclusions. Sitting still becomes unbearable after one hour. Nausea sets in. Quiet desperation descends.

"Three is nothing," my father tells me now. "Three is go home and take two aspirin."

It would be helpful, I tell him, if that could be noted on the scale.

The four vital signs used to determine the health of a patient are blood pressure, temperature, breath, and pulse. Recently, it has been suggested that pain be considered a fifth vital sign. But pain presents a unique problem in terms of measurement, and a unique cruelty in terms of suffering — it is entirely subjective.

Assigning a value to my own pain has never ceased to feel like a political act. I am a citizen of a country that ranks our comfort above any other concern. People suffer, I know, so that I may eat bananas in February. And then there is history . . . I struggle to consider my pain in proportion to the pain of a napalmed Vietnamese girl whose skin is slowly melting off as she walks naked in the sun. This exercise itself is painful.

"You are not meant to be rating world suffering," my friend in Honduras advises. "This scale applies only to you and your

experience."

At first, this thought is tremendously relieving. It unburdens me of factoring the continent of Africa into my calculations. But I hate the knowledge that I am isolated in this skin — alone with my pain and my own fallibility.

The Wong-Baker Faces Scale was developed to help young children rate their pain. It features a smiley face at zero "No Hurt" and a crying face at five "Hurts Worst." In between are a nervous smile, a straight-mouthed stare, a slight grimace, and a deep frown.

The face I remember as the face of pain was on the front page of a local newspaper in an Arizona gas station. The man's face was horrifyingly distorted in an open-mouthed cry. His house, the caption explained, had just been destroyed in a wildfire. But the man himself, the article revealed, had not been hurt.

Several studies have suggested that children using the Wong-Baker Scale tend to conflate emotional pain and physical pain. A child who is not in physical pain but is very frightened of surgery, for example, might choose the crying face. One researcher observed that "hurting" and "feeling" seemed to be synonymous to some children. I myself am puzzled by the distinction at times. After all, pain is defined as a "sensory and emotional experience." In an attempt to rate only the physical pain of children, a more emotionally "neutral" scale was developed. The faces on this scale appear alien, and the first four have nearly indistinguishable expressions of neutrality followed by a wince and then an open-mouthed shout.

A group of adult patients favored the Wong-Baker Scale in a study comparing several different types of pain scales. The patients were asked to identify the easiest scale to use by rating all the scales on a scale from zero: "not easy" to six: "easiest ever seen." The patients were then asked to rate how well the scales represented pain on a scale from zero: "not good" to six: "best ever seen." The patients were not invited to rate the experience of rating.

I stare at a newspaper photo of an Israeli boy with a bloodstained cloth wrapped around his forehead. His face is impassive.

I stare at a newspaper photo of an Iraqi prisoner standing delicately balanced with electrodes attached to his body, his head covered with a hood.

No face, no pain?

A crying baby has always seemed to me to be in the worst pain imaginable. But when my aunt became a nurse twenty-five years ago, it was not unusual for surgery to be done on infants without any pain medication. Babies, it was believed, did not have the fully developed nervous systems necessary to feel pain. Medical evidence that infants experience pain in response to anything that would cause an adult pain has only recently emerged.

There is no evidence of pain on my body. No marks. No swelling. No terrible tumor. The X-Rays revealed nothing. Two MRIs of my brain and spine revealed nothing. Nothing was infected and festering, as I had suspected and feared. There was no ghastly huge white cloud on the film. There was nothing to illustrate my pain except a number, which I was told to choose from between zero and ten. My proof.

← 5 →

"The problem with scales from zero to ten," my father tells me, "is the tyranny of the mean."

Overwhelmingly, patients tend to rate their pain as a five, unless they are in excruciating pain. At best, this renders the scale far less sensitive to gradations in pain. At worst, it renders the scale useless.

I understand the desire to be average only when I am in pain. To be normal is to be okay in a fundamental way — to be chosen numerically by God.

When I could no longer sleep at night because of my pain, my father reminded me that a great many people suffer from both

insomnia and pain. "In fact," he told me, "neck and back pain is so common that it is a cliché — a pain in the neck!"

The fact that 50 million Americans suffer from chronic pain does not comfort me. Rather, it confounds me. "This is not normal," I keep thinking. A thought invariably followed by a doubt, "Is this normal?"

The distinction between test results that are normal or abnormal is often determined by how far the results deviate from the mean. My X-rays did not reveal a cause for my pain, but they did reveal an abnormality. "See this," the doctor pointed to the string of vertebrae hanging down from the base of my skull like a loose line finding plumb. "Your spine," he told me, "is abnormally straight."

← 6 →

A force 6 wind on the Beaufort scale, a "Strong Breeze," is characterized by "large branches in motion; telegraph wires whistle; umbrellas used with difficulty."

Over a century before preliminary scales were developed to quantify the wind, serious efforts were made to produce an accurate map of Hell. Infernal cartography was considered an important undertaking for the architects and mathematicians of the Renaissance, who based their calculations on the distances and proportions described by Dante. The exact depth and circumference of Hell inspired intense debates, despite the fact that all calculations, no matter how sophisticated, were based on a work of fiction.

Galileo Galilei delivered extensive lectures on the mapping of Hell. He applied recent advances in geometry to determine the exact location of the entrance to the underworld and then figured the dimensions that would be necessary to maintain the structural integrity of Hell's interior.

It was the age of the golden rectangle — the divine proportion. Mathematics revealed God's plan. But the very use of numbers required a religious faith, because one could drop off the edge of the earth at any point. The boundaries of the maps at that time

faded into oceans full of monsters.

Imagination is treacherous. It erases distant continents, it builds a Hell so real that the ceiling is vulnerable to collapse.

To be safe, I think I should map my pain only in proportion to pain I have already felt. But my nerves have short memories. My mind remembers crashing my bicycle as a teenager, but my body does not. I cannot seem to conjure the sensation of lost skin without actually losing skin. My nerves cannot, or will not, imagine past pain — and this, I think, is for the best. Nerves simply register, they do not invent.

But after a year of pain, I realized that I could no longer remember what it felt like not to be in pain. I was left anchorless. For a while, I tended to think of the time before the pain as easier and brighter, but then I began to suspect myself of fantasy and nostalgia.

Eventually, I discovered that with some effort I could imagine the sensation of pain as heat, which brought a kind of relief.

Perhaps, with a stronger mind, I could imagine the heat as warmth, and then the warmth as nothing at all.

← 7 →

I accidentally left a burner on the stove going for two and a half days — a small blue flame, burning and burning . . . The duration terrified me. How incredibly dangerous, so many hours of fire.

When I cry from the pain, I cry over the idea of it lasting forever, not over the pain itself. The psychologist, in her rational way, suggests that I do not let myself imagine it lasting forever. "Choose an amount of time that you know you can endure," she suggests, "and then challenge yourself only to make it through that time." I make it through the night, and then sob through half the morning.

The pain scale measures only the intensity of pain, not the duration. This may be its greatest flaw. A measure of pain, I

believe, requires at least two dimensions. The suffering of Hell is terrifying not because of any specific torture, but because it is eternal.

The square root of seven results in a decimal that repeats randomly into infinity. The exact figure cannot be known, only a close approximation. Rounding a number to the nearest significant figure is a tool designed for the purpose of making measurements. The practicality of rounding is something my mind can fully embrace. No measurement is ever exact, of course.

Seven is the largest prime number between zero and ten. Out of all the numbers, the very largest primes are unknown. Still, every year, the largest known prime is larger. Euclid proved the number of primes to be infinite, but the infinity of primes may be slightly smaller than the infinity of the rest of the numbers. It is here, exactly at this point, that my ability to comprehend begins to fail.

← 8 →

Although all the numbers follow each other in a predictable line, many unknown quantities exist.

Experts do not know why some pain resolves and other pain becomes chronic. One theory is that the body begins to react to its own reaction, trapping itself in a cycle of its own pain response. This can go on indefinitely, twisting like the figure eight of infinity.

My father tells me that when he broke his collarbone it didn't hurt. I would like to believe this, but I am suspicious of my father's assessment of his own pain.

The problem with pain is that I cannot feel my father's, and he cannot feel mine. This, I suppose, is also the essential mercy of pain.

Several recent studies have suggested that women feel pain differently than men. Further studies have suggested that pain medications act differently on women than they do on men. I am suspicious of these studies, so favored by *Newsweek*, and so heaped

upon waiting room tables. I dislike the idea that our flesh is so essentially unique that it does not even register pain as a man's flesh does — a fact that renders our bodies, again, objects of supreme mystery.

But I am comforted, oddly, by the possibility that you cannot compare my pain to yours. And, for that reason, cannot prove it insignificant.

The medical definition of pain specifies the "presence or potential of tissue damage." Pain that does not signal tissue damage is not, technically, pain.

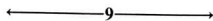
"This is a pathology," the doctor assured me when he informed me that there was no definitive cause of my pain, no effective treatment for it, and very probably no end to it. "This is not in your head."

It would not have occurred to me to think that I was imagining the pain. But the longer the pain persisted, and the harder it became for me to imagine what it was like not to be in pain, the more seriously I considered the disturbing possibility that perhaps I was not, in fact, in pain.

Another theory of chronic pain is that it is a faulty message sent by malfunctioning nerves. "For example," the Mayo Clinic suggests, "your pain could be similar to the phantom pain some amputees feel in their amputated limbs."

I walked out of a lecture on chronic pain after too many repetitions of the phrase, "We have reason to believe that you are in pain, even if there is no physical evidence of your pain." I had not realized that the fact that I believed myself to be in pain was not reason enough.

We have reason to believe in infinity, but everything we know ends.



"I breathe, I have a heartbeat, I have pain..." I repeat to myself as I lie in bed at night. I am striving to adopt the pain as a vital

sensation.

Once, for a study of chronic pain, I was asked to rate not just my pain, but also my suffering. I rated my pain as a three. Having been sleepless for nearly a week, I rated my suffering as a seven.

"Pain is the hurt, either physical or emotional, that we experience," writes the Reverend James Chase. "Suffering is the story we tell ourselves of our pain."

Yes, suffering is the story we tell ourselves.

"If we come to the point where we have no place for suffering," Reverend Chase writes, "to what lengths will we go to eradicate it? Will we go so far as to inflict suffering to end it?"

Christianity is not mine. I do not know it and I cannot claim it. But I have seen the sacred heart ringed with thorns, the gaping wound in Christ's side, the weeping virgin, the blood, the nails, the cross to bear . . . Pain is holy, I understand. Suffering is divine.

In my worst pain, I can remember thinking, "This is not beautiful." I can remember being disgusted by the very idea.

But in my worst pain, I also found myself secretly cherishing the phrase, "This too shall pass." The longer the pain lasted, the more beautiful and impossible and absolutely holy this phrase became.

← 10

The Worst Pain Imaginable

Through a failure of my imagination, or of myself, I have discovered that the pain I am in is always the worst pain imaginable.

But I would like to believe that there is an upper limit to pain. That there is a maximum intensity nerves can register.

There is no tenth circle to Dante's Hell.

The digit ten depends on the digit zero in our current number system. In 1994 an Alternative Number System was developed. "This system," its creator wrote with triumph, "eliminates the need for the digit zero, and hence all digits behave the same."

"One of the functions of the pain scale," my father explains, "is to protect doctors — to spare them some emotional pain. Hearing someone describe their pain as a ten is much easier than hearing them describe it as a hot poker driven through their eyeball into their brain."

A better scale, my father thinks, might rate what patients would be willing to do to relieve their pain. "Would you," he suggests, "visit five specialists and take three prescription narcotics?" I laugh because I have done just that. "Would you," I offer, "give up a limb?" I would not. "Would you surrender your sense of sight for the next ten years?" my father asks. I would not. "Would you accept a shorter life span?" I might. We are laughing, having fun with this game. But later, reading statements collected by the American Pain Foundation, I am alarmed by the number of references to suicide.

The description of hurricane force winds on the Beaufort scale is simply, "devastation occurs."

Bringing us, of course, back to zero.

On the Locus Amoenus

Permitting Shame, Error and Guilt, Myself the Single Source

Latin. Right? Happy place. A pleasant place, a propitious place for happiness, luck, creativity, abundance of spirit to take hold. Does everyone have one? The locus amoenus is one of the early conventions of the pastoral mode, which is the oldest minor genre in poetry and lyric writing, and maybe the most mutable. In a certain light, Gwendolyn Brooks's urban Bronzeville poems from the Sixties were pastorals: linked persona poems whose dropped-in-on scenes together made up a village, a community; and in another light so is Rufus Wainwright's cover of The Beatles' "This Boy": nostalgic, plaintive, performing and lamenting the fungibility of men as love partners. "This Boy": it's the one that begins "That boy...isn't good for you." (He sings it with Sean Lennon, the slight one, at cross purposes.) Most commonly now we think of the pastoral as nature poetry or soft-focused naturalist writing, potentially embarrassing for its unproblematic birdsong and lilting reverie on the wonders of streams. But nature itself was in the work of Theocritus and later Virgil only a kind of stage, a theater for the idyll or eclogue or scene to begin.

The poem or songful story would be spoken by a "shepherd"—that is, by a young man who was amative and uninhibited, rascally, gracefully intelligent, highly literate, musical, fit, unself-conscious, curly-haired and beautiful, *and* the capable herder of livestock meanwhile. The early urban poet's ideal of the rural shepherd, goatherd, neatherd, or swain was implausible, a fantasy. That's who *spoke* the poem, which could be a number of things but was often an extrapolation of a detail in a myth known well by listeners. The listeners too were a fixed premise: fellow shepherds and lyrist who

were sometimes involved by name in the poem. What was it like for Herakles to leave his men and search frantically for his young, barefoot lover who had been drowned by river nymphs attracted to his beauty? Well, before I tell you, I must have led my sheep to pasture and found some shade, confident of their containment. It must be noontime, which is the most sempiternal of hours in the day. The sweet competitiveness of other shepherds who know my reputation as a poet and lover must be about me, electric. And, I must be in the right place. A clearing or a glade, a hillside outcropping of rounded rock one happens upon, with the long golden hair of the grasses matted and soft. The *locus amoenus*.

It is a reasonable question to ask, whether the poet is different from the person who writes the poems and pays the Comcast bill late again and gets balsamic dressing on the side and snaps at the customer service person at U-Haul headquarters. The philosopher and poet Allen Grossman makes the distinction between them and further suggests—best as I could tell and as well as I recall—that the poet (I believe he says the “poet in time”) is contingent on the poem, is made the poet by the poem, each poem. A sort of separation happens perhaps. I think Grossman divides him up further and identifies, third, the lyric speaker as the default voice itself in a lyric poem, which in fact we do recognize immediately in poetry, the voice that is more overheard than heard. *Often I am permitted to return to a meadow*. If that spoken line were piped in through an intercom, you would still know right away it was poetry. *This is someone unnamed saying something to someone unnamed, either in a particular context or in the realm of forms, I am not him, and I want you to hear it*. Come into earshot. In what kind of place is all the hearing overhearing? The kind of place where all the looking is onlooking. The *locus amoenus*.

So, am I in a voice in a poem; or am I in a place from which I’ve prepared to speak; or have I situated someone other there, a figure, a projection, to speak, so to speak? More than a decade

ago, after giving a reading, reading some of the early poems that went into my first book, I remember clearly a particular consternation someone felt and related to me. I think it was the following day. It was someone not especially familiar with poetry but someone who knew me well; I can’t remember who. It’s the kind of experience that repeats a half dozen times, in dreams too, until you sort of equip yourself for it. There is a question that is embarrassing, kind of flooring in its reasonableness. The question is easy but the answer is hard. (Isn’t it always, about identity?) The person asks, maybe even works up the nerve to challenge: “But why does what you write not sound like how you talk?”

Why is poetry pretentious? Is that the question? Certainly to answer “Well, there I was speaking as my representative shepherd” doesn’t help the cause. There are all kinds of ways to answer the question, including to define poetry as yet another art that pulls attention to the medium, language, defamiliarizing it from its usual invisible, directly communicative and expository functions, thereby discovering it afresh, activating and liberating it. But it is in usual, directly communicative and expository language that this explanation is offered, and so seems paltry, and even if one cuts to the chase and says, “You don’t tell a dancer *that’s not how you normally move*,” the defensiveness concedes the point. What was the point?

I’m thinking of that exercise where you imagine there were but one person in a group who points, who understands pointing as the act that might send the gaze of others in a direction he indicates with his outstretched arm and indicating finger. But with each demonstration, all the others keep their eyes on him, even and especially on his extremity which repeatedly extends and goes rigid and to which he seems to want to draw attention. For these others, it is a kind of dance to do. There is no casting from the body with any part of the body something as divorced and immaterial as someone else’s attention. He introduces point-

ing again and again, but it doesn't take. He makes strange asides like, It's as though to indicate had never been a transitive verb. (Note to Rufus Wainwright: a "Me and My Arrow" duet with one of Harry Nilsson's sons.) It doesn't send.

So, you know, pointing is a construct. The child looking not past the pointer finger proves it. The self is a construct. Often I am permitted to return to a meadow. Poetry is a construct. When you say your poem it somehow isn't the person I know speaking.

No one writing a poem, achieving pleasure in discovery of intention and pattern and melody and association and parallels and syntactic and other tensions, is trying to be someone else. But once made, the poem so made registers as speech. And lyric speech is always, rather mysteriously, someone else's. Someone with givens, in a world. Theocritus may have been the first to find an exterior figure for this transformation, particularizing the givens of that speaker, and of the milieu for poems. These givens are representative pretenses of poetry still.

The last of the things I like that Allen Grossman says in his famous and pretentious *Summa Lyrica*, or maybe he's quoting someone, is that in the social realm of speech we face one another, asking and answering and remarking and informing, in exchange. But in the realm of speech a poem opens onto, we all face forward. We look on. We are positioned toward the speech differently than as we stood in the world a moment before, the world we came to the poem in. It is not meant for us exactly, this speech. It's in the locative case. Not a word of it, but the condition of the speech itself: it points us elsewhere if we listen. We listen in. The doings there are ongoing. What is that place? The one behind the construct of the idyll.

The Writer's Obligation

By [Wayne Koestenbaum](#) April 22, 2020

The writer's obligation in the age of X is to pay attention. Dreamed last night of a senile woman who'd taken up piano-playing; dementia had etherealized her features. Like a seasoned, reputable coach, I stood behind her while she fumbled through Schubert. The writer's obligation in the age of X is to remember the history of song, and to remember the reasons that troubled people have looked toward song to relieve pain and to organize, with other sufferers, in resistance.

*

With curiosity and reverence, I pulled down, from the shelf, the legendary *No More Masks!: An Anthology of Poems by Women*, the original paperback edition, 1973, edited by Florence Howe and Ellen Bass. The writer's obligation in the age of X is to revisit books to which we have ceased paying sufficient attention, books we have failed adequately to love.

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On a transcontinental flight I read Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*. I wanted to live in the crevice where words broke down, and where matter arose to compensate for the loss. Some words I found in *The Unnamable*: "grapnels," "apodosis," "sparsim," "congener," "paraphimotically globose," "circumvolutionisation," "inspissates," "naja," "halm," "thebaïd." These words—obstructions in the throat—seemed specimens of rigorous, refined accounting, of a system so late-stage, so desolate, it could only satisfy description's mandate by lodging in words virtually never used. And, while 39,000 miles in the air, I imagined an island where the only currency, for the stricken inhabitants, gumming their porridge, was the obsolete word, the rare word, the word stigmatized, in the dictionary, as "literary." I was imagining an island—call it the planet Earth—after most of it was rendered uninhabitable, where there were no words or only the most elementary words or only the most obscure words, only those words so specific, so *paraphimotically globose*, that they could function in this new, eviscerated terrain. Imagine, then, an ecology of language, where only "cang" and "ataxy" can make the rivers flow, where only "serotines" and "naja" can serve as verbal cenotaphs for the missing bodies, whether made of words or of matter, that failed to arrive at this final, spectral island. If we don't live on that island now, we may, one day, and we might not be "we" any longer; we might be sparse tuft or diatomaceous phlegm.

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Long ago I knew a little boy who was afraid of diatomaceous earth—a bug killer made from "the fossilized remains of marine plankton," I learn from a website that sells this product, or defines it, or rails against it. I knew a little boy who was afraid that the presence of diatomaceous earth in the family's garage would destroy his lungs. He

feared that diatomaceous earth would insinuate its chalky presence into the house itself. The patriarch of that house had a name almost identical to the nineteenth-century German peasant who discovered diatomaceous earth. The name of that peasant, Peter Kasten, closely resembles my father's name; the only object missing is the suffix “-baum.” The only object missing is the tree—not the actual tree, but the name for the tree, which is itself the sign of a so-called race, tribe, or population for whom poisons would eventually matter. There are no tribes for whom poisons do not always matter. Poisons mattered to the boy—not me, but my brother—who lived in the house adjacent to the garage containing diatomaceous earth. I imagine that my brother feared the diatomaceous earth not simply because it was possibly toxic to human lungs but because its first discoverer bore a name similar to our father's. And so, as Michel Leiris and other word-unveilers have noted, we travel into our stories—our bodies, our destinies—through the words that accidentally or deliberately serve as the vessels holding the material facts, the powders, the liquids. I will say “unguent” here because I seize any opportunity to say “unguent,” not because I want perfume or healing or exoticism but because I want vowel mesh, I want a superabundance of the letter “n,” hugging its “g,” and I want the repeated, nasally traversed “u,” which is an upside-down “n.” *Unguent*. And thus we dive into that aforementioned crevice where words crossbreed: my brother feared death at the hands of a bug killer discovered by a German man whose name uncannily resembled the name of our German father.

*

The writer's obligation in the age of X is to play with words and to keep playing with them—not to deracinate or deplete them, but to use them as vehicles for discovering history, recovering wounds, reciting

damage, and awakening conscience. I used the word “awakening” because my eye had fallen on the phrase “to wake the turnkey” from *The Unnamable*. Who is the turnkey? The warden who holds captive the narrator, if the narrator is a single self and not a chorus. “To wake the turnkey” is a phrase I instinctively rearranged to create the phrase “to wank the turkey.” Why did I want to wank a turkey? Is “wank” a transitive verb? According to the OED, the word’s origin is unknown, and it is solely an intransitive verb, which means it has no object. I cannot wank a turkey. You cannot wank a turkey. We cannot wank a turkey. They cannot wank a turkey. The turkey could wank, if the turkey had hands. I have no desire to investigate this subject any further. Before I drop it, however, let me suggest that Beckett’s narrator, the solipsist who paradoxically contains multiple voices, is, like most of his narrators, intrinsically a masturbator, as well as an autophage, a voice that consumes itself. The writer’s obligation in the age of X is to investigate the words we use; investigation requires ingestion. We must play with our food; to play with the verbal materials that construct our world, we must play with ourselves. Producing language, we wank, we eat, we regurgitate, we research, we demonstrate, we expel; with what has been expelled we repaper our bodily walls, and this wallpaper is intricate, befouled, and potentially *asemic*—nonsignifying scratches without a linguistic system backing them up, scratches we nominate as words by agreeing together that this scratch means wank, that scratch means cang, this scratch means diatomaceous, that scratch means masks.

*

Susan Sontag once praised a maxim by the painter Manet, who said that in art “you must constantly remain the master and do as you please. No tasks! No, no tasks!” I often quote Sontag quoting Manet.

Writing is a terrible task. It is also, sometimes, a pleasure, but it is more often a task. The arduousness of the task, and the succulence of the pleasure, are coiled together. For Sontag, writing must have often been a task, and she was often fleeing the task, even in her own writing. It's possible to read any of her sentences as a round-trip flight between pleasure and task. The flight grows marmoreal—hardened into its pose—and that state of stillness-in-motion (a modernist ideal) is her finished sentence. “Mastery,” as Sontag, quoting Manet, constructs it, is a matter of fleeing task; we flee the task to become the master. Mastery, a dubious concept, needn't be our lodestar; we can flee task not in search of mastery but in search of circumvolutionisation. More on circumvolutionisation in a minute.

*

“No more masks! No more mythologies!” So goes the passionate cry uttered in Muriel Rukeyser's “The Poem as Mask.” *No more tasks*, I say, crossbreeding Rukeyser's phrase with Sontag's (or Manet's) “No tasks!” Mask and task are two nouns—two behaviors—I love. From Oscar Wilde come masks; from the Marquis de Sade, and from Yahweh, come tasks. After Eden, masks and tasks. In Eden, we had neither. Literature—the respite of the fallen—is the process of making do with mask and task, diverting ourselves with tasks that mask our disenfranchisement. We are disenfranchised, regardless of our station, because we belong to an earth that will continue to bear our presence only if we remain adequate custodians of this material envelope, fragile, in which we dwell, an envelope consisting of just a small interval of habitable temperatures. To unmask the systems that will destroy our possibility of inhabiting the earth is the task of a language that operates through masks and the avoidance of tasks. Past the obvious tasks we fly, in search of tasks more stringent, more personal,

more awed, more seamed, more circumvolutionary. Circumvolution must be voluntary; no master can impose it. Beckett's word, "circumvolutionisation," is not in my two-volume abridged OED. Perhaps the word does not really exist. Perhaps it only exists in Beckett's mouth, or the mouth-mask that we call a novel. To flee the words we have been allotted by an immoral system that wishes to *drain the swamp* (as the current political administration describes its wish to destroy governance), and to seek circumvolutionisation, if circumvolutionisation turns you on, is the very simple medicine I stand here to offer you. *Circum-* means "around." *Volvere* means "to roll." In my dream last night, the senile woman playing Schubert on the piano had sat, a few dream moments earlier, gossiping with fellow sufferers in a room usually given over to psychoanalysis; my crime, in the dream, was either that I had crashed a borrowed car, or that my existence was filthy and inadmissible. In the dream, gobbets of mud were stuck to the bottom of my Blundstone boots. Homoeroticism lay encrypted within those muddy clods. My soiled homo-boots sat on the porch of the senile woman who'd been practicing her awed Schubert. Dirt's movement into and out of a house has always been the topic I circle around, and I beg you to take my circumvolutionisations as seriously as possible, and to eat them, as you would eat an allegory, biting hard into its brittle exterior, like an unfriendly candied almond, *Mandelbrot, Mandelbaum*.

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The problem is not how to finish a fold, but how to continue it, to have it go through the ceiling, how to bring it to infinity. It is not only because the fold affects all materials that it thus becomes expressive matter, with different scales, speeds, and different vectors (mountains and waters, papers, fabrics, living tissues, the brain), but especially because it determines and materializes Form. It produces a form of expression, a *Gestaltung*, the genetic element or infinite line of inflection, the curve with a unique variable.

– Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*

1 I open the codex; with a skirty murmur, commodiousness arrives. It figures' in a sequence that addresses me as its potential. And so I like to

1 Erich Auerbach, in his 1938 essay "Figura," traces a history of this word. Etymologically, it is related to the same Latin stem that connotes "plastic form," and it is important for the long story of *figura* as a concept, that the word, as he says, points to "the notion of *new* manifestation, the *changing* aspect, of the permanent" (my emphasis). In Lucretius, Auerbach saw the transposition, in *figura's* general precept of "outward shape," towards a non-visual traversing, such as the movement from the plastic to the auditory, or the ideational transition from model to copy, or the relation between things and their sometimes invisible simulacra or ghosts. This supple transference embodied by a figure, which is also a simultaneity, gives occasion to the desire to interpret. I'll propose that the codex is a figure for the material history of thinking. And the particular liveliness, the gesture, the codex brings to thinking is the turn, or the fold – the inflection whose agency never does complete itself.

Auerbach describes the different tasks carried out by a symbol and a figure: Where the signifying matter of the symbol typically completes a static idea of nature in a corresponding object – a flower, say, or a planet – by fulfilling nature's identity in this object, in a manner magical or mythic, the figure tends towards a shaping or a human crafting that includes temporal change. The figural faces a not entirely determined field of meaning. "The object itself overflows its frame in order to enter into a cycle or series," as Deleuze writes. The figural shape is already social, already part of a willed production of meaning. What makes an object figurative, besides this productive origin, is its capacity to overflow intention. The figure's agency is its historicity – it finds its dynamics in the inherent incompletion of history. As Auerbach proposes, "what actually makes the two forms [figure and symbol] completely different is that figural prophecy relates to an interpretation of history – indeed it is by nature a textual interpretation – while the symbol is a direct interpretation of life and originally no doubt for the most part, of nature." Interpretive incompletion is the figure's access to potential change. Or in other terms, an object or an image figures when it receives more of our imaginative projection than its social or mythic function would require. This margin of excess (an excess of potential interpretability inherent to a shapeliness) can be differently inflected through time. Conceptual and historical fluctuation exceeds the bounded or perceptible limits of a thing. At any time, a book may receive its reader differently. The figure's ambivalent stance *vis à vis* signification grants it the potent capacity of dissimulation, whether persuasive or ludic. The opacity, the inconspicuousness of its folds permit the interpretive differential.

face this device. Its structural modesty and discretion conceal a formally generous aptitude for proliferation, complexity and differentiation.

- 2 Mostly I seek the promiscuous feeling of being alive. Across a topography of tonalities, the codex amplifies an access. Within its discrete shelter, I move freely among new sensation.
- 3 By *commodious* I mean: This object furnishes hospitable conditions for entering and tarrying; it shelters without fastening; it conditions without determining. With a minimal gesture the commodious form shows us complexity's amplitude.
- 4 I submit to ink. I go into the elsewhere of chiaroscuro. The lack of transparency, the elaboration of shadow as a medium, makes the codex a soft bomb of potential. The sociality of reading does not always or only pertain to the present; it implicates the multi-temporal generosity of politics. Within this folded time, the person and an impersonal speech test and inflect and mix into one another. The book's darkly confectioned scene is a speculative, temporally striated polis.

Figura was also appropriated by architects into the technical description of potential space. Auerbach makes a further distinction in his conceptual history of this word by stressing *figura's* material plasticity (as distinct from its potential for interpretive dissimulation among the poets and rhetoricians) in Vitruvius' texts: "*figura* is architectural and plastic form, or in any case the reproduction of such form, the architect's plan; here there is no trace of deception or transformation; in his language *figura similitudine* does not mean 'by dissimulation', but 'by creating a likeness'. Often *figura* means 'ground plan' (*modice picta operis futuri figura*, slightly tinted, a plan of the future work), and *universae figurae species*, or *summa figuratio*, signifies the general form of a building or a man (he often compares the two from the standpoint of symmetry). Despite his occasional mathematical use of the word, *figura* (as well as *fingerere*) has a definitely plastic significance for him and for other technical writers of the period..."

This plasticity - this propensity of the figure to actively fold within itself an agency, an inflection that modulates perception - is the trait that permits the ongoing activity of the figure in time.

- 5 Chiaroscuro is also the technique of the uncanny. I am etched with unknowing as I continue. I have crossed into a material reserve that permits a maximum of intuition, the "as if" of a speculative thinking, which is outside of knowledge. Reading shows the wrongness of the habitual reification of "the social" and "the personal" in a binary system of values. It submits this binary to a ruinous foundering. And so, an erotics.
- 6 Multiplying, dividing and interchanging, the uncanny opens up the indeterminacy of identity. It provides an affective convention for the shadowed interchange among strangers, a relation that is not constrained to a unified time.
- 7 The inchoate state I crave dissolves and reshapes itself in the codex; reading feels like a discontinuous yet infinite rhythmic dispersal that generates singularities. It isn't knowledge at all. It's a timely dallying and surge among a cluster of minute identifications. I prefer to become foreign and unknowable to myself in accordance with reading's audacity.
- 8 It is the most commodious sensation I can imagine, this being lost. I don't want to leave this charitable structure that permits my detailed dissipation. Its excess of surface is available only ever in measured increments. I might define thinking this way: The partial access, in a sequence, to an infinite and inconspicuous surface complexity which is not my own.²

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- 2 When constructing a description of thinking in *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt asks *where* it is that we go when we think, rather than asking what thinking is - the customary philosophical inquiry. She shifts the emphasis of the ancient question from ontological query to spatial trajectory. For Arendt, thinking resembles tracking, a kind of place "beaten by the activity of thought," which turns to ploddingly follow a course towards a pause. It is "the small, inconspicuous track of non-time ... beaten between an infinite past and an infinite future by accepting past and future as directed, aimed, as it were, at themselves - as *their* predecessors and successors, *their* past and *their* future - thus establishing a present for themselves," a space that is neither inherited

- 9 The substitution of personae for self, of a series for an origin, of a rhythm for a state: Here is love's tension, love's politics. Here is form. The reader loves without knowing, I read *for* the book, simply because the book is there to be read. Sometimes my fidelity is for materiality.
- 10 I inhabit its joinery. Because of the orderly continuity of structural traits, the architectural metaphor is easily assumed. But what the book subtracts from architecture is the originating connotation of the *arche*. Here origins must be differentiated from beginnings, and from historicity. Each reading begins a movement among a multiple and open series, where memory is impersonal. The tectonics of the book frame chance and its twisting trajectories, not an origin.³ A reader is a beginner.

nor received from tradition, but which is made from what is touched in passing: "the ruin of historical and biographical time." In this argument thinking acquires a direction only when situated, and it is the modest, even ruined, situatedness of an invisibility, an inconspicuousness, the necessary (and resistant) turning away of the thinking body from appearing. I can recognize my own activities in this ruinous turning.

To follow Arendt's description inflects thinking with a utopian ungroundedness.

It feels true to me to claim a utopian status for thought. But such a claim can also seem to obfuscate the historical contingency of the thinker's milieu – after all, this activity is conditioned by historical pressures and protocols, the failures, delights and movements of materials and social and economic relationships. But thinking also veers freely. Both. The unresolved, often frictive, relationship between conditioning environments and the desiring mind is itself thinking's energetic resource.

- 3 If we can speak of the architecture of the book, it is because the book with its folds infinitely figures: Its conceptual plasticity plays forth an engendering within a lineage. But whatever conceptual, figurative connotations we read into the book are contingent on a material history: The history of the transformation of a support – wood and wax tablet, papyrus, parchment, paper; an alphabetical or diagrammatic inscribing – manual, mechanical or electronic; a structuring – wound scroll to unfurl on ivory wand, folded sheets, sewn signatures bound with boards, a digital space with its numerical architecture.... Also this material and technical transformation of the object is aligned with the history of the book's institutional frames – ritual, spiritual, ecclesiastical, secular or aesthetic – in their various combinations. But this material figuration, this semantic

- 11 I read garbage, chance and accident. I can't fix what materiality is. Reading, I enter a relational contract with *whatever* material, accepting its fluency and swerve. I happen to be the one reading.
- 12 I can't fix what materiality is. I act into happenstance. A codex accompanies what is otherwise an interpretive surplus suffered or enjoyed in my body. With this complicity arrives a world, and timeliness: form.
- 13 I read to sense the doubling of time: The time of the book's form, which pertains to the enclosure and topology of rooms, allegories, houses, bodies, surfaces; and the time of my perceiving, which feels directional, melodic, lyric, inflectional. Then, because of the book's time overlaying my own, reading opens a proposition. It receives in me the rhythm I didn't know I missed.
- 14 I face something delicate and fragile that could span a great distance and then it closes. One time cancels the other, exercises its authority upon the other. I am suspended between form and perception, inflected with an outside temporality. Attention becomes impersonal.
- 15 I'll be lost then, if reading is dark. In the forest, in the hotel or wherever.
- 16 In heavy and worthy houses, I feel a violent dismay. It gets harder and harder to be female in one's life in such a house. What has commodiousness become? I abandon the house for the forbidden book.
- 17 Something can change. The dispersed rhythm of a wandering – musical and conceptual – is what its folds conduct. Rhythm is a figured, embodied improvisation, not a measure.

plenitude – book as nature, memory, Rome, God, word, history, church, love – finds its inconspicuous site only in relation to the embodied mentalities of its readers.

18 In the pleasant displacement of identity, another time keeps shaping what I will be. This banal and minimal object plays me, plays what living in thinking might be, given luck and commodiousness. Time's just luck.

19 The codex acts out an inaccessibility, the failure of transparency, and it figures this inaccessibility not only as a generative aesthetics, but also as the motive agency of perception, where perception disperses identity in a movement towards unknowing. I want to notice and memorize the non-semiotic meanings the codex inaugurates in my body.

20 Reading in the dark: Here is the acutely sought ruin of identity. Reading begins in me an elaborate abandonment. Desire and identity are not the same. At times it feels like desire displaces, or replaces, identity. Perception retreats or rather turns towards this dark interiority that isn't my own.⁴ The codex continuously transforms desire and this has become a life.

21 I feel astonished that any institution could have placed such an object in my hands, then left me alone with it. Reading misuses privileges, abuses authorities, demands interference. Its commodity is political, not economic; it insists on the distinction between economics and politics. The dimension of thinking articulates itself only in political time. In order to continue, reading resists. I witness the displacement of the political into the codex.

4 In his discussion of the material history of textuality, in *In the Vineyard of the Text*, the medievalist Ivan Illich describes the 12th-century reader's relation to the codex in the developing practice of silent reading. Here, the newly private readerly experience is expressed as an interior pilgrimage finding its spiritual and conceptual field within the folds of the codex. Such a figurative movement mirrored the pilgrimages then unfolding across the European continent, whether to Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela, or Rome, or to the new northern cathedrals. That the spiritual journey, with its physical hardships and teleology could transfer itself to the intimacy of the book as a space infected by all the potentiality of such a struggle, suggests the degree to which the codex had instituted itself within the spatial imaginary of the era.

22 Encouraged by such material conviviality, thinking's rhythm paradoxically opens: It undoes itself from identity, there having been little habits or measures binding them. The potential relationships between identities and desires loosen and multiply. The undoing poses an extraordinary and pleasing relief. Fear is not absent either.

23 Perhaps the effect of inwardness of the codex inheres as a serial multiplication of access and surface, rather than as a correlative to the trope of psychological depth. Time is in the codex as simultaneity. When we think, we go into a confected time.

24 With minimal gestures, the time of my sensing is repeatedly annexed, confounded by the codex, which now lends its folds to thought. What reader emerges from her study simplified? She has exchanged the propriety of an assigned identity for these charitably promiscuous folds.

25 Sensual perception, and hence cognition, is supplemented, not compromised, by indetermination. Although the book is a screen for certain intentions – institutional, authorial and readerly – intention can't be contained or enforced. Thinking's impersonality moves across the shadowed commons of the codex to be politicized by chance, where chance is a stranger.

26 Thus the interdiction against reading – it was Rousseau who said that any girl who reads is already a lost girl. The codex has lent her its secrecy. She will read in spite of any law.

27 As the girl leans into chiaroscuro, commodiousness⁵ unpleats itself in

5 The trope of the readerly pilgrimage further complicates itself in the 18th-century secular humanist practice of the Grand Tour, where the journey to Rome can be mirrored, supplemented or substituted by the private perusal of bound print albums such as

the interstices of her gestural history and in the time of reading, which becomes a rhythmic infinity. She embodies an unknowable politics by deepening the shadows in places, tarrying with the anarchy of impersonal memory. Her autonomy undoes itself and disperses into a devotedly plural materiality. Her identifications are small revolutions and also the potent failures of revolutions. She is free to not appear.

those of Piranesi. Where the 12th-century reader is on a road towards spiritual light, knowledge of the divine as embodied in the book and the word, the young man on his Grand Tour moves towards shadow, ruins. The self has become not what is lit by divine truth, but what garners an obscurity in the partiality and ambivalence of origins, which are always perceived as lost, broken, in ruin. In Piranesi's albums, the Roman dark etched by the scribbling burin is the new dark of the unconscious, the new divinity.