

INTRODUCTION

Poems, Poetry, Personhood

It is time to explain myself. Let us stand up.

B *BEING NUMEROUS ADDRESSES* a set of interdependent problems in the history, theory, and politics of recent Anglo-American poetry. In it, I offer a challenge and an alternative to a nearly unanimous literary-historical consensus that would divide poetry into two warring camps—post-Romantic and postmodern; symbolist and constructivist; traditionalist and avant-garde—camps that would pit form against form on grounds at once aesthetic and ethical. Rather than choosing sides in this conflict or re-sorting the poems upon its field of battle, I argue that a more compelling history might begin by offering a revisionary account of what poetry is or can be. Poetry is not always and everywhere understood as a *literary* project aiming to produce a special kind of verbal artifact distinguished by its particular formal qualities or by its distinctive uses of language.¹ Nor is it always understood as an *aesthetic* project seeking to provoke or promote a special kind of experience—of transformative beauty, for example, or of imaginative freedom—in its readers.² Among the possible alternative ways of understanding poetry, I focus on the one that seems to me at once the most urgent and the one most fully obscured by our current taxonomies. For a certain type of modern poet, I will argue, “poetry” names an ontological project: a civilizational wish to reground the concept and the value of *the person*.

This shift of emphasis, from “poems” as objects or occasions for experience to “poetry” as an occasion for reestablishing or revealing the most basic unit of social

life and for securing the most fundamental object of moral regard, has precedents and justifications in the long history of the theory of poetry:³ in the ancient association of song with the most important forms of social recognition (Homer's κλέος ἄφθιτον, or "immortal fame," for example); or in the Romantic idea that the play of poetic imagination is constitutive of what it means to be human (Friedrich Schiller's "[der Mensch] ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt").⁴ But the modern versions of these claims are altered and intensified to the extent that the need to reground personhood responds to history on another scale: to a set of civilizational crises that are at once theoretical (the desacralization or critique of the concept of the person) and devastatingly real. These include the upheavals of decolonization and nation formation, the levelings of consumer culture, "the end of history," and above all, genocide and the specter of total annihilation. In discussions centered on writers from a range of historical moments, formal traditions, and political orientations (William Butler Yeats, George Oppen, Frank O'Hara, and the Language poets), I identify a tradition of poets for whom our century's extreme failures to value persons adequately—or even to perceive persons as persons—issue to poetry a reconstructive philosophical imperative that is greater than any imperative to art; indeed, it is hostile to art *as such*.

But why should art and personhood come to seem opposed to each other? As both Classical and Romantic examples attest, it would seem rather more common to regard them as two moments in the project of self-fashioning or soul-making (what might, in a more technical or skeptical idiom, be called "subject formation"). When we describe a poem as having a "speaker," or as giving "voice" to a person, we are not *assuming* anything about what a person is. Rather, we are taking the artifice of voice in the poem to offer something like a model or a theory of the person, or even a pedagogy of personhood. In its orchestrations of perception, conception, and affect, a poem elaborates upon or expands the possibilities of what a person can see, think, and feel. Through its constructive work with the sound and matter of language, the poem gives shape to the concept of the person who can think, say, and make *these things*.⁵ Likewise, it has often seemed intuitive to see poems as fostering recognition and solidarity between persons. As public objects, poems strive to make their ideas or conceptions of personhood perceptible and durable—if not always immediately legible—to others. In their scoring of the voice, or in their stretching of the word beyond or beneath the horizons of ordinary speech, they produce opportunities for readers and hearers to extend and expand their sympathies, and to identify even the most baroque utterance or repulsive sentiment as the testimony of a fellow mind.

But if poetry has seemed well—even powerfully—suited to redress failures of human sociability, it has also been understood to be profoundly implicated in them. The accounts of personhood made available to sense by poetry's vivid presence are burdened with art's limits. The work of art in John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait

in a Convex Mirror” may be the means by which “[t]he soul establishes itself”; but the “secret” of the soul made manifest in art is “that the soul is not a soul / Has no secret, is small, and it fits / Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.” In their economy of means and their requirements of closure, even the most expansive poems can be felt to reproduce—and to make palatable or attractive—the bounded scope and restricted application of the concepts that they make available.

Similar problems accrue to the poem conceived as an occasion for sympathy. As objectifications of thought or voice destined for the eyes and ears of others, poems are dependent on the capacities of their readers for attention and perception, interest or pleasure. As a result of this dependency, works of verbal art may seem to emphasize, not the autonomy or dignity of the other of whom they tell, but rather the sense in which persons *themselves* are dependent upon the perceptions and inclinations of others for survival. Hannah Arendt begins *The Life of the Mind* with this very thought: “Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*.”⁶ Not to be beheld is not to exist; thus, when Sappho declares poetry’s cultural function to supply the privilege of value-bearing personhood in the form of eternal perceptibility, she does so precisely by way of withdrawing that privilege in contempt:

When you lie dead there will be no memory of you,
No one missing you afterward, for you have no part
in the roses of Pieria. Unnoticed in the house of Hades
too, you’ll wander, flittering after faded corpses.⁷

For Ashbery’s “Daffy Duck in Hollywood,” it is not just the immortalization of life but life itself that is afflicted with a dependency upon the attention of another: “I have / Only my intermittent life in your thoughts to live. . . . Everything / Depends on whether somebody reminds you of me.” In some serious sense, we are all animated figures, for whom much (perhaps it is everything) depends upon whether we seem sufficiently like “somebody” to be worthy of having our claims credited or to be granted justice.

In the face of a century of emergencies, some poets come to see the relation between art’s power and its limits, not as a simple fact, as Arendt sees it; not as a point of privilege, as Sappho understands it; and not as an occasion for the witty performance of regret and evasion, as Ashbery treats it; rather, they see the requirements of closure and perceptibility as an intolerable burden and an affront to human dignity. For such poets, the poetic response to crises of human value entails reimagining the object of the art—a task that they perform as a sort of sacrifice. The effort to evade the limits and dependencies of the person—once they are understood to be inseparable from the form and substance of the poem itself—results in a conception of art with a conflicted and attenuated relation to both

substance and form. The poets I am *most* interested to describe throughout this book will thus resist their own will to formal mastery, shy away from the sensory richness of their own strongest work, and undermine the conceptual particularity and moral exemplarity of their poetic vision. At the extremes, they long, threaten, or enjoin themselves to do away with poetry altogether. More precisely, they strive to conceive of or even produce a “poetry” without poems; as though the problems with what philosophy calls “person-concepts”—our definitions of and attempts to give an account of personhood—could be addressed by subverting or destroying the very medium that bears them.

Thus, what begins as an argument about the contours of recent literary history opens into a reconsideration of the nature or status of the literary artifact and of the role that poetry can play in social thought. The poets I will discuss here cannot be recruited into the war of kinds I describe at the outset without obscuring their deepest commitments. Nor can their choice of styles be understood to be part of an ethical or political project aimed at expanding the sphere of attention or social sympathy. For these poets, and for others of their kind, *no* style could be adequately capacious to convey the limitless value of the person; no poem that had to be perceived in order to live could produce confidence, beyond skepticism or error, that a valued life was present.

But what is the alternative—in poetry, for personhood—to style and to perceptibility, to appearance and phenomenology? Against a poetics of poems that enters deeply into the texture of the experience of persons (whether as representation of that experience or occasion for it), the poets I will describe here seek ways to make their poetic thinking yield accounts of personhood that are at once *minimal*—placing as few restrictions as possible upon the legitimate forms a person can take—and *universal*—tolerating no exemptions or exclusions. Finally, they will also demand that our concepts of personhood identify something *real*: not political fictions we could come to inhabit together, or pragmatic ways of speaking we might come to share, but a ground on which the idea of a “we” might stand. This poetry, I argue, is an important site for the articulation of a new humanism: it seeks a reconstructive response to the great crises of social agreement and recognition in the twentieth century.

I. Two Kinds

“There are two kinds of poets, just as there are two kinds of blondes,” opines Oliver Wendell Holmes’s unnamed Author in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*.⁸ The choice offered to the residents of an imaginary New England boardinghouse in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858—between

“NEGATIVE or WASHED” and “POSITIVE or STAINED”—has justly been treated with less seriousness than some other, better known attempts to divide poetry in two: Plato’s account of the passion-driven and imitative poet (banished) and the properly devotional and moral poet (welcome), for example; or Schiller’s classification of poets and stages of culture as “naïve” and immediate or reflectively “sentimental.”⁹ Nevertheless, it is Holmes’s slighter and more superficial taxonomy that seems apt for our present moment. Like his Author, the authors of our histories of poetry in the twentieth century—and now the twenty-first—have divided the art into two jealous and irreconcilable kinds. And like the distinction between “negative” and “washed” or “positive” and “stained,” our distinctions and descriptions begin with the promising technical sheen of analysis, but they quickly devolve into fashions.

“[Movement of curiosity among our ladies at table. - Please to tell us about those blondes, said the schoolmistress.]”¹⁰

The first of these poetic kinds has been defined through its traditionalist lineage: its modernism is continuous with Romanticism in its faith in the power of art—and in the modes of consciousness and powers of mind that poetic forms access or promote—to redeem or remake the self and history, even as it casts a cold eye on the Romantic celebration of naturalized subjectivity as history’s highest achievement.¹¹ Rooted in W. B. Yeats’s symbolism and his dream- and spirit- haunted atavisms, this version of Modernism encompasses T. S. Eliot both in his religious strivings and in the avowed classicism of his art; it takes in Wallace Stevens’s ornate beauties as well as his supreme fictions. Postmodernists like Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath are, in their turn, skeptical of modernism’s totalizing forms of artistic mastery; newly receptive, too, to the human particularity and social situatedness of the poetic speaker. But even in his ironic deflations of aesthetic or imaginative heroism, a poet like Lowell never wholly breaks with the modernist conception of the poetic vocation, and never relinquishes the elevated ambition to transform the merely empirical person into the valued person by poetic modes of speech and thought.¹²

We are poor passing facts,
 Warned by that to give
 each figure in the photograph
 his living name.¹³

Contemporary champions in this line may be found wherever poets understand themselves to be the inheritors of a single art as of an unbroken thought. Such poets understand poetry’s ageless continuity as an ally or fellow-fighter; a supplement to the limits and contingencies of the human mind. Frank Bidart’s appeal to

the great makers of the past—his plea for a transformative intensification of self that would differentiate him from a mere creature of instinct—marks him out as a poet of this sort:

*Not bird not badger not beaver not bee
Many creatures must
make, but only one must seek
within itself what to make*

. . .

Teach me, masters who by making were
remade, your art.¹⁴

The second kind of poet, less thoroughly canonized but more comprehensively theorized, is conceived as the inheritor of a paradoxical “avant-garde tradition.” This tradition, too, lays some claim to the energies of Romanticism (here, in its most revolutionary aspects). But its repeated promises of originality and continual discoveries of discontinuity are more securely grounded in modernist experiments: Gertrude Stein’s “beginning again and again”;¹⁵ Ezra Pound’s epic of assemblage, “containing” history by constructing it; the open-eyed immanence of William Carlos Williams’s “clarity, outline of leaf.”¹⁶ The privileging of unending novelty, constructivist experiment, and unadorned sight justifies an explosion of mid-century movements and schools, united (if at all) in valuing difference and in busily seeking for continual change. Something of the formal, conceptual, and geographic range of this moment is on display at mid-century in Donald Allen’s anthology *The New American Poetry 1945–1960*, which opened so many poets’ eyes to the varieties of American poetic innovation with transformative results. The century’s end saw a consolidation of these experimental energies around the work of the American avant-garde school known as the Language poets; and it is this movement, more than any other, that continues to give formal and theoretical shape to the poetic present, whether as positive influence or troubled inheritance.

This “alternative” tradition pits a thoroughgoing skepticism about the representational powers of language and the coherence of selves against a theoretical optimism about the constructive possibilities of language and its capacity to remake selves or to release them from conceptual fetters. Contemporary poets in its line take the poem as an occasion not so much for self-discovery as for the disassembly and reassembly of persons—often in the same act or moment, as in Rae Armantrout’s self-theorizing performance of a speaker’s always unfinished work of manifestation:

A moment is everything
one person
(see below)

takes in simultaneously
 though some
 or much of what
 a creature feels
 may not reach
 conscious awareness
 and only a small part
 (or none) of this
 will be carried forward
 to the next instant.¹⁷

These are, I have suggested, familiar stories—even overfamiliar. The narratives I have been elaborating are well enough entrenched in our present conversation about poetry that they seem to lie on the very surfaces of poems, so that we can sort confidently between Bidart’s poem and Armantrout’s—and, it would sometimes seem, any others—by gestalt.¹⁸ Indeed, part of the intuitiveness, force, and durability of the split stems from precisely this kind of impressionism. But in fact, the analytic categories underwriting and justifying the division vary substantially from critic to critic. Marjorie Perloff, for example, has most recently cast the opposition as between a dominant “expressivist paradigm” that takes poetry as a “*vehicle*” for “thoughts and feelings” that originate in selves prior to language, and a “constructivism” that takes language as “the site of meaning making.”¹⁹ Harold Bloom, characteristically uncompromising, elaborates the criteria of a great tradition in terms derived from the Romantic line he favors—“aesthetic splendor, intellectual power, wisdom”—but does not countenance the existence of an alternative to greatness. Rather, he conceives of the split as the division between “poetry” and “non-poetry.”²⁰ Others, continuing the Whitmanian tradition of equating “the free growth of metrical laws” with political freedom, or endorsing Eliot’s conflation of his impulse to conserve literary traditions with his impulse to uphold traditional institutions (“classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion”) have taken the difference between wisdom and invention, splendor and disruption to be political in design or effect, and map the difference between tradition and experiment onto a difference between right and left.²¹

Rachel Blau DuPlessis provides a vivid example of the multiplicity of grounds upon which our history currently stands in her definition of objectivism, which, as she writes,

usefully designates a general aesthetic position in modern and contemporary poetry encompassing work based, generally, on “the real,” on history, not myth, on empiricism not projection, on the discrete not the unified, on vernacular prosodies not traditional poetic rhetoric, on “imagism” not “symbolism” or “surrealism,” and on particulars with a dynamic relation to universals.²²

This description of a specific poetic movement produces the full effect of the two-tradition model in microcosm. The terms it proposes are both useful and forceful: they do pick out recognizable elements both in poems that we know and in ones that we might discover. But the poetic position described here is unstable because the terms used to define it are heterogeneous in kind. Sometimes they evoke literary-historical movements (“imagism” vs. “symbolism”); sometimes they seem to reflect formal or functional commitments that transcend the boundaries of schools and histories (“discrete” vs. “unified” or “vernacular” vs. “rhetorical”); and sometimes they suggest philosophical commitments with strong ideological implications but no necessary aesthetic dimension (“history” vs. “myth” or “empiricism” vs. “projection”). Still, despite the various or shifting or incommensurable terms in which the division is described or conceptualized, the critical champions of each side do achieve virtual unanimity about the *fact* of the split, and an impressive (if imperfect) consensus about which poet belongs to whom.

This book began in my dissatisfaction with this state of affairs—one which has, despite the fact that others have begun to share that dissatisfaction, shown few signs of disappearing.²³ The need to make navigable or usable the dense field of the past century’s poetry has resulted in a sorting engine so efficient that it has reproduced itself as orthodoxy not just in criticism—where it has leapt from the conclusion of an argument to its unexamined premise²⁴—but even in the work of poets themselves. What began as a description of the art has been adopted by the artist as an obligation; the poet’s felt need to find a productive community and a usable past has turned into the demand to pick a side; and style has become less a way of solving artistic problems than a declaration of allegiance.²⁵ As a general rule, critical and poetic partisans, bent on consolidating, celebrating, claiming, or extending one tradition, take note of the other only long enough to deride—and too often such derision is a reflexive reaction rather than an analytic one.

There are a number of ways to go about criticizing this view of the poetic field. Certainly any literary history so powerfully streamlined courts criticism for the poverty or indelicacy of its distinctions. Many of the kinds of poetry written in the last hundred years fit only uneasily or tententiously into this binary of tradition and experiment. Poetries that draw from the wellsprings of neglected experiences, from oral literatures, or from traditions that originate beyond Europe and the Americas, for example, may appear both traditional and innovative at once, as the ideology of authenticity may offer possibilities of renewal to a cultural sphere unfamiliar with the sound of marginalized voices. The critical movement to recover the rich tradition of poetry by women is one notable instance of the complex interplay in which authenticity is itself a kind of experiment;²⁶ similar dynamics are at work in the hard-to-classify case of Afro-Modernism in the first half of the century, or of Asian American poetry in the second.²⁷ From an even broader vantage, the sheer volume and multiplicity of poetries in the last hundred years in America produces a cacophony

of voices that resist categorization almost entirely—a fact elevated to a principle by the two-volume Library of America offering *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, a collection that “organizes” some two hundred poets, versifiers, and lyricists by mere chronology, so that the Dadaist provocation of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven stands next to the vernacular formalism of Robert Frost, and Lightnin’ Hopkins’s “Death Bells” accompany May Sarton’s decorous music.²⁸

Critics have also (usually implicitly) qualified the two-tradition narrative by paying rigorous attention to the multiple aspects or moments to be found within a single poet’s work. Such intensely particularizing scrutiny can make a poet seem *sui generis*, a school or industry unto himself. Pound is an exemplary figure in this vein. Considered for their monumental stature as an archive of formal inventions, his *Cantos* are, as Basil Bunting declared them, the Alps of the modernist poetic landscape—inimitable, inevitable, demanding harrowing passage. Considered in terms of his totalizing ambitions and wretched politics, Pound is the queen of spades in the game of literary history—the card nobody wants. John Ashbery is uncategorizable in another (more slippery, less agonistic) sense. In his endless productivity and insistent changefulness he seems to belong to every category we can imagine or desire. Our jack of diamonds, he is claimed at one moment for the tradition of Stevens and at the next for the tradition of Stein.

The split between kinds, so clear in theory, may not be so clear in the actual conduct of literary life, where relations between poets often reveal themselves with the force of surprise. When Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg read together at St. Mark’s in 1977, the *New York Times* attested to the collision of two species: the “tense ruddy history-ridden New England Brahmin” on the one hand and a “bearded Paterson-East Side Hasid guru” on the other.²⁹ Yet Lowell the Brahmin attests to his shared genealogy with Ginsberg the Hasid (“Actually, we’re from two ends of the William Carlos Williams spectrum”), and confirms (though somewhat grudgingly) Ginsberg’s influence in his letters. Poets may also deliberately *strive* to overcome divisions and sequesterations that they feel as overly constraining.³⁰ Moxley’s choice of poetic dedications and homages (to Keats, to Oppen), along with her polemically broad courting of dictions, forms, and influences, hone her book’s dedication “to my contemporaries” into a pointed rebuke to the burdensome allegiances that the contemporary demands of the emerging poet.

I have some sympathies with all of these qualifications, projects of recovery and pluralization, and angles of revision and self-expansion. But none of them describes the course this book has taken. While I, too, had hoped to dissolve the distinctions that seem to have cut poets of whatever kind off from fully half of their art, I have come to think that our analytic divisions need to be intensified instead. Thus, as it happens, *Being Numerous* does argue for the existence of yet another distinction within modern and contemporary poetry. But because the division I have in mind will prove to be more fully grounded in poets’ philosophical (indeed,

their ontological) commitments rather than their strictly formal or ideological ones, it cuts across the current lines drawn according to style and politics. And because it arises from the intuitions of a certain kind of poet about the most fundamental questions—not just about the nature of literary artifacts, but about the human nature of their makers and readers—it results in a poetic taxonomy that is, if less total in scope, more absolute in nature.

Symptoms of this absoluteness may be found in the depths of poetic incomprehension. Though Yeats and Pound actually shared a physical home at Stone Cottage as well as metaphysical and occult sources, the older poet's bewilderment in the face of the younger's attempt to explain the structure of the *Cantos*—and of history—is as complete as his admiration:

He has scribbled on the back of an envelope certain sets of letters that represent emotions or archetypal events—I cannot find any adequate definition—A B C D and then J K L M, and then each set of letters repeated, and then A B C D inverted and this repeated, and then a new element X Y Z, then certain letters that never recur, and then all sorts of combinations of X Y Z and J K L M and A B C D and D C B A, and all set whirling together.³¹

Wider still is the gulf between Pound and Stevens, who shared no affections and barely a common alphabet, and whose quarrels never even rose to the level of mutual misunderstanding. They appear hardly to have read each other's work at all.³²

Misunderstanding is translated into the next generation of poets as a kind of willful indifference. George Oppen's letters over a half-century and his copious notebooks and "daybooks" are full of news of the literary world, but they reveal the horizon of that world to have been quite close.³³ "Four men in Pound's generation wrote poetry," Oppen proclaims, "Perhaps an equal number since."³⁴ The so-called Objectivist poets like Louis Zukofsky, Carl Rakosi, and Charles Reznikoff are Oppen's constant interests and interlocutors, while the poets most often understood as the central figures of that generation—Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, or Robert Lowell—hardly even appear as worthy topics of conversation. The exception in this case outdoes the rule; Oppen's slighting mention of Elizabeth Bishop, as the author of "the silliest line ever written,"³⁵ produces even more effectively than silence a near total erasure of the work. Bishop herself similarly erases half the poetic world in her own elegant and voluminous correspondence; one would look in vain for the barest mention of any poet calling himself an objectivist.³⁶

Incomprehension, indifference, and erasure are symptomatic of something important that lies beneath the shrillness of our present acrimony. If the latter is best

understood as a competition for limited resources of publication and the dwindling stocks of honor and prestige available to poetry of any kind in our culture,³⁷ the more complete separation looks less like a clash of tribal styles and more like two entirely different practices only accidentally going by the same name. I believe Harold Bloom has captured something of this all-or-nothing distinction in his insistence on characterizing recent poetic history as the contest between “poetry” and “non-poetry.” While lesser poetry might, for a time, triumph over the greater in some period’s sensibility (such may be the case, according to Bloom, with T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, “the Cowley and Cleveland of this age”³⁸), poetry cannot be in genuine competition with non-poetry. Perhaps one could mistake the ersatz for the real thing; but such a mistake would be categorical, an error of reason rather than a lapse of judgment. I would like to suggest (very much against the spirit of his intention) that we read Bloom’s categorical claims in a register that is neither merely dismissive nor even fundamentally evaluative, but rather as genuinely and usefully taxonomic. This is to say that the idea of “non-poetry”—an art that does not merely lack aesthetic “splendor” in some degree, but that instead negates the very idea of aesthesis as the privilege and destination of poetry—captures something important about the formal features of an as-yet-undefined poetic kind. It also, I will soon argue, suggests something quite precise about the characteristic intentions of certain “non-poets” with respect to the objects and purposes of their art.

But for the moment, I would simply note that this difference between conceptions of the poem lies behind another fact that has been hard for readers interested in the innovative poetry of the twentieth century to acknowledge. The lack of what might be called poetic realization results in work that can be hard to love, or even to like. So variously fragmented, occulted, difficult, and silent; so assertively trivial, boring, or aleatory are the types of poetry on the “experimental” side of the critical divide, that critics who champion the work have gone to great didactic and theoretical lengths to imagine, explain, justify, and market alternative species of pleasure and interest to compensate for the loss of traditional aesthetics. Such justifications include “the fascination with what’s difficult,” the penetration of the veil of the esoteric, the masochistic pleasures of derangement, the politicized shock of estrangement, the tranquilizing or meditative dwelling in the ambient.³⁹

This pointed catalogue may read like a judgment of taste, or a way of casting my lot with a particular family of poetic styles through descriptive abuse. But my goal here and throughout is not to refuse any sort of pleasure or interest no matter how recondite; nor is it to uphold “traditional” aesthetic standards in relation to poems that do not seek them. Still less do I mean for a new poetic taxonomy to proscribe aesthetic choices for contemporary artists in the way of the old one (though I may hope that my argument opens some compelling possibilities for writing). Rather, my point will be to show that the *a priori* conviction that all poetic projects imagine the crucial relation to poetry to be a relation to an object—an

object of labor, of perception, of interpretation—is an unwarranted assumption; even a sort of fetishism. If many of the poems I gravitate to in this book appear to be in various ways silent—strange, broken, or otherwise unforthcoming with any of the pleasures we expect and demand of well-made things—it is because they are deliberately made in such a way as to present problems for reception, problems for which *none* of our vocabularies of response (traditional or innovative, aesthetic, affective, constructivist, pragmatic) are appropriate. An insistence upon the centrality or even the reality of the poem is not consistent with what every poet means by undertaking poetry. Let there be as many kinds of pleasure and interest as can be conceived; the frequency with which we can encounter “non-poetry” as a literary fact should, if we attend to it, point us in the direction of a deficiency not just with the ways poetic history has been described, but with the ways that poetry itself has been conceived. Stated most simply: The persistent production of non-poems asks that we entertain the notion that *what the poet intends by means of poetry is not always the poem*.

II. Poetry in the General Sense

Of course, poets do intend their poems. The idea of the poem as the product of great and focused labor will be familiar to anyone who has ever tried to write one. It is a notion as deeply ingrained in the tradition as its opposite, the ideal of full-throated ease that work on the poem paradoxically strives to approximate:

I said: ‘A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught. . . .’

But just what is it—besides the appearance of effortless spontaneity—that a poet intends by his painstaking work on the line? And what is the benefit for the reader of what the poet, also in “Adam’s Curse,” calls the “idle trade” of working *through* the line, whether in “beautiful old books,” or (as some more avant-garde poet might prefer it) in the estranging and new?

The question of how to relate the distinctive forms and phenomenologies of poems to the intentions of their makers and the effects upon their readers has been the central problematic for poetic criticism in the last half-century. W. K. Wimsatt, in “*The Verbal Icon*,” provides the canonical instance of the New Critical way of handling—which is to say, exacerbating—the problem:

[P]oems are taken by the critic not as abstract or intentional, but in what might be called solid, or artifactual, dimensions. The verbal object will be viewed by

the critic in a kind of stereoscopic perspective that makes it look somewhat like a physical object. The poet himself is taken as artist, not as intender, but as accomplisher.⁴⁰

Much of the poetic criticism that has followed in the wake of the New Criticism has been concerned to theorize ways to reconcile the “artifactual” solidity of the poem that Wimsatt argues for here—an objectification that licenses the heightened attention to form and pattern that we call “close reading”—with a concern with the shaping influences of history. Thus, Theodor Adorno begins his 1957 essay “On Lyric Poetry and Society” by imagining a hypothetical listener’s anxious—one might say Wimsattian—concern that the critic’s attempt to relate a lyric to society does worse than merely misconstrue the poem; it “does not see it at all.” The properly dialectical reading that would allay such anxieties, Adorno goes on to explain, will resist taking the poem for the wrong sort of thing—“objects with which to demonstrate sociological theses”—only if it respects the objecthood of poems in the right sense: only if, that is, “the social element in [poems] is shown to reveal something essential about the basis of their quality.”⁴¹ “Material,” as Adorno puts it in *Aesthetic Theory*, “is always historical.”⁴² Despite his resistance to the ideology of modernist claims to self-sufficiency, Adorno’s poem, like Wimsatt’s, manifests itself as solid and artifactual, walled off in the enclosure of its forms, autonomous and functionless. But, Adorno argues, the “basis” of that peculiar quality of autonomy is the social world that the work refuses: or, as he puts it, “the demand that the lyric word be virginal is itself social in nature.”⁴³ Adorno’s artifactual lyric is the manifest negation of sociality—all its modes of talk, its restrictive notions of causality, its reductive spheres of concern—and it is this negation that will prove in his analysis to be the very mode of art’s social engagement.

Between the object as masterful accomplishment and the object as masterful refusal there lies a range of other possibilities. Adorno’s preservation of formalism as the crucial category for even the most historically inclined reader has itself been preserved in one sense by critics who treat the poem’s formal or artifactual nature as a reactionary withdrawal from history. It has been honored in a still more capacious sense by historicist critics who share Adorno’s view of form as the site of the poem’s contact with history, but subtract his insistence on negation or refusal as the only properly poetic mode of historical engagement.⁴⁴ Rather than offering some new angle on the familiar question of how to render the apparent rift between aesthetic object and its social intentions merely apparent, however, I would first like to consider alternatives to the original premise: not just to Adorno’s claim that the poem of modernity is distinguished by a heightened kind of formalization or objectification, but to the more general claim that the primary way to do justice to poetry as poetry is “to see it at all.” Or, more capaciously, to consider it in its phenomenal modes: in the music of its language, the vividness of its

figures, the force of its rhetoric, even the disposition of its words across the surface of the page.

This reconsideration, too, has a basis as much in intuitions that arise from the making of poems as from central texts of poetic theory. First the intuition: I have already suggested that anyone who writes a poem will be familiar with the feeling of laborious “ease” that goes into its realization. But now I would like to suggest that the poet undertaking to enter poetry will also recognize a feeling of deep and sometimes troubling disjunction between the work he or she does on the poem on the one hand—both the formal work on the way to what Wimsatt calls the poem’s “accomplishment,” and the signifying work on the way to communicating or constructing meaning—and the poet’s intentions *for* poetry on the other. In “To Some I Have Talked With by the Fire,” the poem Yeats chose as the dedication to his 1906 *Poetical Works*, the poet subtly attests to the disjunction by contrasting the effortful labor of poetic making with the effortless and intransitive “brimming” of the heart with dreams:

While I wrought out these fitful Danaan rhymes,
My heart would brim with dreams about the times
When we bent down above the fading coals
And talked of the dark folk who live in souls
Of passionate men, like bats in the dead trees.

The oblique relation in this poem between the work of making rhymes and the heart’s dreaming—actions that are represented as simultaneous, but one not obviously causing or caused by the other—suggests a separation between the work of poetic making and the poet’s generative vision. This vision is of an ever-deepening set of communal relations. It begins with shared talk among equals, but within that conversation arise thoughts of still more elemental collectivities: “dark folk”; “wayward twilight companies”; and finally, an “embattled flaming multitude.” This last image of communal life or collective action arises seemingly of its own volition; description of the “multitude” dilates to take over the present scene of the poem, breaking the frame of retrospective mediations (talking within dreaming within writing) in which it is nested:

Who rise, wing above wing, flame above flame,
And, like a storm, cry the Ineffable Name,
And with the clashing of their sword-blades make
A rapturous music, till the morning break
And the white hush end all but the loud beat
Of their long wings, the flash of their white feet.

This multitude has its own “rapturous music,” which, though the poem may speak of it, cannot be identified with its own “fitful” rhymes; it beats out a loud and regular

rhythm that cannot be heard in the strangely patterned pentameter of the lines that house it.

This separation between verse form and vision reappears in the next poem in the volume as an oblique disrelation between the formal features of poetry and what they reveal to their reader: “*Because to him who ponders well / My rhymes more than their rhyming tell.*” Just as what a rhyme “tells” is not quite the same as what it says or means, so too the reader’s good work of “pondering” is not quite the same as her reading or hearing. And like the white hush that ends all talk and all music, the unspoken truth of what is “told” and “pondered” exceeds anything that might be meant through poems or read in them.

Lest this be thought the sort of idea that would appeal only to a Neo-Platonist, we can find similar intuitions in poets of an anti-metaphysical temper. William Carlos Williams’s account of Marianne Moore in *Spring and All*, for example, elaborates his strangely disembodied concept of poetry by means of tautology:

I believe in the main that Marianne Moore is of all American writers most constantly a poet—not because her lines are invariably full of imagery they are not . . . and not because she clips her work into certain shapes . . . but I believe she is most constantly a poet in her work because the purpose of her work is invariably from the source from which poetry starts—that it is constantly from the purpose of poetry. And that it actually possesses this characteristic, as of that origin, to a more distinguishable degree when it eschews verse rhythms than when it does not. It has the purpose of poetry written into it and therefore it is poetry. (230)

This feeling of disjunction between the poem’s variable “shapes” and its singular “purpose” (as well as the sense of a close relation between its “purpose” and its “origin”) indexes, in the poet who has it, a different account of what a poet is, and of what the poet intends. And what the poet intends is not just the poem (the “accomplishment” of the object); not just something *by* the poem (that it mean something, convey or construct that meaning). Instead—or in addition—the poet intends something through or by *poetry*.⁴⁵ Allen Grossman, combining Yeats’s intuition about poetry’s aspiration to vision with Williams’s insight about the “most constant poet’s” indifference to forms, puts the matter more succinctly, if more polemically: “The true poet says: I *DO* the best I can. I also *KNOW* better. And assuredly knowing better IS closer to poetry than the ‘poem’ and more justifiably convincing.”⁴⁶

Perhaps the most powerful theorization of this idea of poetry—as a knowing better that “convinces,” as a “purpose” that abides with poems but is not identical with them—may be found in Percy Shelley’s “Defense of Poetry.” Shelley famously begins his treatise by distinguishing between poetry “in a restricted sense” and poetry “in a general sense.”⁴⁷ Poetry in the restricted sense encompasses the triumphs of language that we most often associate with the poem as an aesthetic

object. Shelley singles out “metrical language”—“a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound”—for special praise and consideration (484); but it would be entirely consistent with his argument to expand the category to admit a more capacious formalism: rhyme, figuration, the intense forms of poetic closure and enclosure—all the qualities that those who identify poetry with its forms take to be essential.

Poetry in the general sense, on the other hand, is defined as “the expression of the imagination,” in *whatever* form that expression might take. Thus, Shelley argues, Plato and Bacon, Herodotus, Plutarch, and Livy are all in this general sense poets, authors of “highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue, and glory” (506). Religions and laws, perhaps even more so than verses and rhymes, are in this general sense “poetry.” But if Shelley’s point is that a particular kind of linguistic mastery is only one “expression” of poetry (though perhaps an important one), and that philosophy, true science, history, and sovereignty are equally to be attributed to the same origin, then the word “expression” seems a misleading way to describe the relation that he has in mind. Or rather, “expression” is here being used in a peculiar way, to denote not a semantic relation but a genetic and logical one. This is the sense of the term in which the nature of a thing is “expressed” by external tokens, as a phenotype expresses a genotype, or as “the excellence of beauty in Jesus was expressed.”

The subordination or secondariness that Shelley attributes to the component materials of the poem—its “language,” “color,” or “form”—extends as well to the full material *fact* of the poem, which turns, in the *Defense*, from substance to shadow—“the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet”—and from end to echo: “when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline” (504). Even the *Defense*’s description of what it means to be a *stylist* is less bound to formal mastery (or its absence) than to the poet’s possession of some other more vital force. Consider the pointed abstraction of Shelley’s “stylistic” appreciation of Dante:

His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor. All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. (500)

The disproportion between the fleeting illumination of the word-spark and the “inextinguishable” burning of the thought it somehow contains; the overleaping of the moment of change between a poem “pregnant” with a charge that cannot be conducted and the envisioned release of its lightning; the relation (which is equally a disrelation) between the material “acorn” of the poem and its infinitely generative potential: poetry, considered through these figures, is something like a *cause*—

“Language, color, form, and religious and civil habits of action, are all the instruments and materials of poetry; they may be called poetry by that figure of speech which considers the effect as a synonym of the cause.” But the account of “cause” that Shelley has in mind is *formal*, in the Aristotelian sense in which “the form is the account of the essence.”

Thus, for Shelley, the reason why “A man cannot say, ‘I will compose poetry’” (503) is because “poetry” is not a species of composition. I would call special attention here to Shelley’s choice of the term “conception” here, with its dual connotation of mentality and natality. “Poetry in a general sense” is both a power of the mind, a faculty, and a natal privilege that is coextensive with our nature as persons. Or, as Shelley puts it out the outset of the *Defense*, poetry is “connate with the origin of man” (480). Considered in the general sense, “poetry” is not so much the expression of the imagination as a revelation that imagination is the fundamental and value-bearing aspect of our nature. To treat poetry as a faculty—as the definitive human faculty—is to make it both descriptive and normative—to treat it as an ontological claim with moral significance. To “intend” this kind of poetry is to intend not something that we make or something that we mean, but something that we are. Maureen McLane has aptly described this aspect of Shelley’s romanticism (and Romanticism more generally) as a sort of lyric anthropology, emerging less as a rejection of the human sciences’ categorizations of human nature than as a competing version of them. “To define poetry via the human faculty of the imagination was not only to give it, as Coleridge desired, a philosophical foundation: such a definition also gave poetry an anthropological foundation. Poetry is defined, in fact, as the discourse of the species.”⁴⁸

If our dominant accounts of poetry have been in the broadest sense empiricist and phenomenological—centrally concerned with the *fact* of the poem, as a made thing and an object of experience—then the kind of poet Shelley asks us to consider might be called *rationalist*. (It might equally be called *intuitionist*.⁴⁹) Such a poet understands “poetry” not as a kind of object, performance, or practice but as intending a *knowledge* or *capacity*—constitutive of what it is to be a person. What the poet of poetry in the general sense intends—insofar as he intends poetry—is not to produce that class of objects we call poems, but to reveal, exemplify, or make manifest a potential or “power” that minimally distinguishes what a person is.⁵⁰

III. The Person

What conception of person is at stake in a poetic project defended in this way? And what possible purposes could “personhood” considered at this level of abstraction be answerable to? Sharon Cameron begins her recent study of literary impersonality by defining the term against which the writers she

will consider mount their complex and various projects of negation, resistance, or extinction:

The word *person* confers status . . . value, even equality; it establishes intelligibility within a political and legal system, indicating a being having legal rights or representing others' rights. . . . It does not, however, presume anything of substance.⁵¹

For Cameron—as for many scholars of personhood in literature, law, and anthropology—“person” is regarded primarily in its aspect as an honorific term or an ascriptive concept. Following the Hobbesian notion that “the definition of a person . . . is what we agree to treat as a person” (viii), such a view locates the sources of normative personhood in our linguistic and behavioral conventions and our social agreements; and, more powerfully, in the institutions that embody those conventions and give them extension and force. Whether the personhood in question is national, identified with the privileges and obligations of citizenship, or global, embodied in the uncertainly located legal domain of human rights, such contingent constructions or “agreements” about what will count as a person are in equal measures powerful and fragile—bound up with the problems of sovereignty and the hazards of identification and recognition.⁵²

It is obviously not true, however, that all accounts of “the word *person*” presume “nothing of substance.” In the theological context of the term’s origin, and quite differently, in the context of modern and contemporary philosophy, many of the most important debates around personhood have been directly concerned with metaphysics and ontology—with the specification and description of properties that uniquely constitute persons, distinguish them from other kinds of beings, and determine their persistence across time. Where the substantive tradition in theology posited immaterial substances like souls, more recent philosophy has emphasized the unique organization of organic matter that frames the human animal or the human brain, as well as psychological desiderata like language, reflexive awareness, and memory, and faculties like reason and will.

What I take Cameron to be saying, then, is that while it is theoretically possible to distinguish between substantive and descriptive accounts of personhood and normative or ethical claims that are mounted upon them, the two have been difficult to tease apart in practice.⁵³ The Boethian definition—the first to attribute personhood to human rather than divine beings—is an early case in point: “*Person is an individual substance of rational nature . . . He is the highest of the material beings, endowed with particular dignity and rights.*” So too is the nominally secularized version of this claim found in Kant’s *Groundwork*: “rational beings are called persons inasmuch as their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves”⁵⁴—a rationality that gives them an incontrovertible “dignity” rather than a “price.” Personhood is most frequently a portmanteau concept that bridges the gap between

the “material nature” that we possess and the “particular dignity” we would assert—between fact and value—holding together physical, psychological, and moral aspects.⁵⁵ It is this uncertain and variable relation between the substantive and the normative—between claims about the criteria of personhood and the acts of interpretation and legislation that determine the just conduct of our lives as persons—that has provided such rich material for our histories of personhood, and indeed for skeptical critique of the concept as it has been deployed in anthropology and law.

I will here be more concerned to frame the problem in a different and somewhat more abstract way. The general problem of criteria in our thinking is prior to the problem of evidence in our legislating. Criteria are the means by which we subsume the objects of our experience under concepts; they determine what we can recognize and count as evidence. The philosophical tradition most engaged with the question of the criteriological judgments by which we learn what our concepts of *persons* are in highly particularized moments of perception is that of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his inheritors. I will thus be spending some time with that tradition in this chapter and throughout the book; I will also want to suggest also that this philosophical tradition’s phenomenological or quasi-phenomenological approach to the problem of persons most closely resembles the mode of address adopted by some of our most troublingly original poets, though philosophic and poetic accounts grasp the problem for different reasons and to quite different ends.

I begin with a crucial but little noted moment of a much commented on section from the fourth chapter of Stanley Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason*.⁵⁶ In this chapter, Cavell is concerned to argue that there are limits to conceiving the project of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy as a complete disarming of skepticism. Though Cavell acknowledges one central Wittgensteinian claim—it is indeed impossible to sanely and consistently embrace skepticism about reality of the external world—nevertheless, he goes on to argue, we have no equivalent protection in the conduct of life from “the radical doubt of the existence of others” (477). A kernel of such doubt haunts even our most intimate relations beyond correction or philosophical purgation. Cavell denies that we can ever achieve certainty that we are in the presence of another person; he nonetheless shares in Wittgenstein’s resistance to the traditional skeptical idea that our failure to achieve certainty is an epistemic problem: a failure to discover the real substance behind the substantive term “person.” To put this another way, Cavell denies that his ineradicable core of skepticism is the same as a failure to perceive or to know the *personhood* of persons:

To speak sensibly of seeing or treating or taking persons as persons—or of seeing or treating or taking a (human) body as giving expression to a (human) soul—will similarly presuppose that there is some competing way in which persons—or bodies—may be seen or treated or taken. (372)

Cavell considers and rejects a number of possible options for such a competing way—a person might be regarded a king, he proposes, or, more appallingly, as a thing. But in neither of these cases, he argues, have we failed to see persons. A king, of course, is a person, even if he is in some sense more than a person as well. And though Cavell concedes that it is common to *talk* about slaves as less than persons or even as non-persons; he insists that such talk is true only in a limited sense. It is true, for example, that chattel slavery operates by withholding much of the status that accrues to the *legal person*. But this concession to usage is not a philosophical concession: for Cavell argues that the specific forms of legally sanctioned brutality and exchange that constitute chattel slavery do not require that the slaveholder really mean his own skeptical words about the personhood of slaves. Indeed, he goes on to say, such words “cannot really be meant” (372), and such claims, though they can be acted upon and enforced, elaborated as reasons or embraced as justifications, cannot really be believed. Rather, “[w]hat he really believes is not that slaves are not human beings but that some human beings are slaves” (375). Or again, “He means, indefinitely, that there are *kinds* of humans.”

Cavell’s talk about slavery is not in any important way an argument about slavery as an institution.⁵⁷ Rather, he is taking the slaveholder as an extreme example of what it is like for a person to engage the problem of determining the presence of another mind and to fail. But such failures show us something about the actual conditions of success. For failing to treat a slave as a person is not, on Cavell’s account, a failure of *knowledge* about what another is. (This is the force of calling his meaning “indefinite”—it is not based on substantive considerations or definitions.) And because our knowledge of persons is not knowledge of something lying behind or within the body we encounter, no amount of knowledge about the nature of persons or even of souls would correct it. What afflicts and deforms the slaveholder is, rather, a refusal to act on another form of knowledge that he possesses—the knowledge that is built into the very structure of his stance toward another, even when that stance is most brutal and unjust.

To distinguish between these two conceptions of “knowledge,” Cavell substitutes the idea of *acknowledgment* for knowledge and *avoidance* for ignorance. It is avoidance of the other that constitutes the tragedy lurking within our ordinary relations to other persons.

What is implied is that it is essential to knowing that something is human that we sometimes experience it as such, and sometimes do not, or fail to; that certain alterations of our consciousness take place, and sometimes not, in the face of it. Or in the presence of a memory of it. The memory, perhaps in a dream, may run across the mind, like a rabbit across a landscape, forcing an exclamation from me, perhaps in the form of a name. (Cp. *Investigations*, p. 197 and cp. Yeats’s “A Deep Sworn Vow”) (379)

How are we to understand Cavell's casual certitude that philosophy and poetry are engaged in the same problem? For certitude is what is implied by the parenthetical and unelucidated injunction to "compare" Yeats's poem "A Deep-sworn Vow" to the Wittgensteinian idea of person-seeing as aspect seeing. Here are the relevant passages to which Cavell directs us. First Wittgenstein:

I look at an animal and am asked: what do you see? I answer: "a rabbit."—I see a landscape; suddenly a rabbit runs past. I exclaim "a rabbit!"⁵⁸

And alongside it, for comparison, the Yeats:

Others because you did not keep
That deep-sworn vow have been friends of mine;
Yet always when I look death in the face,
When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
Or when I grow excited with wine,
Suddenly I meet your face.

In this section of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein is offering an alternative to the idea that seeing is mere blank perception posing a sort of question to which we match our answering concepts. The exclamation, in its immediacy (it is as if it were forced from us, Wittgenstein says), is a kind of redemption of perception from emptiness. It speaks to the way our perceiving is already rich with knowing—our seeing is part sight, part thought.

By the same token, perceptions in poetry (like our perceptions of poems themselves) are charged with the knowledge that we bear as inhabitants of a shared world. If we were to supply the reading of Yeats's poem that Cavell intimates through the comparison, it would look something like this: The revelatory disclosure of the beloved's face at the poem's end represents a moment of acknowledgment after a duration of avoidance. The speaker's stance toward the beloved may change, has changed—in the forgetting or denial that comes with anger, betrayal, or distraction. But the recovery of the beloved's image in memory or dream is not a new access of certainty about her nature. It is a self-recovery of his inclination to see her person—to see her soul upon her face—that takes place against a backdrop of the beloved already being present to him as a person.

As I shall argue more fully in the next chapter, however, this is to get Yeats's poem quite wrong—both as an argument and as an artifact. The urgency that drives the attenuated syntax of "A Deep-sworn Vow" toward its final sudden revelation is not a recognition of the tragic failures of recognition embedded in ordinary life, but rather an extreme form of skepticism motivated by metaphysical terror. Yeats is haunted by the threat that meaningful personhood might be unattainable—a threat that is both intimate and political, and against which he marshals a deep—and deeply absurd—metaphysics. Accordingly, the image of the

beloved that Yeats wishes to recover in sleep or in death is not an aspect, not a way of taking the person. It is an *origin*—a template of meaningful personhood given countenance in Yeats's lyric. To encounter this face is precisely to encounter the substance of what allows a person to count as a person.

If the *total* skepticism requiring such an extreme metaphysical antidote is a philosophical error, as Cavell insists it is, it is nonetheless an error to which a poet like Yeats commits his fullest acts of imagining. Yeats belongs to a tradition of poetry written under conditions of historical and philosophical extremity, in which skepticism about other minds is experienced and approached as a *real* danger, and in response to which poets formulate what I might call an ontological wish for accounts of personhood not susceptible to loss or risk. If the value of the person is dependent on the acknowledgment of others, whether by an individual's acts of recognition or by a state's, then that value will only be as generously distributed as our institutions permit, and only as durable as our sympathies allow.

As both the risks and the consequences of such failures or refusals of acknowledgment increase, so too does the demand for foundational rather than relational concepts of personhood. The twentieth-century poets I will describe here, facing what they perceive as even greater threats to social cohesion, meaningful life, and even social survival, confront an additional demand that Shelley's Platonism evades: the sense that any account of persons that could serve as a legitimate ground for social life would have to take its orientation from something *real*. This is, in effect, to demand that their person-concepts be valid within a world understood in secular terms—that they be compatible with its metaphysics—and perhaps even with its physics. If that should prove impossible, then a poet must wrestle with the consequences of refusing those terms. As we shall see, such tensions between materialist and idealist accounts will lead Yeats to unite the perfection of the soul with the eugenic engineering of the body; it will lead the Language poets to invest their Shelleyan hope for a utopian "uncommunity" in a restrictive species concept like language itself.

The elaboration of the substantive criteria of personhood, however, may court the opposite danger—that of drawing of invidious distinctions and boundaries that exclude as-yet unrecognized kinds from moral consideration. This is why what I have called "rationalism" in poetry cannot be a commitment to reason as such. As a person-concept, reason has, notoriously, a *reality* problem, having been declared to be limited or defective (incapable of grounding the claims on its behalf), multiple (coming in different and competing forms and flavors), historical (a contingent rather than absolute basis for valuing), or merely fictional. But it also has what we might call a distribution problem; for even if reason was everything we could hope for, we have also shown great inventiveness in finding various disfavored groups either deficient or wholly lacking in it. Thus poets I describe will arrive by various routes at accounts of personhood that are distinctly *thin* or minimal, positing predicates it

would be difficult to imagine withholding of anyone, modes of attention that push off the moment of decision as long as possible—and then longer.

The poetry I describe is in search of some real quality on the basis of which persons can be said to be *a priori* associated—to *be* and to be *numerous*—rather than a practice of association through the channels of reading, circulation, conversation, or sympathy. In so doing, it posits a distinction between “subjects” and “persons”: if subjects (as poems conceive of them) are understood to possess qualities (voices, histories, features, bodies, genders, attachments, as well as rights and obligations, etc.), the persons intended by the poetic principle are defined by their possession of *value*—the sheer potential to be integrated into whatever social system. In their need to discover personhood as something substantial and yet abstract, distinguishing yet universal, the poets of poetry “in the general sense” find themselves on the horns of the dilemma formulated by two competing camps of critics of the Enlightenment in the wake of the brutal crises in the twentieth century:

For the first, who might loosely be grouped as premodern, the Enlightenment is too thin, besotted by relativism, and incapable of searching and finding the good; a betrayal of traditional philosophy and theology. . . . By contrast, for the second set, who loosely may be grouped as postmodern, the Enlightenment and its legacy is too thick, characterized by the *hubris* of imposing a master narrative which artificially values only particular and limited aspects of human capacities and sensations and is marked by stereotypes and prejudices that remain unexamined. In this accounting, its universalism is a pretense and its ideas are instruments of power and domination.⁵⁹

The fundamental questions with which poets must struggle—and they remain in many ways unresolved in the poetic tradition I will describe—are:

- (1) Where—in what aspect, faculty or capacity—are we to ground the concept of person, such that all persons may be judged to possess it?
- (2) How can *any* quality (no matter how widely distributed) constitute or articulate a sufficient *demand* for recognition or value?
- (3) How do we reconcile the desire for a universal conception of personhood with the manifold forms of particularity brought to bear by actual poems?

It is to this last question that I now turn.

IV. The Noem

There is something troubling about the degree to which Shelley’s account of poetry “in its general sense” is at odds with his own particular poetic practice. Whether we hold with Wordsworth that Shelley was among the

first of his contemporaries “in workmanship of style,”⁶⁰ or with Pound that Shelley is the author of “one of the rottenest poems ever written,”⁶¹ there is no denying that Shelley is a maker of poems in the “restricted sense.” But there is also no avoiding the disproportion between the aesthetic mastery that his work displays on the one hand—the result of sustained effort directed at the realization of the artwork—and the forms of self-distinction and world-transformation that he describes as arising from song on the other.

The breath whose might I have invoked in song
Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven!

Here, in his great elegy “Adonais,” the breath of song is transmuted into storm; the lightning that figures poetry's shattering effect is not (as in Shelley's Dante) contained in embryo within the pregnant word, but conducted from heaven to earth. And if in “Adonais” the storm invoked by song is said (merely!) to bring about the transformation of the spirit, in “The Mask of Anarchy” the storm released by words promises (in some future time) to bring about the transformation of the world:

“And these words shall then become
Like Oppression's thundered doom
Ringing through each heart and brain,
Heard again—again—again—

“Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number—
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you—
Ye are many—they are few.”

What Shelley famously promises is the legislation of the world by means of poetry. What he prophesies is the poetic production of free beings. What he fails to provide is a theory of mediation adequate to either task. The “burning atom” of the poem-in-potential could never give rise to such explosive effects without some way to release its energy. “Poetry” may be the historical custodian of a humanizing project, in which persons will arise “in unvanquishable number”; but *poems* are a singularly unpromising means to pursue it.⁶²

If one were in search of a term of art for a poetry that promises the kind of wholesale transformation of self and world that *actual* poems by their limited nature make impossible, one could do worse than Bloom's “non-poetry.” But how—and here is the question that turns the distinction back in the direction of the

revisionary taxonomic project I began by proposing—can we think of “non-poetry” as naming a poetic *kind*? Once a particular poetic oak has sprung from its all-potentiating seed, how will we recognize a poem as belonging to “poetry in the general sense” rather than in the restricted sense? If actual poems inevitably tell things “in confidence,” reaching some audiences, repelling or foreclosing others, then what kind of mediation is the “true” non-poem? And, turning forward upon the largest horizon that I have claimed for this work in poetry, how could such a “kind,” built as it seems to be on the negation of mediation itself, bear on the problem of thinking through the foundations of social relation—of being numerous?

In considering these questions I would like to turn briefly to a poet who lies somewhat beyond the linguistic and geographic boundaries that delimit the inquiry of this book: Paul Celan. I say “somewhat,” because Celan has been taken up quite explicitly as an exemplary figure by and for Anglophone poets in the second half of the century in a way that makes him seem central to the division I have been describing and contesting. Celan’s appeal has seemed at once formal and ethical. His reception has foregrounded both the idea that his poems are motivated by or answerable to the most brutal instances of dehumanization in the twentieth century, and the idea that his difficult poems present the problem of re-grounding the shattered relation between persons precisely as a problem in “translation” or interpretation. Celan, in other words, makes the labor of intersubjectivity seem like a problem particularly well suited to a verbal art.⁶³

In his 1967 poem “Weggebeizt,” Celan compares the process of poetic making with the process of paring away dross or excess (as by acid on a printer’s plate or by the natural forces of erosion) to reveal something significant that remains.

Etched away from
the ray-shot wind of your language
the garish talk of rubbed-
off experience—the hundred-
tongued pseudo-
poem, the noem.⁶⁴

Weggebeizt vom
Strahlenwind deiner Sprache
das bunte Gerede des An-
erlebten— das hundert-
züngige Mein-
gedicht, das Genicht.

Michael Hamburger’s translation has been decisive for Celan’s English-language readers in calling special attention to the doubleness of the term “*Mein- / gedicht*”

in the poem's opening stanza. Divided at once formally (by enjambment) and semantically (by its dueling etymologies), the term suggests that for Celan, the poems (*Gedichte*) in question are at once his creation and (therefore) *false*.⁶⁵ For Celan, writing in the language of a nation that was the source of his pain and in the genre whose beauties had become a source of shame, the idea that making and falsifying would take place in the same breath arose out of the particulars of his own experience. And yet the pairing of poetry and perjury is not meant to be specific to this poet alone; Celan takes it to reflect a general cultural condition in which the sensual pleasures of lyric aesthetics are in danger of being disallowed. On this account (familiar to us, as to Celan himself, from Adorno's notorious critique of poetry "after Auschwitz"), poetry, rather than forging the artifice by which personal pain can be made public, creates more opportunities for divisive individuation, misunderstanding, and misrecognition in a world in which persons are lost to us. "Don't come with *poiein* and the like," Celan writes to Hans Bender, in a 1960 letter otherwise extolling the individuated craft or "handiwork" of making poems; "I suspect that this word, with all its nearness and distance, meant something quite different from its current context." In the context in which Celan wrote, no mere making could suffice to address a world emptied of persons and denuded of care: "We live under dark skies, and there are few humans [*Menschen*]. This is probably why there are also so few poems."⁶⁶ The wish embedded in a poem like "Weggebeizt" is that there might be an alternative to *poiein*, to the making that Anne Carson has called the "imprecise perjury of the verbal art,"⁶⁷ and with it, an alternative mode of relation undarkened by mendacity and loss.

But if Celan's poem seeks to sort between an ideal of truth and the falsifying forms of expression, then it is not clear on which side of the divide between the true and the false the neologism that ends the first stanza—"das *Genicht*"—is meant to fall. In particular, it is not clear from the syntax of this stanza whether "*Genicht*" (felicitously translated by Hamburger as "noem") is meant to stand in *apposition* to the "*Mein-Gedicht*" or in *opposition* to it.⁶⁸ If the former, then "noem" is merely another name for the forked and mendacious talk with which art speaks. As one of the several things from which *something else* (as yet unnamed) is etched away, the "noem" is false precisely for its origin in experience—which the poem regards as secondary or impoverished ("rubbed-off")—and for its reception as experience, with its subjective and therefore multifarious ("hundred-tongued") interpretations and misinterpretations. Such a poem offers poetry as a problem to which there is no apparent solution or alternative.

If, however, the "noem" is regarded as the withheld grammatical subject of the attenuated sentence that forms the poem's first stanza, then we might understand it instead as that which *is* etched away. It would then be allied, not with the "garish" speech with which the poem begins, not with the "pseudo-poem" of

which it is the negation, but with the *Atemkristall*, or “breathcrystal,” with which the poem ends:

Deep
in Time’s crevasse
by
the alveolate ice
waits, a crystal of breath,
your irreversible
witness.

Tief
in der Zeitenschrunde,
beim
Wabeneis
wartet, ein Atemkristall,
dein unumstößliches
Zeugnis.

A crystal, in its mute austerity, determinate singularity, and formal fixity, serves as a rebuke or alternative to all that is garish, multiple, and evanescent about mere “talk.” And though (as the compound noun itself suggests) a “breathcrystal” is somehow compounded of breath, it does not, like a “ray-shot wind,” eddy or shift according to the rise or fall of the living heat that generates it. Rather, an *Atemkristall*, like every crystalline form, is held in an unchanging lattice or structure.

If we take the notion of the “noem” to be carved out in opposition to the “pseudo-poem,” then perhaps we might imagine that a “breathcrystal,” too, requires “etching,” some process of paring and polishing to create its facets and angles out of a more ordinary substance. And, indeed, Celan’s “breathcrystal” does appear only at the endpoint of the poem’s process of selection and ordering: it seems to be the climax of a narrative, or figural journey, that conducts us (through the middle stanza) along a “path” or “way” (“*Weg*”) carved through “human-shaped snow” (“*menschen- / gestaltigen Schnee*”). That the snow has a human shape could suggest that perhaps it is a path a human has shaped, a way into the world made by his will and his labor. That the snow is “penitents’ snow” (“*den Büßerschnee*”) might propose that there be a redemptive route that a person could travel, a figure he could cut, that would constitute a redeemed form of human making (“*poein*” or perhaps “the like”) free from the shadowed world in which other persons are scarce or inaccessible.

But this sense of narrative progress or subjective *Bildung* would be deceptive. As Celan—aficionado of crystallography and glaciology—would certainly have

known, the procession of cowled figures that make up the formation that we call “penitent snow” is a configuration of glacial ice that results from the different rates of melting and evaporation in snow on sunlit surfaces at very cold temperatures (figure 1.1). By the same token, a crystal is neither “etched” by human hands nor cut by human tools. Rather, it is formed by processes of nucleation and attraction that govern matter at the most elemental level.

This is in part merely to state the obvious: that a breathcrystal is not an *art* object. A crystallization of vapor into ice, that is, may in a sense be *expressed*, or precipitate out of the human breath; but it does not *express* anything internal to the person. The *Atemkristal* is the sort of object that is, one might say, only incidentally an object for our perception. But neither is the breathcrystal a *brute* object like a stone—its symmetry, its perfection, and its origin in breath must also be to the point. The crystal’s *resemblance* to an art object speaks to its curious intentional relation to the principle of its origin. Expressing nothing, it stands as the “expression” of the general laws that structure the world in which particular crystals reside.

Celan’s identification of the poem with this curious sort of object—the kind of objects that subordinate their phenomenologies to the laws that give rise to them—should determine the way we navigate this poem as a shape, or a narrative. Though it appears at the end of the poem, the idea of an *Atemkristall* does not seem to be intended by the poem as a kind of insight, nor does it arise as an epiphanic leap—unforeseeable but justified—out of the progress of the poem’s composition. Rather, the breathcrystal is characterized as that which “waits,” lying “Deep / in Time’s crevasse.” Considered temporally, this is to say that it pre-exists the human measures that a poem counts; considered spatially, we might say it is located outside or beneath the conceptual frame that the poem occupies or charts. Rather than standing as the endpoint of a “way” (wayward, penitent, imperfect, prone to misdirection or loss), or appearing as the emblem of a communicative channel opened between individuated subjects, the *Atemkristall*—though it never quite appears—is a kind of argument that there exist forces of attraction that draw all things together and that are (under ideal circumstances) irresistible and perfecting.

These two possible accounts of the “*Genicht*”—first, as a sort of objectified epistemic prize, a truth grasped at the end of a difficult journey through individuating experience (a life that is “human shaped”); second, as not quite an object but (like the “breathcrystal”) the expression of a timeless and dimensionless principle that governs the formation of objects through a force of attraction—lead us back to the consideration of the “noem” as a poetic kind. If the “non-poem” were to be understood primarily as a kind of art object, it might be precisely the sort of difficult object that Celan has been most commonly understood to make: indeed, the sort of object that Celan sometimes presented himself as making, as in his famous speech “*Der Meridian*”: “The poem wants to reach an Other, it needs this Other, *it needs an Over-against*. It seeks it out, speaks toward it.”⁶⁹ It is the interest of what



Figure 1.1. Snow penitents. Photo © Dirk Sigmund, Dreamstime.com.

Celan calls an “encounter” that justifies all of the hermeneutic journeying, the laborious decoding of syntax, neologism, pun, arcane allusion, and figuration that make his poems difficult and particular. As Susan Stewart has argued, “The particularity of Celan’s art demands an inexhaustible and universalizing labor of attention and semantic judgments, as task for the present and for the future.”⁷⁰

If, on the other hand, a “noem” is only *secondarily* an object for our perception, then our relation to it might not be a process of decoding or translation, but a relation of some other sort. The history of phenomenology offers us a term for that relation as a refused alternative. In the first, foundational section of his *Logical Investigations*, Husserl distinguishes between the *bedeutsamen Zeichen*, or “meaningful sign,” and what he calls an “indication sign” (*Anzeichen*). Husserl ultimately wishes to leave aside a consideration of mere indications (what he also calls *Hinweisen*, or “hints”) in favor of the phenomenology of *Ausdrücke* (“expressions”) that will be his central concern.⁷¹ It is nonetheless the *Anzeichen* that has seemed most useful to me in understanding the relation between the kind of object a “non-poem” is and how it stands in relation to meaning. For as Husserl explains it, the *Anzeichen* is a sign that motivates the belief in the reality of some state of affairs *without itself expressing that state of affairs*. And while his initial examples of indication signs make them look something like C. S. Pierce’s indexical signs—smoke is the index of fire—the real force of an indication sign for Husserl, as for Celan, is that it motivates our confidence in the existence of an intending mind. The sign is not a communication, but it *tells*. More like smoke *signals* than smoke, but finally more like the syntax of a signal than its message, the indication sign tells of the person who stands behind the signs as principle of origin by which they may be taken as signs at all.⁷²

It is here that the connection between “poetry” and what I have been calling “personhood” becomes more legible. If a poem is understood as an expression—which is to say, among other things, as an object that one must *interpret*, then the social relation that we are imagining taking place by means of poems is that of communication and, one hopes, understanding. “Empathic projection is to other minds what seeing is to material objects,” Cavell suggests (*The Claim of Reason*, 425). In the case of reading poetry, to “see” the poem and to “project” the person behind it are not merely analogical, but identical acts. The relation to another conducted by means of such seeing and projecting is, because ungrounded, dependent on the exercise of the senses and the projections of feelings, in principle fallible, reversible, or even refusable.⁷³

One could fail to embark upon a journey of understanding; one could get lost; one could turn around midway, as in Rilke’s tragedy of reversals and misrecognitions in “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.”:

And when without warning
the god stopped her and with pain in his cry

spoke the words: He has turned around—,
she grasped nothing and said softly: *Who?*⁷⁴

But such reversibility of relations between persons is precisely what “Weggebeizt” sets out—in full consciousness of its undeniability—to deny. The “breathcrystal” at the poem’s end is explicitly placed parallel to “irreversible witness”—the sort of relation that, because it is premised upon a structural law rather than a contingent fact, cannot be gainsaid. Celan gives the impossible object a name: the *Genicht*, or “non-poem,” that lies in wait, cold and austere. And in the shaping of the actual poem he gives notional or conceptual shape to the relation between the object and the form of solidarity it promises. That relation is neither identity (the breathcrystal is not itself “irreversible witness”) nor metaphor (the breathcrystal is not *like* irreversible witness), but indication: the breathcrystal is the sort of object that motivates belief in the fundamental forces of attraction that structure it and that bind human lives, though as an object it is not itself “human shaped.”

V. A History Containing Poetry

Being Numerous is a historical book. It seeks to retell a portion of the history of twentieth-century poetry on changed conceptual grounds, and to describe the consequences for poetry of a philosophical concern with personhood that emerges with a new intensity and a heightened self-consciousness in an era of unprecedented historical violence. As I have already begun to show, de-emphasizing one taxonomic opposition—between the traditionalist poet and the avant-garde poet—in favor of another—the poet whose primary constructive investments are in the making of poems and the poet whose primary conceptual investments lie in the direction of persons—will require me to make some counter-intuitive claims about the ontology of poems and of persons, to forward arguments about the oblique relation of poetic intentionality to the realized work of verbal art, and to offer some revisionary accounts of how we ought to go about linking thoughts about poetry to thoughts about social life and to political desires. To put it another way, *Being Numerous* is also a theoretical book.

From the perspective of our dominant modes of literary criticism, these two impulses might appear to be at odds with one another. The theoretical disposition upon which our present historicism rests is relentlessly nominalist and localist. What counts as a responsible historicist reading requires the elaboration of ever-more-finely differentiated micro-histories of literary genres and functions; it involves situating literary work within richly articulated networks of symbolic and discursive practices; it demands close-up description of the material form of the literary artifact and an aerial charting of the channels of production, circulation,

and reception. Perhaps nothing has seemed a riper target for this project of contextualization and de-idealization than the idea of poetry itself. Thus, in her recent brief for what she calls a “historical poetics,” Yopie Prins celebrates the achievements of critics who would bring externalist historicism into the idealist heart of the poetic. In order for this critical renovation to be complete, Prins explains, “critics working in historical poetics would need to develop different approaches to different centuries, taking into account generic shifts in the production and circulation of poetry and insisting on the cultural specificity of poetic genres.”⁷⁵

Perhaps the most fully realized example of such a critic thus far is Virginia Jackson, who, in her careful work on Emily Dickinson, inveighs against the modern retro-projection of the reifying category of lyric upon the incommensurable communicative practices, personal relations, generic conventions, and discourse communities that make up the life led in proximity to poetry:

[T]he overlapping or incongruous details, seasons, public and private histories, battles and pets, sex scandals and insect remnants, books, newspapers and all sorts of familiar letters that surrounded the lines later published as a Dickinson lyric could not be said to be what the lines are “about” . . . the stories that could be unfolded from them may or may not have been relevant to the lines’ potentially miscellaneous subjects (and objects) in the past. Once the lines were published and received as a lyric, these several and severally dated subjects and objects and their several stories faded from view, since the poem’s referent would thereafter be understood as the subject herself—suspended, lyrically, in place and time.⁷⁶

What is most striking about this impulse toward specificity (and what makes Dickinson paradigmatic for historical poetics) is that it results not so much in a hermeneutic “approach” specific to Dickinson’s century (or to any more finely parsed moment), nor in an account of poetic genre that belongs to her cultural context, but rather in an account of poetic making so fully particularized that only description will do it justice. “[T]he difficulty of reading Dickinson’s manuscripts,” Jackson argues, “is that even in their fragmentary extant forms, they provide so much context that individual lyrics become practically illegible” (38).

Certainly, in light of this historicism’s emphasis on poetry’s “illegible” particularity and the “incongruous” miscellany of the persons who make them, any talk about “poetry in the general sense,” or about a poet’s commitment to abstract and highly noncontingent conceptions of personhood, starts to look suspiciously—indeed, symptomatically—ahistorical. It will look particularly suspicious if, as is the case in this book, the exposition is not, in any strict sense of the word, a *narrative* history of those contrary commitments and concerns. That is, while the poets I discuss do follow in rough chronological sequence, their work is not obviously describable in terms of influence or inheritance; nor do their vocations seem

subject to the same immediate cultural and political pressures any more than they seem subject to the same personal ones. Frank O'Hara may speak a language that is distinctively of New York, but his poetry, formed amidst mid-century artistic coteries and queer culture, bears little relation to George Oppen's "A Language of New York," born of the poet's aesthetic and ethical struggles with the radical American left. Yeats's role as a poet-senator, enmeshed first with the intense cultural politics of the Gaelic Revival and then the fractured practical politics of the Irish Free State, is not precisely parallel to the situation of the American Language poet seeking abroad for models and theories of an effectual solidarity within a highly professionalized literary economy at the end of the Cold War.

On principle, then, I agree there may be as many kinds of poem as there are tones that a socially situated person can sound, or arguments a worldly actor can entertain. There may be as many kinds of poetry as there are shapes that the living hand can form or modes of reflection that the furnished mind can undertake. But as the case studies that follow will show, reading in the history of the theory of poetry may benefit from a less straitened sense of what counts as a context and a more capacious view of what constitutes a moment. Poetry, perhaps not alone, but to a high degree among the arts, dwells in multiple temporalities.⁷⁷ Poetic responses to contingency are influenced by noncontingent entailments of the medium; the fact that a poem is a made thing that is heard, read, or seen motivates its perennial interest in problems of voice and address, substance and its perception. Such concerns are not just critical fantasies about or impositions upon poems, but common objects of poets' own conscious deliberation—whatever forms those deliberations take. On a different account of necessity (historical rather than material), a poet's view of the contemporary is refracted by shared terms and concerns that make up the long history of the art. Thus even the narrowest and most personal concern with self-manifestation may be pulled into generality by the gravity of poetry's historical obligation to the project of immortalization. The history of poetry's self-idealizations is not necessarily itself idealist.

Just as we need to preserve a sense of what it can mean to attend to concerns that are internal to the art, so too we need to maintain a full sense of how poets may be influenced by events external to it. Poetry's shape is determined by the material conditions that bear upon its makers and immediate audiences, but also by the intellectual and philosophical cultures whose scope is wider and whose pace of change is more gradual. In the case of the poets I consider in *Being Numerous*, the long history of intensifying skepticism toward the Enlightenment project is far from being a thing apart from or in addition to a poet's "private history"; the terror of skepticism about persons afflicts even the most intimate personal affections. By the same token, a century of unprecedented and escalating historical violence is a context pervasive enough that it can make a poet's silence *legible*, rather than "practically illegible."

The story that *Being Numerous* tells tries to keep hold of all of these dimensions of poetic practice, from the most personal to the global. Its chapters constitute not a *narrative* of a poetic tradition, but a set of limit cases that define its parameters and concerns. The poets I discuss are deeply and variously immersed in the idioms of their personal lives, local concerns, generic histories, and yet from within those “overlapping and incongruous” contexts, they each confront broadly shared cultural phenomena—the unprecedented historical threats to personhood that begin to be felt even before World War I combining with and exacerbating a secular and skeptical philosophical culture that emphasizes the contingency of human value. The radically different barriers to acceptance or comprehension that these poets present to readers—their moral or conceptual incoherence, their silence, triviality, boredom, or indifference—these are not indicators of incommensurable projects, but rather indexes of their convergence, out of idiosyncrasy, upon a shared account of poetry and of personhood: one that is deliberately hostile not just to “social contingency” and “public reading” but to *all* contingency and to *any* reading. Such an account may cross the distinct strands that make up the history of poetry without transcending history itself. Indeed, I will go further to say that a historicism that begins by assuming that generic variation and difference as *prima facie* evidence of methodological rigor cannot *help* but fail to perceive the existence of a tradition of poetic thinking in which the insistence upon difference (between poets, verse genres, as indeed between one person and another) is the very problem in need of a solution. The fervor of micro-historicism has a moral cast that exceeds the requirements of descriptive accuracy.

To say this, of course, raises a question about the normative stakes of my own argument. There are, this book will acknowledge, poets of the poem, for whom the social imaginary of the poem is that of the human journey toward understanding. I will be centrally concerned with describing another tradition, and another kind of poet; one whose drive to secure the universality of personhood will often seem to deprive poems (in the ordinary, restricted sense) of everything that we hold most dear about them: the way they negotiate the work of being a particular person embedded in a world of particulars; the way they allow us to enter very deeply into the texture of experience; the way they facilitate (or trouble) understanding by replaying experience in slow motion, by recasting it in durable materials, or by turning it inside out for observation; the way they create public analogues for private imaginings.

I am sympathetic to those who regard this turning away from particularity as a loss to poetry. Perhaps it is loss to politics as well, though not all of my poets have thought so; one of the things my book will show is that a commitment to abstract conceptions of personhood may turn out be as compatible with a democratic politics as with a fascist one, and that a poet may have a deeply realized social vision with hardly any political ideals to speak of, or else with deeply self-defeating

ones. In describing another relation to poetry, and making the case for its interest and value, I will argue that there are compensations for such losses. A radical poetics, this book will argue, is not radical for its political commitments but for its pre-political or ontological commitments. The attempt to make the person appear anew as a value-bearing fact—as the necessary ground of social life—is a conceptual precursor to any effective politics, to any subsequent account of justice. In place of the myriad pleasures—esthetic, intellectual, and moral—of the poem, the poet of “poetry” offers a drama in which the pleasures of object creation or perception, the search for self-possession, the particularized scene of valuing, the self-shattering or self-fortifying experience of love of another or of the world, all fall away, leaving in their place something else; a conviction (as George Oppen puts it) “That they are there”; an ontological confidence in the presence of other minds, in the meaning of being numerous. The history of this poetry in the twentieth century has been a history of pursuing this confidence and of negotiating its price.

. . .

I begin with a poet who is incontestably a maker of poems, and who regarded the mastery of art the highest of possible achievements—William Butler Yeats.

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work

Faced with what he called “The Choice” between rival perfections, Yeats is most often understood to have chosen the second. His life was (as he characterized the lives of all poets) a “bundle of accident and incoherence”: passionate attachments alongside destructive loves, noble political aspirations coupled to appalling political judgments, artistic genius feeding on occult foolishness. His work—“these masterful images, because complete”—placed him first among the moderns for successive generations of readers and critics.

My first chapter takes up both the philosophical origins and the political urgencies of Yeats’s demand for “perfection” and “completeness.” Despite the poet’s own claims—his consciousness of poetic labor, his lifelong project of revision, his metrical sophistication and his care for the minutest details of publication and print—the perfection of the work of *art* mattered to him just insofar as it could actually be imagined as a means to realize the perfection of life. And not just the life of the artist—reborn in art as “something intended, complete”—but of all life. Yeats’s early and abiding commitment to the esoteric roots of symbolism and his late interest in eugenic science both addressed the local project of forging a counterfactual identity. The poems of Yeats’s middle period (*Responsibilities* and particularly *The Wild Swans at Coole*) imagine a tool—a bone, a poem, a man—bridging the gap between the perfected Ireland he conceived of and the degraded one he perceived.

Philosophically speaking, however, the idea of Great Mind that Yeats drew from Neoplatonism, ceremonial magic, and Theosophy could be squared only uneasily with the bounded concerns of his nationalism. Historically speaking, Yeats perceived “mere anarchy” to have been loosed not just on a divided Ireland but on “the world.” Under such internal and external pressures, Yeats begins to imagine that art itself could be not just the nation’s but the world’s schoolroom; that the origin of the image—poem, painting, even the well-chosen picture on a coin—in primal and universal sources of being might have a transformative effect upon the spirit *and* body, remaking all persons in the image of their collective origins: “Bring the soul of man to God / make him fill the cradles right.”

The poet’s increasingly radical vision of aesthetic education, the shifting mechanisms by which he imagined it might work (sometimes by rational pedagogy, sometimes by magical transformation), and the ever-expanding horizon in which he envisioned its unifying effects (national, global, or metaphysical), placed conflicting and impossible demands on Yeats’s actual poems. These demands are manifest as specific kinds of difficulty or “badness” (arcane symbol systems, uncontrolled rhetoric, fantasies of purifying violence), but also as formal *strangeness*: contortions of syntax and dead-ends of rhyme that strain to bend social speech and warp lived time to make another world apparent.

At the end of Yeats’s career, both poetry and politics run aground on his extreme commitment to personhood. To be adequately universal is to renounce the heroism of human particularity; to be adequately general poetically is to renounce mastery, “to chaunt a tongue men do not know.” But from his own conflicts and vacillations between poems and poetry, individual persons and universal personhood, Yeats produces for modernism and its successors the conflict that would be parceled out between poets of different kinds.

Renunciation lies at the heart of my second chapter. The 25-year silence at the center of George Oppen’s poetic career was driven in part by his early choice of left-political activism over art. But for Oppen, class conflict in the 1930s was only a precursor to the more dire failures of sympathy and recognition that he would witness in World War II. In the context of total war, silence was not an alternative to art but an artistic solution—perhaps the only one suitable to the extremity of that history. Oppen’s return to poetry was contingent upon his conceptualization of the rigorous charity of his silence—its refusal to model in speech and thought the kind of person who will count—and his discovery of a way to make such silence audible.

The chapter centers on the figure of Robinson Crusoe, who appears in Oppen’s 1968 sequence *Of Being Numerous*, and who also figures importantly in other poetry and philosophy of the period. Crusoe is the paradigm of the person at once doomed to act out constrained and deformed versions of the social even in his solitude (as in Marx’s reading), and to voice that constraint in the sociability and

pathos of his *tone* (as in Elizabeth Bishop's "Crusoe in England"). For Oppen (as, I will suggest, for Saul Kripke's Wittgenstein), Crusoe is a radical isolate whose silence raises the question of how to recognize the morally salient presence of something or someone whose responses are so different from our own as to appear inhuman. Oppen's deliberate uncertainty about whether it is by listening or looking, feeling or thinking that we will come to value what needs valuing may sometimes look like a kind of intense skepticism about the senses and faculties—but his commitment to a poetics of silent attentiveness is a kind of faith in the human capacity for moral curiosity.

For both Yeats and Oppen, commitments to the moral seriousness of generality and abstraction create problems for the idea of poetic mastery, and indeed for the very idea of a poem. (Oppen: "Because I am not silent, the poems are bad."). In my third chapter, I turn to a poet whose problem is a specificity bordering on triviality. Whether criticized for his absence of technique and narrow frame of reference, or celebrated for his unadorned inclusion of everyday life, Frank O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems are best known for their loquacious over-particularity. Even loving O'Hara, as so many do, presents at once an aesthetic problem—Why should we care about the expression of such slight catalogues of likes and dislikes? What *reasons* can we give to our attachment to an ungeneralizable particular?—and an ethical problem—Why should we commit ourselves to a world in which the value of the person seems dependent on the vicissitudes of taste? Against sociologically inflected readings that take the poet's tastes as the symptomatic product of a consumer culture in which taste is all, or else (more optimistically) that take taste to carve out an alternative coterie whose affections oppose dominant social structures, I argue that O'Hara's dependence on preference does not *restrict* the extension of his poetry all. Rather, by *totalizing* the scene of judgment—by treating the whole world as a magnification of the art world—O'Hara dramatizes the consequence for social life of using a single scale—not taste, but *love*—to determine the value of a thing, regardless of what sort of thing it is. O'Hara understands "poetry" less as a collection of objects that appear than as a *medium* in which persons, things, or actions can appear. In his effort to respect both the particularity *and* the abstraction of his loves, he reimagines a world in which any kind of person has the potential to be valued, whether or not any particular person happens to value him.

These first three chapters of the book are part of the project of literary-historical revision I announced at the outset. They allow us to see connections between poets like Yeats and Oppen who lie on opposite sides of the apparent divide between tradition and experiment. They also seek to reinterpret the meaning of the experiments undertaken by Oppen and O'Hara—poets who have been recruited by our contemporary avant-gardes to provide a history and justification for their own exclusive vision of legitimate poetic practice—and so challenge the legitimacy of divisions made, in part, in the names of those predecessor poets. In my

fourth chapter, I take up one of those contemporary avant-gardes directly. I take seriously something that the Language poets of the 1970s and '80s (and many of their successors) often said that they wanted—a sense of themselves as engaged in a communal and even political practice *by means of poetry*. The poets' own attempts to theorize and to practice this poetics of community may be compelling as desires, but their analyses and poems are hobbled by simultaneous and contradictory commitments to absolute constraint and absolute freedom. Examining the theory and practice of collaboration in the joint-authored book *Leningrad*, I argue that the account of the person implicit in the generative linguistics that the poets deplore—rather than in the poststructural linguistics that they have tended to embrace—provides something very close to what they have felt themselves to be looking for. A Chomskyan account of poetry as interested in highlighting the distinction between grammar and utterance both “saves the appearances” of many Language poems and is compatible with the intensity of the poets' valuation of linguistic innovation over convention. More importantly, the Chomskyan account of language as a capacity for an endlessly productive freedom grounds a conception of personhood that the constraints and determinations of grammatical, conceptual, and political systems cannot reach.

One of the methodological difficulties that this book presents is the question of what will count as evidence, or, to put it somewhat differently, what will count as a reading of a poem. Just as it is the case that a general account of personhood cannot be derived by averaging the qualities of any number of persons, so too an argument for a poetic tradition's being a tradition of “non-poems” cannot be derived solely by reading any number of poems. Poems, like persons, are always going about some business of their own, which in the moment seems much more urgent—and certainly more specifiable—than the business of being instances of what they generally, abstractly, essentially are. If the particular business of individual persons is what we mean by *living*, then the specification of the business of poems is what we generally mean by *reading*. My final chapter is thus an experiment in reading and in living. It tells a story of a reader (myself) who sought to read a poem with another person, but at a distance—“together apart.” Where the preceding chapters describe the production of “indifferent” poems—poems that seek to put us off their phenomenal features, by poets who go about trying to take themselves, and us, *out of the moment*—this chapter describes the way that reading poems together may promote an attitude of indifference toward the specificity of *any* poem in the greater interest of solidarity with other persons. Taking up debates about collective intentionality within contemporary social philosophy, I propose an alternative to models of poetic community built around conversation, interpretation, or translation. Writing myself into the history of poetic intentions I describe, I also argue for the interest and value (if not necessarily the truth) of a theory of collective intentions that is crucially *internalist*: it conceives of the ability

of forming intentions for partnership-in-action whether or not one has a partner—indeed, whether or not anyone else in the world exists. The ability to recover—by reading poems—a conviction in even the solitary person's innate and “primitive” capacity to formulate “we-intentions” may, I suggest, have a transformative effect on one's felt capacities for relationship, and reorient the person toward a shared world. The question that the poets in this tradition pose to social thought is of the most fundamental kind: not how to distribute fairly the privileges of identity, but how to secure the *ground* of identity; not just of how to do things with persons, but how to know that a person is there at all.