

Beyond McPoetry: Contemporary American Poetry
in the Institutionalized Creative Writing Program Era

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the rise of the creative writing program in American higher education and considers its influence on contemporary American poetry. I investigate how the patronage of the university has impacted American poetry and reconfigured the contemporary literary landscape. Using Mark McGurl's (2009) groundbreaking research on post-World War II fiction and the rise of the creative writing program as a launching point, I consider the following questions: (1) How might contemporary American poetry be understood in relation to the rise of mass higher education and the creative writing program? (2) How and why has the creative writing program reorganized U.S. poetry production in the postwar period?, and (3) How can the rise of the creative writing program be brought to bear on a reading of contemporary poetry itself?

Investigating beyond the well-worn claim that institutionalized creative writing programs produce McPoetry, this humanities-based research examines the ascents of three of America's most celebrated living poets. First, I investigate Kay Ryan's rise as an "outsider" poet happily unaffiliated with creative writing programs. Through close readings, I consider how the most dominant and idiosyncratic craft elements in her writing are a partial result of her avoidance of the homogenizing forces of the creative writing workshop. I then examine Jorie

Graham's influence as a former faculty member at Iowa Writers Workshop, the most prestigious and indisputably powerful M.F.A. program in the nation, and as a current professor at Harvard University. I examine distinguishing features of Graham's work and trace threads of connection in the poetry of other Elliptical poets who have been heavily influenced by her. I consider how Graham's work necessitates literary scholarship and how those granted power by their institution in turn bolster Graham's body of work. In particular, I examine Helen Vendler's role, as our nation's most powerful poetry critic, in promoting Graham's poetry and popularizing a set of aesthetic values modeled largely after Graham's. Next, I consider Billy Collins' aggressive courting of the general reader of poetry as an antidote to academe's exclusion of non-specialist readers. I argue that Collins' impressive popularity and subversive tendencies serve as a counterweight to the literary authority of "official verse" culture. The examination of Billy Collins, Jorie Graham, and Kay Ryan aims to illuminate higher education's role in bestowing cultural authority on particular poets and kinds of poetry.

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for my parents with love

Preface · Household Poetry

In the summer of 2007 I visited my grandmother's farm in rural southeastern Ohio for a final time before her move to an assisted living facility. It was at her farmhouse nestled in the fertile cow-spotted hills where my father was born and where he was raised with his parents, two aunts, two siblings, a coal stove, and no indoor plumbing. The screen doors slapped as they always had, the hand pump for well-water let out a rusty "hee-haw," Hereford cattle lolled about flicking stained tails, and the sound of gravel on tire signaled visitors. Despite the familiar sensory experiences, so much had changed. The once bustling farmhouse was empty except for the presence of my elderly grandmother. Separating her from her closest neighbor were a few hundred acres of fallow farmland. The hog house roof sagged, there were no cattle to pasture, the meat hook in the barn was rusted, spider eggs dotted the John Deere, and the weeds were horse high. In going through my grandmother's items, I came across *The Household Book of Poetry* (1873), a handsome leather-bound book published in 1873. For me such a discovery in a house where I had never heard poetry discussed was nothing short of exhilarating.

At the time of this discovery, I was in the midst of an M.F.A. program in poetry at Sarah Lawrence College and a doctoral student in English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. This visit gave birth to a number of the poems in my M.F.A. thesis and I suspect that my discovery of *The Household Book of Poetry* helped generate some of the underlying ideas in this dissertation.

The idea of a *Household Book of Poetry* felt provocative at the time of my discovery and made me wonder about how a farm in Appalachia still had use for

poetry despite its seeming irrelevance in most other parts of the country. Why did poetry have a place at my grandmother's farm in Malta, Ohio even while it occupied a place on so few bookshelves in homes across the country? As an M.F.A. student in poetry I was keenly aware that outside of academe there was little audience for poetry. I wanted to understand why.

The word "household" from the collection's title, I think serves as a kind of connective thread to my dissertation. "Household" is defined as something "used in maintaining a home" as well as something "common, usual, or ordinary." Now, 139 years since the publication of *The Household Book of Poetry* the idea that poetry might be "used in maintaining a home" feels dated and sadly laughable. This research seeks to explore, among other things, how non-specialist readers of poetry came to be alienated and how contemporary American poetry has grown into a balkanized system of poetries each with their own sovereign audiences. How has the rise of creative writing programs impacted the poet's approach toward the reader and why does poetry now have so little place in the household?

The hope that underlies my research is that poetry might again become *household* and that upcoming generations of families might again have a *Household Book of Poetry* on their bookshelves.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

Nearly twenty-five years ago, Donald Hall wrote an essay that rumbled the tectonic plates of the poetry world. Arguably, no piece of writing about poetry has received as much attention in the past quarter century as Hall's. His incendiary essay laid the foundation for a prolonged period of reflection within the poetry community that included notable responses from Dana Gioia, Joseph Epstein, Hank Lazer, Charles Altieri, and Charles Bernstein.¹ Hall's essay was the first of its kind to address the impact of the rise of higher education programs in creative writing on American poetry. "Poetry and Ambition" (1988) begins, "I see no reason to spend your life writing poems unless your goal is to write great poems" (Hall, 1988, p. 1). Hall's essay offers a scathing critique of the problems of contemporary poetry ranging from unambitious poets who mistake publication for achievement to the "disastrous" problems caused by separating literature departments from writing departments (Hall, 1988, p. 8). Hall writes, "the great majority of contemporary poems, in any era, will always be bad or mediocre" and that "we fail in part because we lack serious ambition" (Hall, 1988, p. 1).

Hall's relentless criticism of the unambitious poet is a mere warm-up for his critique of the university system that mass produces what he deems poor poetry.

Hall writes, "In all societies there is a template to which its institutions conform...

Today the American Industrial corporation provides the template, and the

¹ Titles from this time period include "Who Killed Poetry?" (Epstein, 1988), "Death to the Death of Poetry" (Hall, 1989), "Can Poetry Matter?" (Gioia, 1991), *After the Death of Poetry* (Shetley, 1993), "Dead or Alive? Poetry at Risk" (Goode, 1993), "Why Poetry is Dying" (Salemi, 2001), and "Poetry is Dead. Does Anybody Really Care?" (Wexler, 2003).

university models itself on General Motors” (Hall, 1988, p. 3). According to Hall, the United States excels at “mass quick-consumption” and “production lines” that churn out utilitarian staples that are a far cry from hand-built Ferraris and Rolls Royces (Hall, 1988, p. 3). Hall characterizes American poetry as a product of the same societal institution that popularized fast-food. He explains,

We write and publish the McPoem—ten *billion* served—which becomes our contribution to the history of literature... Pull in any time day or night, park by the busload, and the McPoem waits on the steam shelf for us, wrapped and protected, indistinguishable, undistinguished, and reliable—the good old McPoem identical from coast to coast and in all the little towns between, subject to the quality control of the least common denominator. And every year, Ronald McDonald takes the Pulitzer. (Hall, 1988, p. 3)

Individuals may produce McPoems but it is the systems that sanction homogenized creativity that attract Hall’s greatest wrath. He writes,

To produce the McPoem, institutions must enforce patterns, institutions within institutions, all subject to the same glorious dominance of economic determinism, template, and formula of consumerism. The McPoem is the product of the workshops of Hamburger University. (Hall, 1988, p. 3)

For Hall, the creative writing workshop is the assembly line of a larger soulless factory system driven by supply and demand. The university “provides technology [in the form of the workshop] for mass reproduction of a model created elsewhere”

(Hall, 1988, p. 3). Hall insists that the drive of universities to churn out graduates supersedes any attention to the quality of students' writing. He argues that like the industrialization of the restaurant kitchen that ensured the steady barrage of fast food in the American diet, the invention of the creative writing workshop has led to the steady production of poems with the character and depth (but not the longevity) of Styrofoam.

Hall's rant reaches a crescendo when he offers the only plausible solution for remedying a university system that has, he believes, infected contemporary American poetry with homogenized mediocrity. He insists, "Abolish the M.F.A.!" For Hall, "The workshop schools us to produce the McPoem," a poem that is typically anecdotal, descriptive, emotionally and linguistically limited, and autobiographical. In other words, McPoems are as mundane and unexceptional as re-heated apple pie served in triangular paper containers. According to Hall, the poetry workshop encourages writers to make writing public before it is truly ready, something he likens to offering to a garage "incomplete or malfunctioning homemade machines for diagnosis and repair" (Hall, 1988, p. 4). Hall believes that the examiners of these "non-functional machines" are "other apprentice inventors and one or two senior Edisons" (Hall, 1988, p. 4). McPoems are served up each week, according to Hall, to an assembly line of amateur writers with undiscerning palates. In addition, Hall believes that these amateur writers accustomed to our fast-food culture of instant gratification bring their poems to workshop too soon. He writes, "The weekly meetings of the workshop serve the haste of our culture. When we bring a new poem to the workshop, anxious for praise, others' voices enter the poem's

metabolism before it is mature, distorting its possible growth and change” (Hall, 1988, p. 4). Perhaps the biggest danger posed to poets who present their work prematurely, according to Hall, is the homogenization of their creativity. He writes,

This publication exposes oneself to one’s fellow-poets only—a condition of which poets are perpetually accused and frequently guilty. We learn to write poems that will please not the Muse but our contemporaries, thus poems that resemble our contemporaries’ poems—thus the recipe for the McPoem... If we learn one thing else, we learn to publish promiscuously; these premature ejaculations count on number and frequency to counterbalance ineptitude.

(Hall, 1988, p. 4)

For Hall, the workshop is “the institutionalized café,” a poor substitute for the intellectual and artistic stimulation that occurs in Europe’s cafes (Hall, 1988, p. 5). In these “institutionalized cafes,” Hall believes that poetry is reduced to a “parlor game” (Hall, 1988, p. 5). He writes, “Games serve to democratize, to soften, and to standardize; they are repellent. He believes that although workshops serve a useful purpose in gathering young artists together, workshop practices enforce the McPoem” (Hall, 1988, p. 5).

Fast food, as both a commodity and a metaphor for our habits of consumption, offers a provocative and rich entry point for examining the interplay of social, economic, and technological forces at work in creative writing programs in higher education. Here, in this dissertation, I do address some of the social and economic interplay. Just as the thinking behind fast food has become the operating

system of today's retail economy, wiping out small businesses, obliterating regional differences, and spreading identical stores throughout the country like a self-replicating recipe, Hall fears that poetry has suffered a similar homogenization and simplification.

Shortly after Hall fired the first warning shot about the university's influence on American poetry, writer and critic Joseph Epstein chimed in with similarly combative words. In his essay "Who Killed Poetry?" (1988) Epstein argues,

Contemporary poetry is no longer a part of the regular intellectual diet.

People of general intellectual interests who feel that they ought to read or at least know about works on modern society or recent history or novels that attempt to convey something about the way we live now, no longer feel the same compunction about contemporary poetry... It begins to seem, in fact, a sideline activity, a little as chiropractic or acupuncture is to mainstream medicine—odd, strange, but with a small cult of followers who swear by it.

(Epstein, 1988, p. 15)²

² Though it is virtually impossible to assess the validity of Epstein's claim about the marginalization of contemporary poetry, recent studies conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts substantiate his assertion that the readership for poetry is dwindling (even while the readership for literature in general and fiction in particular is increasing). A 2008 study found that 8.3% of book readers had read any poetry at all during the survey period. A similar study conducted sixteen years earlier in 1992 found that 17.1% of book readers had read any poetry at all during the survey period. The data shows that in the sixteen year span studied, the readership for poetry was essentially halved. According to the study, the declining reading rate for poetry is due in part to a significant decline in the percentage of women, Americans 45-54 years of age, and white Americans who read poetry. From 2002-2008 the proportion of women who read poetry fell at a 39 percent rate (National Endowment for the Arts [NEA], 2009; NEA, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

For Epstein, the rise of the creative writing program and the accompanying credentialing and professionalization of poetry is to blame for the art's growing irrelevance. He writes, "the entire enterprise of poetic creation seems threatened by having been taken out of the world, chilled in the classroom, and vastly overproduced by men and women who are licensed to write it by degree if not necessarily by talent or spirit" (Epstein, 1988, p. 20). Epstein extends Hall's argument by asserting that the insulation of the poet within the walls of the institution has shifted the role of the writer from that of "artist" to "professional." Epstein believes that the professionalization of poetry is primarily responsible for poetry's declining audience.

Critic and university professor Charles Altieri astutely links the role of the poetry workshop and the professionalization of poetry in *Sense and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (1984). For Altieri, the academy as an institution encourages craft over ideas and insulates writers from a public audience. In describing the role of the workshop Altieri writes,

...workshops and the mentality they encourage put poets in a situation closely parallel to that of French painting in the 1850s. There, too, extraordinarily skillful artists created a climate skeptical of any intellectual role for the medium, hence trapping it within a narrow equation of lucidity and elegantly controlled surfaces. Instead of a stress on ideas, there emerged an emphasis on craft that in turn produced a highly inbred professionalism governing both the training of artists and the judgment of their work. Rather than directly seeking sources of patronage among a consuming public, artists

received their commissions and praise largely by appealing to other professionals. Their salon juries are our fellowship boards. (Altieri, 1984, p. 205)

In place of Donald Hall's derisive sobriquet for workshop poetry, Altieri refers to the prevailing style as the "dominant mode" (Altieri, 1984, p. 205). According to Altieri, the workshop mode puts a

reticent, plain-speaking and self-reflective speaker within a narratively presented scene evoking a sense of loss. Then the poet tries to resolve the loss in a moment of emotional poignance or wry acceptance that renders the entire lyric event an evocative metaphor for some general sense of mystery about the human condition. (Altieri, 1984, p. 205)³

Altieri's commentary, though less biting than Hall's or Epstein's, contributes to the chorus of voices deriding the workshop's homogenization and simplification of American poetry.

In the nearly twenty-five years since Donald Hall's "Poetry and Ambition" was published, the number of degree-conferring programs in American higher education has grown by approximately 400 (*Numbers of degree-conferring programs*, n.d.). University creative writing programs are now one of the most powerful forces in contemporary poetry. One could argue that just as the centralized purchasing decisions of the large restaurant chains and their demand for standardized products have given a handful of corporations an unprecedented

³ In 2012, twenty-eight years after Altieri first described the "dominant mode," the prevailing style in MFA programs has shifted but there still exists a dominant mode. I will discuss this further in chapter four.

degree of power over the nation's food supply, universities and the poets they employ wield significant power in the form of publishing and pedagogy. As creative writing programs have proliferated, so too have small literary magazines subsidized by university budgets and legitimized by academe. Blurbs on book jackets often function as commodities that are exchanged for reciprocal book blurbs or readings.⁴ Grants and teaching jobs are prized by poets not only for the prestige they confer but because they offer the poet the rare opportunity to earn money for her expertise. Importantly, unlike fiction writing where James Patterson, the highest paid author of 2011, made \$84 million and signed a seventeen-book \$150 million contract with Hachette Book Group, there is very little money to be made in poetry writing. While the publishing industry reigns supreme in fiction writing, the university system is one of the primary pillars of economic exchange for the poet.

The abolishment of the M.F.A. is as unlikely as the downfall of the McDonald's Corporation. Creative writing programs have cemented their status in the literary arts and have influenced contemporary American poetry in ways that we are only beginning to understand.

Today, the vast majority of the literature that Americans read and write is processed through the higher-education system. How then, does the system impact the product?

⁴ For example, in the case of poems written by John Hollander, poetry critic James Woods humorously explains that that "the quotes and blurbs cling like fertilizing spores to his books" (Woods, 1999, p. 1). Woods' point is that "boring, indeed sometimes intolerable, poems" written within academe are bound to receive praise from peers eager for reciprocation (Woods, 1999, p. 1).

Nearly twenty-five years after the publication of Donald Hall's essay, literary scholar and university professor Mark McGurl (2010) took up this precise question. He offered the most comprehensive and ambitious historical study to date of the impact of creative writing programs on post-World War II fiction. His work examines how the patronage of the university has impacted American fiction and he uses the close relationship between writing and schooling to understand contemporary literature. McGurl considers "the rise of the creative writing program" to be the "most important event in postwar American literary history" (McGurl, 2010, p. ix). More than any other contemporary critic, McGurl investigates the way that the system impacts the outcome. He traces the impact that creative writing programs, in particular, have had on contemporary fiction. He examines the development of literary modernism in post-World War II America and views the formation of creative writing programs as a response to the modernist mantra "make it new."

According to McGurl, the push to "make it new" was institutionalized in the form of creative writing programs by science-oriented universities of the Cold-War era that were eager to cultivate creativity and encourage original research (McGurl, 2010, p. 4). More generally, creative writing programs benefitted from the growth and development of mass higher education in America after World War II.

An overview of the evolution of the creative writing program is helpful in understanding the university system that shaped it. According to D.G. Myers in his book *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (1996), creative writing as an academic subject arose out of a reaction against English philology, the study of

literature as linguistic science. Myers explains that creative writing as an academic discipline was founded on the argument that “literature is not a genre of knowledge but a mode of aesthetic and spiritual cultivation” (Myers, 1996, p. 7). After the Civil War, a rift developed in American higher education dividing positivists and idealists. Positivists sought to anatomize literature in pursuit of scientific knowledge while idealists believed that such an analysis prevented an aesthetic appreciation of literature.

Myers suggests that Ralph Waldo Emerson first coined the term “creative writing” in his 1837 Phi Beta Kappa address titled “The American Scholar.” In it, Emerson offered “creative writing” and “creative reading” as necessary alternatives to traditional academic scholarship (Myers, 1996, p. 31). Emerson believed that then-current scholarship promoted the uncritical acceptance of sanctified knowledge and that “creative learning” encouraged much needed independent thinking (Myers, 1996, p. 31).

The evolution of English composition in the United States beginning in the late nineteenth century also played an integral role in the emergence of creative writing. Proponents of a revised form of composition studies felt that formal rhetoric placed too little emphasis on the practice of writing and favored, instead, the study of language’s underlying theory. The new goal of English composition was to bring together theory and practice, giving students greater opportunity to express themselves freely.

In 1880 Harvard professor Barrett Wendell offered the first classes in writing. His immensely popular classes were a revolt against the strict dictates of philology

and emphasized instead creativity, aesthetics, observation, and daily writing exercises. Wendell's book *English Composition* (1891) gave creative writing its first name and allowed others to adopt his ideas. His student William Hughes Mearns went on to incorporate Wendell's ideas as well as those of John Dewey, in the books *Creative Youth* (1925) and *Creative Power* (1929). These books were integral in spreading interest in "creative writing" among educators.

According to Myers (1996), what is known today as the "workshop method"⁵ grew out of an effort to apply the principle of manual arts training to the teaching of writing. The manual arts training method emerged in the 1870s, led by Washington University professor Calvin Woodward. He believed that the best way to educate artists was through their own creative work. Woodward's borrowing of established methods within the arts proved to be a critical moment in the development of the writing workshop.

It was not until 1930 that Norman Foerster started the nation's first graduate writing program. As the director of the School of Letters at the University of Iowa, Foerster set out to mend the disjunction between art and criticism. His program included classes in creative writing as well as literature classes. Iowa's writing

⁵ The traditional poetry workshop involves a group of 5-15 students, an instructor, and regular meeting times. The instructor assigns exercises and each student is expected to bring a new poem to class each week. During the class meeting, students pass around copies of their new poems. The first student to present work reads her poem and then sits silently as the class discusses its strengths and weaknesses. The traditional workshop method relies on "cold readings" rather than readings completed prior to class. Each critique usually lasts from 5-15 minutes and focuses on how to make the poem a better piece of writing. Students take notes on their copy of the poem and return the copy to the author at the end of the critique. In theory, each student leaves class with the information needed to help them in the revision process.

program established the basic components that still exist in many of today's programs. These include literature courses, writing seminars focusing on craft and form, a culminating thesis, and a course of study leading to a graduate degree.

Graduate writing programs gained momentum in the 1940s and early 1950s with the appointment of writers as university professors. In 1942 Paul Engle established the Iowa Writers' Workshop, an outgrowth of Foerster's School of Letters. Engle's program was the first of its kind to offer a Master in Fine Arts degree and has for many decades been considered the premier program in the nation for the study of creative writing. Jonathan Holden (1991) explains that in the years following Iowa Writers' Workshop's inception, "dozens of creative writing programs... sprung up in imitation of the Iowa Writers' Workshop as its graduates spread out like missionaries through American colleges and universities, as American creative writing reached an 'industrial' scale" (Holden, 1991, p. 24).

Beginning in the 1950s, many school officials at American universities acknowledged that they were unwittingly promoting a kind of intellectual conformity and that the creativity of their students was suffering as a result (McGurl, 2010, p. 70). According to George Stoddard, the dean of the New York University School of Education in 1959,

Inside the school, many teachers and textbooks (refrigerated versions of teachers stamped and sealed) pay homage to the same god of conformity. It used to be thought that this made little difference in mathematics, physical science, and grammar, but we were wrong even there. Three hundred years of standard instruction in these disciplines have produced populations

whose chief reliance is on the conditioned response, the repetitive act, the voice of authority. (as cited in McGurl, 2010, p. 70)

Stoddard called on American universities to transform themselves into places where “creative art, music, and writing were no longer alien” (as cited in McGurl, 2010, p. 71).

In addition, according to McGurl, within the science community there was strong motivation to develop the creativity of American scientists so that they could outthink the communist enemy. This competition was fueled in part by the desire to design superior weapons technology (McGurl, 2010, p. 70).

Acknowledging that the human product cultivated by universities lacked sufficient creativity, school officials set out to increase opportunities for creative expression. According to McGurl, creative writing as a discipline was “concocted as a progressive *antidote* to conformism” (McGurl, 2010, p. 71). The irony is that, years later, this very antidote was charged with being an “agent of conformism on the literary aesthetic plane” (McGurl, 2010, p. 71). Put another way, the very system that sought to incubate creativity also functioned as a homogenizing agent of creativity.

The development of the creative writing program as an outgrowth of English philology and English composition established it as a kind of outsider separated from traditional academic disciplines through its emphasis on creative expression. Mark McGurl argues that, unlike their colleagues in traditional academic disciplines, writers are not cogs in a knowledge machine. He believes that the current structure

of creative writing programs provides the opportunity for universities to function as a “difference engine” (McGurl, 2010, p. 85). These engines are devoted to producing original people as well as original research. According to McGurl, creative writing programs are examples of “the institutionalization of anti-institutionality” and “conventional unconventionality” (McGurl, 2010, p. 85). Their contribution to the university comes from the fact that they are outsiders contained within the walls of the academic institution. The product is a kind of “systematic creativity” (McGurl, 2010, p. 69).

McGurl’s term “systematic creativity” captures the tension present in the marriage of the words “creative” and “program” (McGurl, 2010, p. 69). He cautions against dismissing the idea that systems can generate creativity. To illustrate the creative potential of systems, McGurl examines Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn argues that most scientific progress has been the result of a “near-total commitment to a consensus ‘paradigm’ in a given subfield” (as cited in McGurl, 2010, p. 72). Such progress occurs, according to Kuhn, when scientists join forces and work collectively. Conformity, in Kuhn’s view, is an essential element of the creative process in science and is responsible for fundamental changes within the field.

Though McGurl limits the scope of his analysis to fiction, many of the questions he raises and arguments he presents are applicable to poetry as well. It is my hope that this dissertation fills a gap in the research by focusing on American poetry and its relationship to the rise of the creative writing program.

As a practicing poet and a graduate of an M.F.A. program in creative writing, I am fascinated by the ways in which institutions impact creative expression. In many ways, the initial threads of this dissertation were born years before I knew I would one day undertake such a project. In 1998, while a junior at Princeton University, I enrolled in my first class devoted entirely to poetry. Prior to that point in my formal education, poetry had been a kind of literary garnish that accompanied the main course (mainly fiction) of my English classes. The poetry I had studied up until that point in school was almost, without exception, anything but contemporary. I entered “Contemporary Poetry” in the spring term of my junior year with a giddy enthusiasm and the feeling that the tedious survey courses required of English majors had perhaps been worth it. Despite the guidance of a wonderful teaching fellow and now established literary scholar Wes Davis, the course was a disappointment. I now believe that the course, which focused largely on poets such as John Ashbery and Jorie Graham, should have more appropriately been called “Contemporary Academic Poetry.” Though I had not yet identified “academic poetry” as a category within a much larger genre, I did know instinctually that such a course made important omissions. My deep interest in Chicana poetry, in particular, gave me direct insight into a talented segment of the poetry population excluded from most academic syllabi.

Seven years after taking my first poetry course, I entered my first poetry workshop. The six-week poetry workshop at Middlebury College’s Bread Loaf School of English with Paul Muldoon (which included a guest appearance by Seamus Heaney), revitalized my interest in the formal study and writing of poetry. For the

first time since reading Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" in high school, I thoroughly enjoyed studying poetry in an academic setting. Two years later, I entered an M.F.A. program at Sarah Lawrence College where my work with Laure-Anne Bosselaar, Victoria Redel, and Thomas Lux confirmed my belief that creative writing programs are an important place for the study and writing of poetry. It was also as an M.F.A. student that I was first exposed to trends in contemporary American poetry and the potentially homogenizing forces of the workshop.

The sense of disillusionment I felt as a college student studying poetry in the late 1990s and later my first-hand experience as an M.F.A. student underlie many of the questions that guided this research. It was during college that my interest in understanding how we arrive at canonical preferences began and then, as a graduate student, that the workshop became an area of inquiry for me. In this dissertation, I chose to examine Kay Ryan, for example, because I wanted to know why I had never heard of this talented poet prior to her appointment in 2008 as United States Poet Laureate. Similarly, I wanted to understand why Jorie Graham occupied such a prominent position on my "Contemporary Poetry" syllabus and why a colleague at Harvard enrolled in her poetry workshop spoke with such admiration about her. I also wanted to understand why Billy Collins was so wildly popular among high school students and the general public but regarded as a writer of "*Reader's Digest* prose" by many poets. Why also did my teachers Paul Muldoon and Thomas Lux often offer wildly different (and often contradictory) feedback about the same poems? How did they arrive at their preferences and what did it mean for

their teaching? What kinds of writing did their teaching encourage and what did it make impossible?

Another significant motivation for me in my research is the fact that I have taught English in various capacities for nearly ten years and have worked fervently during that time to widen the readership for poetry. I have taught middle and high school English, college developmental English and composition, and pre-service English teachers. In each of these environments poetry has been a central focus. As an English educator, I am driven by the beliefs that poetry is the lifeblood of language and that English teachers are the institutional gatekeepers of poetry in our society. As Baron and Wormser explain, “There is no poetry (particularly contemporary poetry) in most students’ homes; they do not see poetry on television or in the newspaper... For millions of young people their like or dislike of poetry depends on their teachers” (Wormser & Capella, 2000, ix). As a teacher of pre-service English teachers for the past two years at Teachers College, two of my primary goals have been to ease anxieties about the teaching of poetry and to help make poetry a vital part of the English curriculum. I have tried to do this in part by developing my students’ reading skills through an emphasis on craft, exposing the institutional forces that typically narrow the pool of writing deemed worthy of study, modeling teaching methods, inviting students to be active participants in New York City’s robust poetry scene, and encouraging students to read widely and deeply. In addition to my work with pre-service English teachers, I have worked as a consultant in the teaching of poetry with in-service teachers in Vermont and Ohio. There too, I have worked to make poetry not a garnish but a main course worthy of

rigorous study.

As my literature review explains, debates around creative writing programs have, for many years, focused primarily on their efficacy and whether or not it is even possible to teach creative writing. I am less interested in making judgments about the products creative writing programs produce than I am with examining their role in shaping American letters. My hope is that this research will help illuminate the relationships between “systematic creativity” (including the tensions inherent in this term) and the systems that bestow cultural authority on particular poets and kinds of poetry.

I will explore the following questions in my research:

- 1) How might contemporary American poetry be understood in relation to the rise of mass higher education and the creative writing program?
- 2) How and why has the creative writing program reorganized U.S. poetry production in the postwar period?
- 3) How can the rise of the creative writing program be brought to bear on a reading of contemporary poetry itself?

Chapter 2: Methodology

My dissertation is a humanities-oriented research project. According to the *Standards for Reporting on Humanities-Oriented Research in AERA Publications* (2009), “the term *humanities-oriented*⁶ is intended to capture a constellation of familiar education research genres used in domains such as history or philosophy, for which the *Social Science Standards* are clearly not suited” (AERA, 2009, p. 481).

The Council of the American Educational Research Association explains that,

the central purpose of humanities-oriented research has been the exploration and understanding of forms of human existence. In pursuit of this general purpose, humanities-oriented research undertakes investigations into the relationships among reason and emotion, the ethical life, the good life, the just society, the characteristics of the good citizen, and concepts of self, knowledge and its grounds, and the arts and their appreciation. (AERA, 2009, p. 482)

The AERA Council also suggests that, “the familiar vocabulary associated with the conduct of experimental research offers no guidance in developing standards for research that is designed not to establish causality but to illuminate, critique, and

⁶ According to the AERA Council, the content of humanities-based research varies considerably. Some research, for example, “is intended to illuminate educational processes or phenomena by providing insightful and sometimes provocative portrayals of them and their origins, without proffering judgments” while other research “takes a normative approach, in which questions of value are directly pursued and the researcher argues an explicit position about the need for fundamental changes in the methods and aims of education” (AERA, 2009, p. 482). My research seeks to illuminate how a particular educational process within the arts impacts American letters. As stated previously, I am less interested in proffering judgments than I am in understanding the interconnectedness of creativity, higher education, and American poetry.

evaluate educational phenomena” (AERA, 2009, p. 483). The council explains that humanities-based research is rooted in established disciplines that “often are defined more by the problems they investigate than by their methods” (AERA, 2009, p. 483).

My research relies heavily on the research traditions found in English literature. In aligning myself with the research traditions of the humanities, I use “varied, open-ended methods” which are in line with the research of English literature (AERA, 2009, p. 484).⁷ I engage in close readings⁸ of poems to understand how particular craft elements⁹ operate. Such analysis is most closely linked with New Critics of the mid-twentieth century who are credited with making close reading a fundamental method of contemporary criticism.

New Criticism focuses on explication to determine how a poem works. It explores the relationship between what the text says and how it is said. New criticism considers the work of art as an object in itself and relies on a process of close analysis to understand it. For new critics, meaning exists on the page and should not be confused with the author’s intention or the poem’s affective dimension. Meanings derived from outside the text are considered irrelevant. Literature, for new critics, communicates truths incommunicable through means other than the language of literature. No extraneous or special knowledge, according

⁷ According to the AERA Council, “much humanities-oriented research is relatively seamless with respect to topics under investigation and methods employed. Humanities-oriented researchers often do not explicate the specific conceptualization their work exemplifies... As in the case of methods, this lack of explicitness is often quite appropriate...” (AERA, 2009, p. 484).

⁸ I define “close reading” as the careful, sustained observation and analysis of a text.

⁹ I define “craft elements” as the collection of literary tools such as tone, sound, rhyme, syntax, diction, and rhythm that writers use to shape their writing.

to new critics, is needed to understand how a poem works. New Criticism has for decades been the most pervasive form of literary analysis used in graduate school, college, and high school curricula. It is also worth noting that New Criticism has been considered a particularly strong fit for an examination of lyric poetry (Holman and Harmon, 1986, p. 331).

The term "New Criticism" is derived from John Crowe Ransom's book *The New Criticism* published in 1941. Crowe's volume of essays examines a movement in America that began in the 1930s and that paralleled a similar movement in England led by a handful of literary critics including T.S. Eliot. Ransom believed that literary criticism should become more systematic and that a poem should be regarded as an aesthetic object. His essay "Criticism, Inc." (1937), in particular, established the key principles that were influential in developing the basic framework of New Criticism. Prior to the publication of Ransom's seminal works in 1937 and 1941, the ideas that were to become the primary tenets of New Criticism surfaced in the work of other literary scholars. For example, Laura Riding and Robert Graves pioneered the reading of poetry apart from its historical or linguistic context in their book *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) and William Empson examined the semantic strategies separating imaginative writing from expository writing in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). Perhaps most influential to the development of New Criticism as a literary movement was the work of Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks. These men, with the publication of their textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938), codified the beliefs that poems should be read with exclusive attention to the words on the page and that literary analysis should not be influenced by the reader's subjective

experience of the poem. Warren and Brooks' textbook was widely used in American universities from its date of publication until the early sixties and is considered one of the primary means by which the ideas of New Criticism were disseminated.

According to Holman and Harmon (1986), "New Criticism is really a cluster of attitudes toward literature rather than an organized critical system" (Holman and Harmon, 1986, p. 331). While New Criticism has no definitive prescribed methods, its ideology does lend itself well to a methodologically based approach to literary analysis. For this reason, New Criticism remains a dominant mode of literary analysis in schools including graduate programs in creative writing.

Though my dissertation employs close reading, a method connected to New Criticism, I do not align myself with the belief of traditional New Critics that the meaning of a text should not be confused with the text's affective dimension. In their essay "The Affective Fallacy" (1954) William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley attempt to discount the reader's emotional response to a text as a legitimate means of literary analysis. Wimsatt and Beardsely (1954) argue that using the reader's response to a poem to understand its value leaves analysis vulnerable to emotional relativism and subjective impressions. For Wimsatt and Beardsely (1954), analysis anchored by affect is unreliable. Their ideal was a kind of "objective criticism" that rejected the influence of elements outside of the poem such as reader-response, history, and the author's biography.

In practice, I believe that ignoring a poem's affective dimension is virtually impossible and undoubtedly misguided. For example, understanding the craft

element of tone¹⁰ is dependent on the text's effects on the reader. Understanding the speaker's attitude toward the subject matter requires an attunement that considers how each and every craft element contribute to the poem's tone. Affect in a poem is almost always dependent on a poem's more "objective" craft elements such as sound, meter, form, and line breaks. A poem's emotional effects serve as an important entry point into a text and can also be read as the compiled impact of a poem's more "objective" craft elements. To separate affect from craft is, in practice, impossible.

According to Susanne Langer, "... feeling and the forms of discursive expression are logically incommensurate, so that any exact concept of feeling and emotion cannot be projected into the logical form of literal language" (Langer, 1957, p. 91). Langer believes, as do I that, "Verbal statement, which is our normal and most reliable means of communication, is almost useless for conveying knowledge about the precise character of the affective life" (Langer, 1957, p. 91). Langer's words address not only the imprecise nature of language and the role of craft in communicating the unsayable but also indirectly raise questions concerning the responsibility of the reader. If the "exact concept of feeling and emotion cannot be projected into the logical form of literal language" then how is the gap between the writer's language and the reader's experience of that language to be bridged? In my experience as both a reader and writer, empathy serves as the bridge's pillars¹¹. It is the catalyst that expands the reach of words beyond literal meaning and pushes

¹⁰ I define "tone" as the speaker's attitude toward the subject matter.

¹¹ While there are numerous ways of defining "empathy," I prefer Martha Nussbaum's definition of "empathy" as "the participatory imagination trying as best it can to put you in the shoes of another" (Nussbaum, 2010).

language toward a more full-bodied, experiential, and textured level of communication. I believe that empathy is the engine that extends language beyond the mechanical use of words found in recipes and textbooks and gives it the muscle to move others. Stephen Dobyns writes, "Without empathy on the reader's part, the writer can do nothing, since empathy gives the writer access to the heart of another and, equally, makes him or her care about the reader" (Dobyns, 2011, pp. 34-35). Dobyns acknowledges that a kind of emotional literacy is needed for full engagement with poetry. I would add that poetry has the capacity to exercise the very emotional literacy on which its understanding depends. Without the ability to access emotion either through experience or imagination, the reader has little chance of connecting with poetry.

While I believe the reader's response to a text is an essential component of literary analysis, I am not persuaded by reader-response theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt and Stanley Fish who argue that the reader is an active agent in creating the meaning of a text. In his essay "The New Criticism" (1979), Cleanth Brooks explains that overemphasizing the reader's response reduces literary criticism to "reader psychology and to the history of taste" (Brooks, 1979, p. 598). Like Brooks, I believe that while "no one in his right mind [can] forget the reader," the text is the ultimate conveyor of meaning (Brooks, 1979, p. 598).

Historical context, too, is an important tool that New Critics disregard but that I will closely consider. Thus, my analysis also will use the ideas of New Historicism to situate contemporary poetry within a particular historical moment. Poetry, in my view, is not an autonomous art form that can be divorced from its

historical context. While the methodology associated with New Criticism is in many ways ahistorical, New Historicism grounds the arts in a particular moment in time. My extended literature review outlines the prevailing ideas, debates, and assumptions in contemporary poetry. My analysis of the poetry landscape uses information about the historical era for contemporary poetry as a tool for understanding how contemporary poems are made. Unlike New Criticism, however, New Historicism offers little framework as a reading methodology and so has limited usefulness in my analysis of particular poems.

New Criticism and New Historicism are at odds in their beliefs about history's role in the interpretation of art. Reading methodologies though are rarely pure. My methods of literary analysis are no exception. The technique of close reading associated most closely with the New Critics provides the tools to analyze a poem's craft elements while the ideas of New Historicism allow me to situate my analysis within a particular historical moment.

Chapter 3: Dodging the “Great Creative Writing Fungus”: Kay Ryan’s Ascent as an Outsider

Debates over student work tend to dominate discussions about the rise of creative writing programs. Though valuable because of its initiation of larger debate, Donald Hall’s argument obscures the arguably more important issue of how higher education in the United States impacts the work of established poets in the prime years of their career. How has teaching in university creative writing programs impacted the writing of established writers and what does it mean for the United States to have a tenured literature?

At a recent reading in Bernardsville, New Jersey poet and North Carolina State professor Dorianne Laux was asked when she finds time to write. She responded, “I do most of my writing in the summer when I’m not teaching. The university does the work that the church or wealthy benefactors used to do. They’re [the universities] our patrons now.” (Laux, 2010). As writer David Gessner explains, “I gave up the full-time writing life and became the kind of domesticated writer known as a professor. I was not shot with a tranquilizer gun, tagged and shipped off to a university. I underwent this conversion more or less of my own free will, drawn by the lure of health insurance, salary, and security” (Gessner, 2008, p. 64). He adds, “we can’t all go live by ponds or write books about whales” (Gessner, 2008, p. 64).

Poets face arguably the most challenging economic odds in all of the arts. In 2011 poets earned \$460 for a 36-line poem in *The New Yorker*, \$75 for a poem published in *The Paris Review*, \$25 a page for work published in *Ploughshares*, and \$10 a line for work published in *Poetry Magazine* (Friedman, 2011, p. 1). The top-

selling poetry collection published in 2011, *Horoscopes for the Dead* (2011) by Billy Collins, sold 18,406 copies as of December 2011 and earned him approximately \$44,177 (Friedman, 2011, p. 1). The second-leading seller, *Leavings* by Wendell Berry, sold just 2,928 copies and earned him \$4,377. The third best-selling collection, *Come, Thief* by Jane Hirshfield, sold 2,250 copies and earned her \$5,625 (Friedman, 2011, p. 1). Tomas Tranströmer, the celebrated Swedish poet and most recent recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, sold only approximately 12,300 books in the United States in the ten years before he won the Nobel Prize (Friedman, 2011, p. 1). To earn a living from poetry alone is nearly impossible. Poets must have another source of income. Walt Whitman, for example, worked as a government clerk, Tomas Tranströmer worked for many years as psychologist for juvenile delinquents, and Wallace Stevens worked in an insurance firm. Teaching jobs in university creative writing programs, for many contemporary poets, are the most attractive means of earning a living.

While universities provide a steady salary and security, many writers concede that an intensity is lost by needing to divide their energy between their creative endeavors and their obligations to the university. Gessner explains, “A great writer, after all, must travel daily to a mental subcontinent, must rip into the work, experiencing the exertion of it, the anxiety of it and, once in a blue moon, the glory of it... It’s hard to throw yourself into something when that other self has another job” (Gessner, 2008, p. 66). As Jorie Graham, the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University, explains

Sometimes teaching feels like an extraordinary price to pay for the freedom to write poems. I find myself increasingly unable to write—to make contact with my work—while I’m ‘talking out’ so much, burning a hole in my silence... Sometimes I want my silence back—my right to silence—really desperately.
(Wunderlich, 1996, p. 3)

David Lehman echoes Gessner and Graham’s sentiments in his humorous poem “With Tenure.”

WITH TENURE

If Ezra Pound were alive today
 (and he is)
he’d be teaching
at a small college in the Pacific Northwest
and attending the annual convention
of writing instructors in St. Louis
and railing against tenure,
saying tenure
is a ladder whose rungs slip out
from under the scholar as he climbs
upwards to empty heaven
by the angels abandoned
for tenure killeth the spirit
(with tenure no man becomes master)

Texts are unwritten with tenure,
 under the microscope, *sous rature*
 it turneth the scholar into a drone
 decayeth the pipe in his jacket's breast pocket.

Hamlet was not written with tenure,
 nor were written Schubert's lieder
 nor Manet's *Olympia* painted with tenure.

No man of genius rises by tenure
 Nor woman (I see you smile).

Picasso came not by tenure
 nor Charlie Parker;

Came not by tenure Wallace Stevens
 Not by tenure Marcel Proust

Nor Turner by tenure

With tenure hath only the mediocre
 a sinecure unto death. Unto death, I say!

WITH TENURE

Nature is constipated the sap doesn't flow

With tenure the classroom is empty

et in academia ego

the ketchup is stuck inside the bottle

the letter goes unanswered the bell doesn't ring.

(Lehman, 1990)

Compromised intensity, unrecognized projects, an emphasis on quantity over quality, and safer less bold work may very well be some of the attributes of a tenured literature.¹²

John Barr, the former president of the Poetry Foundation extends Gessner's argument in his piece "American Poetry in the New Century" (Barr, 2006). Barr explains that university writing programs, "operate on a network of academic postings and prizes that reinforce the status quo. They are sustained by a system of fellowships, grants, and other subsidies that absolve recipients of the responsibility to write books that a reader who is not a specialist might enjoy, might even buy" (Barr, 2006, p. 4). Barr notes "poetry's striking absence from the public dialogues of our day" and a sense that "poetry is missing and unmissed" (Barr, 2006, p. 2). He believes that in the absence of a general audience, "poets still write for one another" (Barr, 2006, p. 2). Barr adds that "academic life removes them yet further from a general audience" (Barr, 2006, p. 2). Like so many before him, Barr points his finger at creative writing programs for promoting careerism and encouraging the production of dull poems. Barr believes that "the effect of these programs on the art form is to increase the abundance of poetry, but to limit its variety. The result is a poetry that is neither robust, resonant, nor—and I stress this quality—entertaining; a poetry that both starves and flourishes on academic subsidies" (Barr, 2006, p. 2).

¹² Fiction writer John McNally offers an alternative perspective. He explains, "the first several years of teaching helped my writing. Here's why. There's a kind of 'default writing' that all writers slip into—it's just easy, lazy writing—but it's difficult to know what default writing is unless you've read thousands of pages of apprentice writing, at which point you begin seeing the repetitions, the patterns, and then you can work on purging it from your own work" (Shivani, 2010, p. 3).

Barr and Gessner both believe that the rise of creative writing programs has created a climate of careerism and led to the subsequent dilution of what some academics would call “the high principles of art.”¹³ Some critics have gone so far as to call poetry’s worst offenders “foets.” Barr explains, “The MFA experience can confuse the writing of poetry, as a career, with the writing of a poem as a need or impulse. The creation of art is not a matter of fellowship. Writing a poem is a fiercely independent act. It is the furthest thing from mentors, residencies, and tenure” (Barr, 2006, p. 4). He adds that “with a few important exceptions, no major American poet has come from the academic world” and that if “everyone teaches in order to support their writing needs, it follows that the breadth of the aggregate base available to poetry may suffer” (Barr, 2006, p. 4). Barr believes that “Poets should live broadly, then write boldly” (Barr, 2006, p. 6). Similarly, as Charles Bernstein, a vocal proponent of “alternative” poetics explains, there is an “appalling lack of public cultural space outside the narrow confines of the literary academy. It is bad for poetry, and for poets, to be nourished so disproportionately” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 3).

I believe that systemic factors such as tenure and related psychological pressures for university employed poets impact poetry in ways that are both direct and indirect and that it is impossible to trace the causation behind the technical aspects of any given poem. Linking the relationship, for example, between the

¹³ The term “high principles of art” is a problematic one and is a field of debate in and of itself. The term is inherently hierarchical and elitist. In the context of the discussion of careerism, I believe “high principles of art” is best understood as an environment that allows artists to practice their craft with as few as possible technical and practical constraints.

professionalization of poetry and the line breaks or tone of a particular poem is impossible. Still, I believe that general trends in the writing of poetry at this historical moment in the United States are worth examining and that poems written by poets operating outside the academy are perhaps best suited to shed light on poetry generated within the academy.

The following chapter will examine the work of Kay Ryan, an established poet who is happily unaffiliated with creative writing programs and writing workshops. My hope is that an examination of Ryan's life and work will not only offer interesting new ways to consider her poems, but will also illuminate how much of post-World War II American poetry operates through its dominant context, the university creative writing program. The underlying structure for this chapter is influenced by the work of media theorist Marshall McLuhan who believed that to fully understand the impact of a new technology, one must consider the figure's (the medium's) relationship to the ground (context). Taken together, the figure (Ryan's poetry) and ground (the contemporary poetry context) will hopefully offer insight into the limitations and possibilities of "systematic creativity" (McGurl, 2010, p. 69).

Kay Ryan

Ryan labored in obscurity for years before being recognized as one of the nation's most talented poets. Her first collection *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends* was privately printed in California in 1983 by a subscription of friends. Her early work went unnoticed by critics and it was not until the publication of *Flamingo Watching* in 1994 that Ryan gained a small public reputation. Now a two-term United States

Poet Laureate and a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, she has amassed numerous honors including the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize for lifetime achievement, a Pulitzer prize for *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems* (2010), a Guggenheim fellowship, three Pushcart Prizes, and most recently a MacArthur Foundation fellowship.

Kay Ryan's markedly untraditional ascent to the rank of one of our nation's most accomplished living poets reflects her iconoclastic spirit and illuminates the well-worn path most contemporary poets travel. My own experience as a reader with Ryan's work may shed light on her atypical entry into the public imagination. As an undergraduate English major at Princeton University, a graduate student in English literature at Middlebury College, a graduate student at Harvard University, and a graduate student in creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College, I never once heard Kay Ryan's name mentioned. I have taken more English courses than I choose to count yet it was not until Kay Ryan was appointed the Library of Congress's sixteenth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry in 2008 that I first heard her name. Why, even in graduate school for creative writing where reading lists are comprised primarily of contemporary poets, had I never encountered the work of Kay Ryan?

Ryan's background, work history, education, publishing history, and writing style cement her status as one of contemporary poetry's most noteworthy "outsiders." Dana Gioia explains, "Nowadays a poet so refined, disciplined, and original is almost inevitably self-taught. Ryan is an outsider to the institutionalized world of contemporary poetry" (Gioia, 1998, p. 138). Ryan was born in 1945 and grew up nearly 3,000 miles from the New York arts world in the Mojave Desert and

the San Joaquin Valley. Fellow poet and longtime friend, Jane Hirshfield explains, “She [Ryan] is a desert plant. The biography and the character go together” (Halstead, 2007, p. 1). Ryan’s father was a well-driller who did not graduate from high school and her mother was an elementary school teacher. Ryan explains that she was raised in a family where “being a poet would be thought of as putting on airs” (Fay, 2008, p. 1). Ryan says, “I never liked the image of the poet, and I still don’t to this day. There is something way too romantic about it, and way too emotional and way too posturing. I come from clean-scrubbed people who would be embarrassed by that” (Halstead, 2007, p. 2). At the Dodge Poetry Festival in 2010, she reiterated her misgiving about being identified as a poet when she told the audience that she had wanted to be “a really smart regular person” and not a poet. She added, “I was meant to drive a pick-up. Poetry picked me” (Ryan, 2010).

Ryan’s early educational background is unremarkable for a writer who went on to carve such a distinctly atypical path to poetry stardom. She attended Antelope Valley Community College before receiving bachelor’s and master’s degrees in English from the University of California, Los Angeles. She pursued a Ph.D. there in literary criticism but abandoned the doctoral degree after becoming appalled by the idea of being “a doctor of something [she] couldn’t fix” (Fay, 2008, p. 8). In 1976, after years of “resisting the claims that poetry was making on her,” Ryan set off on a 4,000 mile bicycle trip along back roads from Oregon to California to help her decide whether or not to pursue poetry. This bike trip marked the start of Ryan’s slow and unusual ascent as a poet. It was during that trip that she acknowledged that poetry

gave her “pleasure like nothing else” and she committed herself to an eight year self-imposed poetry apprenticeship (Fay, 2008, p. 1).

Ryan describes herself as “an imperfect isolate” who along the way “made kind of a weak, feeble, effort to be a part of the group” (Carty, 2006, p. 7). It is noteworthy that as a student and during her apprenticeship, Kay Ryan never participated in a poetry workshop. She submitted poems as part of an application process to join a poetry club at the University of California, Los Angeles and was rejected. At the age of twenty-five while a teacher at the College of Marin, Ryan again applied to join a poetry group led by established poet Rosalie Moore and was again rejected.

She explains that during her apprenticeship she wrote “a gazillion” poems that were primarily inspired by *Ripley’s Believe it or Not!* books (Fay, 2008, p. 1).¹⁴

¹⁴ Here is a poem from Kay Ryan’s earliest work that was recently published in *The Jam Jar Lifeboat and Other Novelties Exposed* (2008).

THE WALKING STICK INSECT

*of South America often loses an antenna or leg—but
always grows a new appendage. Often nature makes a
mistake and a new antenna grows where the leg was lost.
—Ripley’s Believe It or Not!*

Eventually the
most accident-prone
or war-weary
walking sticks
are entirely
reduced to antennae
with which they
pick their way
sensitively,
appalled by
everything’s
intensity.

Ryan describes herself as an “unteachable autodidact” who, early on, “didn’t know how to write” (Ramelo, 2010, p. 1). Early in her career, she completed a collection of poems based on the cards in the Tarot deck. Her daily Tarot card exercise became her idiosyncratic method for teaching herself how to write. She explains,

I’d bought a tarot deck—this was the seventies—a standard one with a little accompanying book that explained how to read the cards, lay them out, shuffle them—all those things. But I’m not a student and was totally impatient with learning anything about the cards. I thought they were just interesting to look at. But I did use the book’s shuffling method, which was very elaborate, and in the morning I’d turn one card over and whatever that card was I would write a poem about it. The card might be Love, or it might be Death. My game, or project, was to write as many poems as there were cards in the deck. But since I couldn’t control which cards came up, I’d write some over and over again and some I’d never see. That gave me range. I always understood that to write poetry was to be totally exposed. But in the seventies I only had models of ripping off your clothes, and I couldn’t do that.¹⁵ My brain could be naked, but I didn’t want to be naked. Nor was I interested in the heart, or love. The tarot helped me see that I could write about anything—even love if required—and retain the illusion of not being exposed. (Fay, 2008, p. 3)

¹⁵ Examples of successful poetry anthologies from this time include *Naked Poetry* (1969) and *No More Masks!* (1973).

I think it is safe to say that no other contemporary American poet has taught herself to write using the Tarot card method.

I argue that Ryan's unique self-imposed apprenticeship was integral to her development as a poet with a sensibility found nowhere else in contemporary poetry. Her isolation from the homogenizing elements of the workshop shielded her from what Donald Hall would explain as "the template to which institutions conform" as well as the influence of "other apprentice inventors" (Hall, 1988, pp. 2-3).

Though the discovery of her writing was likely delayed by her lack of literary connections, Ryan acknowledges that space from the literary masses allowed her to cultivate her writing without outside influence. She explains,

I think people who become the most interesting writers are always going to come from, in some sense, desperate circumstances. There is a great deal of very private testing that has to happen in a writer. It has to be faced. I'm not sure it is a good idea to hold hands with others too much. (Halstead, 2007, p. 4)

At a talk with Garrison Keillor and Billy Collins in San Francisco, Ryan further expressed her feelings about the dangers of writing programs. She explained,

At the end, they opened it up for questions, and a young woman addressed a question to Billy and me. She said that she was a cook and that she wanted to quit her job cooking and enter a creative writing program full time and really concentrate on her writing in that way. She wanted to know if we had any advice for her. I said to Billy, 'I'll take this one.' I said, 'Stay a cook.' I really

meant that. The genuine thing in us is much too fragile to tolerate the kind of peer pressure or superior pressure of most writing programs or workshops. A lot of the job that one had to do as a writer is to protect the thing that doesn't match the world. I know how that sounds, but I do see great danger in people copying others and listening too much to opinions of other people when they're too impressionable. (Carty, 2006, p. 7)

Unlike the vast majority of her poetry peers, Ryan chose to teach not creative writing but remedial English in a public junior college for over thirty years as well as tutor prisoners for a stint at San Quentin. Only in 2010 when she served as Stanford's Mohr Visiting Poet did she have a brief affiliation with a university writing program. Also, Ryan is devotedly disinterested in the events of the poetry circuit. As *The New York Times* poetry critic Dwight Garner explains, Ryan "mostly steers clear of the poetry world's junketeering, its voluptuous horror of conferences and panels and M.F.A. programs" (Garner, 2010, p. 1).

In 2005, three years before Ryan was appointed the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, Ryan attended her first Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) Conference, the biggest annual gathering of poets in North America. In a humorous, self-deprecating, and somewhat cynical piece titled "I Go to AWP" Ryan documents her experience attending an event that she had actively avoided for so many years. She writes,

I have a weak character. I am very susceptible to other people's enthusiasms, at times actually courting them. I like to sit among people who feel strongly about a basketball team, say, and get excited with them. I love to love ouzo

with ouzo lovers. These are, of course, innocent examples. But this weakness concerns me in going to AWP. If I'm exposed to the enthusiasms of others, I know that I am capable of betraying my deepest convictions, laughing in the face of a lifetime of hostility to instruction, horror at groupthink. The only way I've ever gotten along in this world is by staying away from it; I have had only enough character to keep myself out of situations that require character. Now here I am, going to AWP. How am I going to remember: these people are THE SPAWN OF THE DEVIL? They will seem like individuals, not deadly white threads of the great creative writing fungus (Ryan, 2005, p. 2).

Ryan explains that she agreed to attend because she is "quite old" and the "bone-deep impulse to defend a self" from "giant wheeling circuses of panel discussions" felt less urgent than it did earlier in her life (Ryan, 2005, pp. 1-2). She also admits that her committed avoidance of such conferences was fueled in part by her personality. She writes,

It turns out I have an aversion to cooperative endeavors of all sorts. I couldn't imagine making a play or movie, for instance; so many people involved. I don't like orchestral music. I don't like team sports. I love the solitary, the hermetic, the cranky self-taught. Make mine the desert saints, the pole-sitters, the endurance cyclists, the artist who paints rocks cast from bronze so that they look exactly like the rocks they were cast from. (Ryan, 2005, p. 1)

Ryan's expression of fierce independence and her unapologetic preference for solitary endeavors offer keen insight into one of America's most accomplished living poets.

Ryan's reading habits also reflect her iconoclastic spirit and unflinching candor. Ryan explains,

One of the best ways to get started writing is to read something of thrilling quality. I never read poetry or fiction, and anything that smacks of usefulness—science or biography—is off-limits. Essentially, I read literary essays. I like superarrogant, high-level, brainy essays about aesthetics. I had a Nabakov jag for a couple of years: his *Lectures on Literature*. Kundera has two beautiful books of essays. There's also Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Herbert has that wonderful book *Still Life with Bridal*. Brodsky is another one. And Benjamin. (Fay, 2008, pp. 15-16)

Ryan has spoken openly about her disinterest in reading contemporary poetry, her belief that "there's too much poetry out there," and her dislike of hearing other poets read their work (Fay, 2008, p. 4). Not surprisingly, Ryan's greatest poetic influences are Marianne Moore and Emily Dickinson and she writes not for a contemporary audience but for the "noble dead" poets (Ryan, 2010).

Given Ryan's background, self-training as a poet, unconventional reading habits, and avoidance of the poetry workshop and creative writing programs, what distinguishes her writing from that of other contemporary poets? What did Ryan as a writer protect that did not "match the world" by avoiding the creative writing workshop and by participating instead in a self-imposed apprenticeship? What, if

anything, can we learn about “systematic creativity” from examining the work of an accomplished poet who operates outside of academe? (McGurl, 2010, p. 69).

Ryan’s relationship with cliché offers insight into her unique sensibility. The use of cliché in poetry is generally considered an indicator of inexperience or unoriginality. Clichés, by definition, are ready-made phrases that were once considered original and striking but that have lost their power through overuse. As a student in graduate writing program, I quickly learned that clichés were anathema to the members of a workshop. Not surprisingly, Ryan embraces and celebrates the cliché often using it as a jumping off point for her poems. A self-described “rehabilitator of clichés,” Ryan says, “I often find myself thinking in clichés. I’ll urge myself on with various bromides and chasten myself with others. When I want to write they’re one way to start thinking because they’re so metaphorically rich” (Fay, 2007, p. 7). She explains that her poems often begin “the way an oyster does, with an aggravation” and lead to an investigation of what an expression means. (Lund, 2004, p. 2). Her poem “It’s Always Darkest Before the Dawn” from *Say Uncle* (2000) is a classic example:

But how dark
 is darkest?
 Does it get
 jet—or tar—
 black; does it
 glint and increase

in hardness
 or turn viscous?
 Are there stages
 of darkness
 and chips
 to match against
 its increments,
 holding them
 up to our blindness,
 estimating when
 we'll have the
 night behind us?

(Ryan, 2010, p. 178)

“Its Always Darkest Before the Dawn” begins, like many of Ryan’s poems do, with an idea that is in the process of clarifying itself. The poem’s opening question “But how dark/ is darkest?” is a pragmatic philosophical reflection on the particulars of the cliché “it’s always darkest before the dawn.” The poem consists of three questions that playfully mine the quality and depth of night’s darkest moments. Collectively the questions interrupt our tendency to assume an aphoristic element in clichés. The interrogative mode works particularly well to recomplicate the oversimplified nature of cliché.

Arguably the second most stylistically unfashionable element in Ryan’s poetry besides cliché is her use of rhyme. As poetry critic Dwight Garner explains,

“How unhip is Kay Ryan? Much of her poetry rhymes, for God’s sake, something almost no one’s does anymore” (Garner, 2010, p. 1). Ryan is outspoken about her deep-rooted relationship with rhyme. She explains, “When I started writing nobody rhymed—it was in utter disrepute. Yet rhyme was a siren to me. I had this condition of things rhyming in my mind without my permission” (Fay, 2007, p. 3). About her use of rhyme early in her poetry career Ryan says, “I couldn’t take end-rhyme seriously, which meant I had to find other ways—I stashed my rhymes at the wrong ends of lines and in the middles—the front of one word would rhyme with the back of another one, or one word might be identical to three words” (Fay, 2007, p. 3). Ryan calls her intricate internal rhyme “recombinant,” borrowing the term from the field of genetics where new combinations of genetic material create recombinant cells. Like recombinant cells, Ryan’s rhyme is the product of snipping apart and reassembly. As Ryan explains it, “What’s recombinant rhyme? It’s like how they add a snip of the jellyfish’s glow-in-the-dark gene to bunnies and make them glow green; by snipping up pieces of sound and redistributing them throughout a poem I found I could get the poem to go a little bit luminescent” (Fay, 2007, p. 3). In her poem, “It’s Always Darkest Before the Dawn,” for example, Ryan rhymes the word “blindness” with the poem’s final line “night behind us.” In the twelfth and thirteenth lines of the same poem, Ryan assembles the unlikely sound pairing of “to match against” with “its increments.”

“The Excluded Animal,” a poem that considers animals excluded from the crèche, highlights Ryan’s unusual and inventive use of rhyme (Ryan, 1991, p. 8).

Only a certain
claque of beasts
is part of the
crèche racket

forming a
steamy-breathed
semicircle
around the
baby basket.

Anything more
exotic than
a camel
is out of luck
this season.

Not that the
excluded animals envy
the long-lashed
sycophants;

cormorants

don't toady,
 nor do toads
 adore anybody
 for any reason.

Nor do the
 unchosen alligators,
 grinning their
 three-foot grin
 as they laze
 in the blankety waters
 like the blankets on Him.

(Ryan, 2010, pp. 156-157)

Here she teases rhyme out the most unlikely places and constructs pockets of sound with a distinctive quirkiness. Particularly noteworthy rhymes include “crèche racket” with “baby basket,” “sycophants” with “cormorants,” “nor do” with “adore,” and “three-foot grin” with “blankets on Him.” Similarly inventive sound clusters can be found in virtually all of Ryan’s poems.

One of Ryan’s fundamental beliefs about rhyme is that it is generative. She told the audience at the 2010 Dodge Poetry Festival, “If you launch a boat it will want to survive” (Ryan, 2010). Ryan’s poem “Bait Goat” explores the generative nature of rhyme and its ability to attract the necessary components to ensure the survival of the poem’s triggering words.

There is a
distance where
magnets pull,
we feel, having
held them
back. Likewise
there is a
distance where
words attract.
Set one out
like a bait goat
and wait and
seven others
will approach.
But watch out:
Roving packs can
pull your word
away. You
find your stake
yanked and some
rough bunch
to thank.

(Ryan, 2010, p. 5)

The poem functions as a demonstration of the poem's subject which is the generative nature of language. The poem suggests that a single word works like a "bait goat" waiting for others to approach it and that "roving packs" of attracted words can "pull your word away" and ultimately interrupt a writer's preconceived intention. The poem addresses what Ryan calls the "magical property—maybe a mystical property—of rhyme" (Carty, 2006, p. 2). According to Ryan, "certain words seem to beg for a rhyme, beg to be rhymed" (Carty, 2006, p. 2). Of her need to "gratify that urge" Ryan explains that rhyme contributes to her work in unexpected ways because it "shakes [her] loose from [her] intentions" (Carty, 2006, p. 2). She refers to rhyme's generative power as a "gift" (Chai, 2011, p. 2).

While rhyme and cliché are arguably the two most unfashionable and yet distinctive elements in Ryan's poetry, the form of her poems and absence of the pronoun "I" are also noteworthy features that distinguish her work from that of other contemporary poets. One need only fan through any of Ryan's eight collections of poetry to recognize the shortness of her poems and the brevity of her lines. Most of Ryan's poems are less than twenty lines and each of her lines typically contains less than six syllables. In a review of *The Best of It* (2010) poetry critic Dwight Garner described Ryan's poems as "slim as runway models, so tiny you could almost tweet them" (Garner, 2010, p. 1). Others have compared Ryan's compact poems to the short humorous piano pieces of composer Erik Satie and to Faberge eggs.

Ryan attributes her fondness for short lines to the power they convey. She explains, “Edges are the most powerful parts of the poem. The more edges you have the more power you have. They make the poem more permeable, more exposed” (Fay, 2007, p. 9). Ryan’s poem “Say Uncle” provides a prime example of a poem’s edges at work.

Every day
you say,
Just one
more try.

Then another
irrecoverable
day slips by.

You will
say *ankle*,
you will
say *knuckle*;
why won't
you why
won't you
say *uncle*?

(Ryan, 2010, p. 149)

After referencing the idiomatic expression used to concede defeat in the title, Ryan launches into a witty game of words fueled by small units of language. Like “It’s Always Darkest Before the Dawn,” “Say Uncle” is a poem that playfully seeks clarification and that ends with a question. In just thirty words, forty syllables, and fifteen lines, Ryan mines the human impulse to endure. Enjambment and stand alone lines (lines that read in isolation offer their own unit of meaning) factor mightily in this small poem with muscle. The singleness expressed by the words “*Just one*” in the third line is undercut by the enjambment that tacks on the words “*more try*” in the fourth line. When the lines “Just one/ more try” are read in combination with the fifth line “Then another,” the poem departs further from the idea of a single effort and emphasizes instead multiple efforts fueled presumably by an unwillingness to concede defeat. When not read as a syntactical unit of meaning with “*Just one/ more try*,” “Then another” shifts into a notably darker register of meaning. The lines “Then another/ irrecoverable/ day slips by” address the futility of working fruitlessly to attain a desired end.

The sixth line “irrecoverable” is noteworthy not only because it is the only single word line in the poem but because its five unaccented syllables create a hard pause in what is otherwise a fast moving poem. The line “irrecoverable” is also noteworthy because of its unifying effect on the poem’s sounds. The “cover” in “irrecoverable” joins with the previous line’s “another,” an instance of Ryan’s self-described “recombinant rhyme.” In addition, the “-able” suffix in “irrecoverable” launches a parade of lines that end with “l” sounds (“will,” “will,” “*ankle*,” “*knuckle*,” “*uncle*”). The repetition of “You will” in lines eight and ten not only strengthen a

pattern of sound but, read as stand alone lines, add a layer of unexpected complexity. “You will” can be read to explain an individual’s attempt to bring about a desired outcome by an act of the will or it can be read simply as the speaker’s encouragement of the poem’s “you.” Read as an enjambed syntactical unit “You will/ say *ankle*” offers a humorous and playful statement that helps to momentarily pull the word “uncle” away from its idiomatic expression long enough to disrupt the familiar in language. Just as Ryan rehabilitates clichés, here she skillfully dismantles an idiom. She isolates “uncle” from its idiom unit and partners it with the two syllable words “ankle” and “knuckle” that are related only through sound.

The gymnastic collaboration of sounds and clever manipulations of syntax give the poem both a feeling of playfulness and also an existential heft. The poem asks us to consider why not to concede defeat when the sound of the word “uncle” (but not its meaning) is so closely related to the words for common body parts. She juxtaposes sound with meaning in a way that both entertains and disarms. Amazingly, Ryan does this with only twenty distinct and thirty total words.

Asked if her short lines are a medium for the ideas in her work Ryan responded,

...one of the many things I admire about [William Carlos] Williams, and a thing that I love about poetry and aspire to have in my poetry, is a terrific sense of lightness. I can’t stand the pounding, drumming, assaulting, kind of poetry. I just love the unemphasized casualness in Williams. I think I associate the lightness of the appearance on the page with another kind of

lightness—not lightness of intention, but lightness of delivery. (Carty, 2006, p. 1)

Lightness in the form of line length, poem length, and delivery reflect Ryan's aversion to what she calls "emotional heat" in poetry (Carty, 2006, p. 3). She explains,

When I was first thinking about being a poet, I was very reluctant because I didn't want the kind of exposure that many poets seemed to welcome. I didn't want the romantic posture. I didn't want confession. I didn't want to be Anne Sexton. I was embarrassed by all of that, and yet I felt very drawn to write. I had to find a way to talk about things that mattered to me in a cooler way—chill the material in order to work with it. (Carty, 2006, p. 3)

As a reader Ryan says that she feels "very easily assaulted by work that radiates a lot of emotional heat" (Carty, 2006, p. 3). The emotional guardedness or coolness in Ryan's work is yet another aspect that distinguishes her writing from that of the vast majority of her contemporaries. Ryan is fastidious in her avoidance of the pronoun "I," a pronoun especially linked to the Confessional movement and the McPoems Donald Hall lambasted. Of the 220 poems in *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems* (2010), only sixteen contain the pronoun "I."¹⁶

¹⁶ Interestingly, Ryan chose not to include in *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems* (2010) the few poems from *Strangely Marked Metal* (1985) that are uncharacteristically personal. For example, in the poem "L'Abandon ou les Deux Amies" the speaker expresses her love for another woman as "an easy voluptuousness, a soft wash/of light on garments./Their limbs/may intertwine."

Perhaps the most personal poem included in *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems* (2010) from this resolutely impersonal poet is an elegy titled “After Zeno” written when she was twenty years old for her deceased father.

When he was

I was.

But I still am

and he is still.

Where is is

when is is was?

I have an is

but where is his?

Now here—

no where:

such a little

fatal pause.

There is no sense

in past tense.

(Ryan, 2010, p. 29)

Here Ryan invokes Zeno’s paradox of the arrow to futilely prove her father’s eternal presence through the infinite divisibility of time. This forty-five word poem written

in 1965 provides early evidence of the wordplay and compression that have become hallmarks of her writing. The diction in “After Zeno” is simple and stripped-down using only twenty-four distinct words and only one disyllabic word in the poem’s body (the other forty-two are monosyllabic). The wordplay relies on subtle shifts of language. For example, she establishes her father’s absence in the lines “But I still am/and he is still.” Using the dual denotative meanings of the word “still” and shifting the syntax in the two lines so that “still” transforms from adverb to adjective, Ryan cleverly illuminates the divide between life and death. Similarly, with the switch of a space to divide words in lines nine and ten, Ryan transforms “Now here—” to “no where.” The dash here serves as a kind of representation of “such a little/fatal pause.” Though the economy of language and wordplay in “After Zeno” are representative of Ryan’s poetics, the subject matter marks a distinct departure from her typical work.

More typical examples of Ryan’s subject matter can be found in Ryan’s poems “Reverse Drama” and “Blandeur.” Both poems address a desire to dampen life’s emotional intensity and to offer sensory relief. The poems can also be read as a reflection of Ryan’s distaste for heightened, revelatory, or sentimental displays of emotion in poetry.

REVERSE DRAMA

Lightning, but not bright.

Thunder, but not loud.

Sometimes something
 in the sky connects
 to something in the ground
 in ways we don't expect
 and more or less miss except
 through reverse drama:
 things were heightened
 and now they're calmer.

(Ryan, 2010, p. 247)

The opening lines “Lightning, but not bright./ Thunder, but not loud” work as a kind of metaphor for the intellectual heft and simultaneous linguistic lightness present in Ryan’s poems. “Blandeur,” the second example of a poem that addresses emotional intensity, uses an invented word for its title that is a derivative of “grandeur.”

BLANDEUR

If it please God,
 let less happen.
 Even out Earth's
 rondure, flatten
 Eiger, blanden
 the Grand Canyon.
 Make valleys

slightly higher,
widen fissures
to arable land,
remand your
terrible glaciers
and silence
their calving,
halving or doubling
all geographical features
toward the mean.
Unlean against our hearts.
Withdraw your grandeur
from these parts.

(Ryan, 2010, p. 158)

The poem addresses the intolerable grandeur of the world and the emotions that come with it. Ryan explains, “Blandeur is something I seek a great deal of—a relief from intensity—so it became a poem asking for relief from intensity. It became a little prayer to make life less vivid” (Carty, 2006, p. 5). In an interview with Jo Reed, Ryan shared a story connected to “Blandeur.” She told Reed, “Once a couple lept from the Golden Gate Bridge and left in their car a note, which said, among other things, ‘Life was too vivid for us.’ And this is a poem for people who find life excessively vivid” (Reed, n.d., p. 3). In addition, the household in which Ryan was raised emphasized quietude over excitement. She explains, “My mother was quite a

nervous person and couldn't stand much stimulation or excitement. We didn't have the radio on, certainly didn't have the television on. We lived quietly" (Lehrer, 2009). Ryan is well aware that the "seeking-relief-from-intensity" commonly found in her poems is anything but common in the larger poetry community (Carty, 2006, p. 5). She explains, "I think it's probably a highly unpopular sort of position to take. I think to be so disposed puts me in a really tiny minority of people, but they may make up more of the poetry reading public than the Roller Derby public" (Carty, 2006, p. 5). This proponent of rhyme and cliché has once again unapologetically assumed an unpopular stance within the poetry community.

Part of what may have also attributed to Ryan's slow ascent as a writer may be precisely this "highly unpopular sort of position" towards intensity (Carty, 2006, p. 5). Specifically, Ryan's tonally diminished or timid poems undermine the expectation that "a poem is not passive; it is meant to communicate emotion" (Dobyns, 1996, p. 157). *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) defines a poem as "an affective or expressive instrument... meant to move its audience" (Preminger, 1993, p. 1293). How do Ryan's poems communicate emotion and how does tone function in her work? Stephen Dobyns explains that, "We go to a work of literature for the emotional life within it, and tone becomes our guide within that labyrinth" (Dobyns, 1996, p. 154). Tone, the speaker's attitude toward the subject matter or the emotional distance between speaker and subject matter, controls how a reader understands a word's denotative and connotative values. More largely, tone controls our emotional understanding of the poem as a whole. Dobyns defines tone as "one of the four general linguistic qualities making up a

poem's form" (the others include "the relation between stressed and unstressed syllables," sound, and pacing) (Dobyns, 1996, p. 152). To understand tone, Dobyns encourages readers to imagine a diagram of an atom with the poem's subject matter as its nucleus. Swirling around the nucleus in four distinct orbits are "the entire range of possible emotion," "different types of voice" such as the ironic or the gullible, "aspects of conditionality," and the "intensity or distance" of emotion, voice, and conditionality (Dobyns, 1996, p. 152). Dobyns' suggested diagram can be pared down to simply the nucleus and the "intensity or distance" of emotion to best understand how tone functions in Ryan's work. In her poetry, Ryan typically processes emotion through intellect, making the emotional distance from the subject matter exceptionally wide. At their most emotionally distant, Ryan's poems can feel as if they are resisting association with a human maker or as if their intent is to question or inform rather than to move.

In "Blandeur," for example, the matter-of-fact manner of suggesting a lessening of intensity becomes part of the subject matter. The imperative mood of the poem's verbs such as "even," "flatten," "blanden," "remand," "silence," "unlean," and "withdraw" suggest a desire for dampening and diminishment. Despite the unorthodox nature of the requests, there is no evidence explaining why the speaker would like the earth's rondure evened or Eiger flattened. As readers we can only make the psychological leap to imagine the emotional impulse the drove Ryan not to remain silent about the poem's subject matter. The difficulty in determining the poem's tone stems in part from the challenge in understanding the speaker's connection to the subject matter. The tone is "blandened" enacting the kind of

emotional distance between the speaker and the readers that the speaker longs for in life. Ryan's management of craft elements such as rhyme and line length are so masterful that they overshadow the little perceivable emotion that exists in the poem. While the diminished tone arguably works well in a poem about relief from intensity, I believe Ryan's characteristic lack of engagement with emotion distances her from readers in ways that may have contributed to her late rise as a poet.

Tonally, Ryan's poems rarely meet the expectation that a poem works as "an affective or expressive instrument... meant to move its audience" (Preminger, 1993, p. 1293). Any movement that occurs is most often cerebral in nature as affect is almost always mediated by intellect in Ryan's work.¹⁷ As critic Dwight Garner explains of Ryan's poems, "their moral and intellectual bite blindsides you" (Garner, 2010, p. 2).

The conglomeration of Ryan's distinct and often unpopular approach toward managing cliché, line length, rhyme, and tone make her a surprisingly difficult poet to fully appreciate. Dana Gioia writes,

One can read most new poets quite easily. But a genuinely original poet requires some recalibration of our ear and eye- both inner and outer. Ryan's work may not seem difficult, but it is. She challenges the reader in unusual ways. She is not obscure but sly, dense, elliptical, and suggestive. She plays

¹⁷ I believe Ryan's management of tone reflects the influence of Marianne Moore. Critic Randal Jarrell's commentary on Moore could just as easily be applied to Ryan. Jarrell writes, "Her [Moore's] restraint, her lack—her wonderful lack—of arbitrary intensity or violence, of sweep and overwhelmingness and size, of cant, of sociological significance, and so on, made her unattractive both to some of the conservative readers of our age and to some of the advanced ones" (Jarrell, 1953, p. 187)

with her readers- not maliciously or gratuitously but to rouse them from conventional response and expectation. (Gioia, 1998, p. 1)

Part of the dilemma left unspoken by Donald Hall is that homogenized poetry conditions readers to become accustomed to the conventions of the McPoem and may leave them ill-equipped to read an “outsider” poet such as Ryan. The necessary “recalibration” Gioia speaks of may be a skill undeveloped by readers used to the predictability of McPoetry.

While it may have taken time for the reading public to discover, warm up to, and recalibrate their reading habits to Ryan, literary history demonstrates that outsiders often excel. Emily Dickinson, John Keats, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, William Butler Yeats, Thomas Hardy, and D.H. Lawrence, for example, were largely considered outsiders during their time and did not attend a major university. I have little doubt that with time, Kay Ryan will join this group of celebrated outsiders and cement her place in the literary canon.

Chapter 4: Star Power: Jorie Graham's Influence on Contemporary American Poetry

Clinging to the shark
is a sucker shark,
attached to which
and feeding off its crumbs
is one still tinier...

Thomas Lux, "Remora"

While Kay Ryan's poetry is rooted in an implicit humanist notion of an autonomous unified self, a reigning style now exists in contemporary poetry that interrogates such ideological and epistemological assumptions and emphasizes the instability of language's meaning. Questions concerning epistemology and theories of language are central to a subset of contemporary American poets who, whether or not they openly align themselves with poststructural theory that posit such questions, treat the self and identity not as givens but as unstable components worthy of exploration. These poets oppose the Enlightenment assumption that there is a universal or essential element of human nature that transcends historical, social, and cultural influences. They write in opposition to what critic Joseph Thomas describes as "a mode that evokes the liberal humanist tradition by implying a coherent, whole, and self-knowing author, or perhaps better a 'lyric speaker'" (Thomas, 2007, p. 25).¹⁸ According to Thomas, "This mode disguises the artificiality of the poet's language" (Thomas, 2007, p. 25).

¹⁸ It is important to note that "lyric" is a complicated term. This is largely because it has been overextended to include an increasingly wide range of poetry. It is the most broadly inclusive category in poetry. What was used as a generic term in the Alexandrian period for any poem meant to be sung lost its basis in musical presentation during the Renaissance. The Romantic movement championed the lyric but also attributed to confusion about its definition. Wordsworth and Poe, for

This chapter seeks to explore how creative writing programs work as disseminators of ideologically based aesthetic values. Though programs across the country have, since their inception, served as incubators for a variety of styles, this chapter examines just one dominant mode that is alive and well in American creative programs today. Styles may come and go but the university system ensures a steady stream of graduate students in creative writing programs eager to adopt the latest literary trends. How then does the creative writing program act as a kind of recruiting agent for particular literary styles (depending on historical contexts and moments) and how do these programs, in some instances, function as a breeding ground of aesthetic conformism?

In an essay published in 1998 in *Boston Review* on poet Susan Wheeler's book *Smokes*, critic Stephen Burt coined the term "Ellipticism" to identify a previously unnamed subset of poets who share a particular group of aesthetic values (Burt, 1998, p. 1). Burt writes,

Elliptical poets try to manifest a person who speaks the poem and reflects the poet while using all the verbal gizmos developed over the last few decades to undermine the coherence of speaking selves. They are post-avant-gardist, or

example, equated the word "lyric" with "poetry." According to the *New Princeton Handbook of Poetic* terms, the lyric in its "modern meaning, is a type of poetry which is mechanically representational of a musical architecture and which is thematically representational of the poet's sensibility as evidenced in a fusion of conception of image" (Brogan, 1994, p. 173). Brevity, subjectivity, interiority, imagination, emotion, and emphasis on image are generally considered components of the lyric. Holman and Harmon (1986) define it as "a form that is the personal expression of personal emotion imaginatively phrased" (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 283). In the discussion of "elliptical poets" in this chapter, the term "lyric" refers to poetry that privileges interiority and that avoids confession and clear speech.

post-‘postmodern’: they have read (most of them) Stein’s heirs, and the ‘language writers,’¹⁹ and have chosen to do otherwise. (Burt, 1998, p. 1)

In a book of poetry criticism published eleven years later, Burt elaborated on his definition of “Ellipticism.” He writes,

Elliptical poets are always hinting, punning, or swerving away from a never-quite-unfolded back-story; they are easier to process in parts than in wholes. They believe provisionally in identities (in one—or in at least one—‘I’ per poem), but they suspect the I’s they invoke: they admire disjunction and confrontation, but they know how a little can go a long way. Ellipticists seek the authority of the rebellious; they want to challenge their readers, violate decorum, surprise or explode assumptions about what belongs in a poem or what matters in life, and to do so while meeting traditional lyric goals.²⁰ Their favorite attitudes are desperately extravagant, or tough-guy terse, or defiantly childish: they don’t believe in or seek a judicious tone. (Burt, 2009, p. 346)

Burt observes that “We have now, in 2004, more poetry of the sort I’d like to call Elliptical than we had in 1999, and many more books that exhibit its features” (Burt,

¹⁹ The “Language Poets” emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They were named after the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* run by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews from 1978 to 1981. While the poems and poets classified under this school vary considerably, they typically reject epiphanies, deemphasize emotion and personality, avoid narrative, and embrace difficulty.

²⁰ Burt does not explain what he means by “traditional lyric goals” (Burt, 2009, p. 346). This omission is an important oversight because of the aforementioned overextended use of the term “lyric” in contemporary poetry. I believe that he uses “traditional lyric goals” to mean the expression of self including emotions.

2009, p. 354). How then does the university serve as a vehicle for the growth of a movement such as Ellipticism?

According to Burt, Ellipticism arose partially as an alternative to models available to poets in the late 1980s. At that time universities and their accompanying literary journals largely promoted autobiographical free verse. Young poets who wanted more intellectual complication than found in autobiographical free verse at the time and who also wanted poetry that welcomed the kind of lyric sentiment not found in Language Poetry, sought a new model (Burt, 2004, p. 4). For such writers, poet Jorie Graham provided a desirable blend of difficulty in the form of philosophical ambition and linguistic inventiveness as well as a strong presence of emotion and personality. The fact that Graham taught at Iowa Writers' Workshop during this time, allowed emerging writers to easily imitate her style.

Burt cites poet Jorie Graham as being the most influential elliptical poet. He explains,

Jorie Graham has become the unavoidable presence in other people's styles, partly because she long taught at Iowa and gets lots of press... The most exciting younger poets have read Graham *and* do not imitate her; like her, they treat voice and self and identity neither as givens nor as illusions, but as problems, phenomena, poems can explore and limn. (Burt, 2009, p. 346)

Graham has a long list of poetry critics who champion her work and assert that she is one of the most important American poets of the post-war generation. David Orr has called her "a burnished idol of the poetry world" and a poet with "good looks, sophistication, and elite connections" (Orr, 2005, p. 1). Four years before he

married Graham, poet and fellow Harvard faculty member Peter Sacks wrote a glowing review in *The New York Times* of Graham's Pulitzer prize winning collection *The Dream of the Unified Field* (1994). He commented, "Her poems are philosophically and historically alert, and their acts of thought arise with almost instinctual urgency from an astonished responsiveness that in itself becomes part of what she names 'the vivid performance of the present'" (Sacks, 1996, p. 1). He also called her poetry "among the most sensuously embodied and imaginative writing we have" (Sacks, 1996, p. 3). The most powerful of Graham's proponents is undoubtedly Helen Vendler, the A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard. To understand Graham's ascent and influential role in promoting Ellipticism in creative writing programs, it is important to first examine Vendler's role in enshrining Graham in the poetry canon.

In a *New York Times* article titled "A Woman of Power in the Ivory Tower" (1997), Dinitia Smith describes Helen Vendler as a "kingmaker" and "arguably the most powerful poetry critic in America" (Smith, 1997, p. 1). According to Smith, Vendler has "an encyclopedic knowledge of her field" and a "mimetic memory" that allows her to recite "all 154 of Shakespeare's sonnets" (Smith, 1997, p. 1). Rachel Donadio calls Vendler "a school of one, an impassioned aesthete who pays minute attention to the structures and words that are a poet's genetic code" (Donadio, 2006, p. 2). Over the course of Vendler's career she has served as a member of the Pulitzer Prize board, has served on the grant panel for the Guggenheim Foundation, has been a nominator for the MacArthur Foundation "genius" awards, and has selected and reviewed poets for *The New York Times Book Review*. In addition, she was the first

woman to be appointed to the rank of professor at Harvard University. For nearly the past fifty years, the 78 year-old Vendler has arguably been the most powerful arbiter of the contemporary poetry scene.

Vendler is staunchly protective of what she views as literature's best interests. According to Smith,

Helen Vendler is the most articulate spokeswoman for the 'close reading' method, part of the tradition of the New Criticism, which dates to the 1930's. This approach examines texts not for moral messages or historical and biographical allusions, but for internal structures and stylistic devices, for the way the words are put together. Armed with that philosophy, she adheres to an unflinching hierarchy of what is worthy in literature, and who is entitled to comment on it. (Smith, 1997, p. 1)

Not surprisingly, Vendler's strong opinions have earned her numerous detractors. Current United States poet laureate Philip Levine, for example, told Smith in an interview, "Vendler is an elitist the likes of which we've never had before. The way to get ahead is to cotton up to these ladies [Helen Vendler and Marjorie Perloff]" (Smith, 1997, p. 2). A former auto plant worker whose work focuses on industrial Detroit's working class, Levine has been called "one of America's great narrative poets" by Librarian of Congress James Billington (Library of Congress, 2011, p. 1). It is not surprising that a poet known for his plainspoken lyricism, simple narratives, colloquial diction and syntax, and accessibility has drawn the biting criticism of Vendler. In a review of Levine's poetry collection *One for the Rose* (1981) Vendler asked, "Is there any compelling reason why it [Levine's writing] should be called

poetry?" (Vendler, 1981, p. 2). The tension between Levine as the working person's poet and Vendler as an ivory tower empress illuminates not only a stylistic divide but an ideological divide about poetry's purposes and its intended audiences.

While no one questions Vendler's influence, her assessments of some contemporary poets have not gone unquestioned. Rachel Donadio writes, "Some have questioned her championing of Jorie Graham, in whose work Vendler sees intricacies and trilingual rhythms (Graham was raised speaking English, French and Italian) where others see opacity" (Donadio, 2006, p. 2). Poet Richard Howard explains, "I think Helen's response is entirely genuine, but she's overblown Jorie Graham's achievement to the point where it irritates or provokes resistance" (Schiff, 1997, p. 62). Given Vendler's fierce intellect, prominent stature, and decades of experience it is difficult not to wonder whether she has a gift of perception that allows her to understand Graham better than most or if Vendler's desire for complicated, ambitious poetry motivates her to force sense out of opacity. She is outspoken about her boredom with the "unimaginative exposition or derivative confessions" that she feels dominate "so much of contemporary verse" (Vendler, 2008, p. 4). She makes no secret of the excitement she finds in Graham's "inventiveness and unpredictability" (Vendler, 2008, p. 4). Vendler acknowledges that "to some readers Graham seems difficult, diffuse, oblique, unnervingly changeable" and that "it is true that one does not walk easily into her poems, since they are not, in the usual sense, openly confessional, political, or ideological" (Vendler, 2008, p. 1). Vendler explains, "she's not playing certain welcome tunes. She expects you to be as rapid as she is" (Schiff, 1997, p. 67). Vendler believes that

much of the criticism of Graham's difficulty stems from the fact that "Graham is an intellectual poet writing in a society hostile to intellectuality; her range of reference and liberty of expression have sometimes baffled reviewers" (Vendler, 2008, p. 2). She has even gone so far as to say that Graham "always makes sense, whatever her acrobatics" (Vendler, 2008, p. 4). Vendler leads one to believe that readers of Graham's work need only sufficient intellect and serious commitment to appreciate her poetry.

Though Vendler denies assertions that she is responsible for the success of individual poets, Jorie Graham is widely viewed as her protégé. Vendler first met Graham in 1983 shortly after Graham's second collection, *Erosion* (1983), began to receive widespread attention. At the time, Vendler was teaching at Harvard and Graham was at Radcliffe as part of a Bunting Institute Fellowship. According to Stephen Schiff in a piece for *The New Yorker*, Graham decided to sit in on one of Vendler's classes but missed two weeks of class due to injuries sustained in a car accident (Schiff, 1997, p. 65). Vendler explains, "But then [Graham] came to class with these stitched-up scars on her face. And I thought, how extraordinary, because most women would hide, with such big red stitches and lumps and scars. She just sailed serenely on. I quite admire that" (Schiff, 1997, p. 65). According to Schiff, Vendler and Graham have since developed a friendship and "Graham sometimes seeks out Vendler's response to her poems before publishing them" (Schiff, 1997, p. 62).

Vendler's influential role in Graham's ascent is undeniable. James Longenbach explains, "Graham has become, due in part to the heartfelt

endorsements of Helen Vendler, the most prominent American poet born after the Second World War” (Gardner, 2005, p. 86). No critic other than Vendler has written as extensively on Graham’s work and has given it such consistent praise. For example, in an essay that examines the unit of the individual line in Graham’s work Vendler writes, “Jorie Graham began as a writer of short poems in short lines, lines with a hesitant rhythm so seductive that one’s heart, reproducing those poems, almost found a new way to beat” (Gardner, 2005, p. 42). The suggestion from America’s most powerful poetry critic that Graham’s poems might help the human heart find a “new way to beat” is nothing short of a glowing endorsement.²¹ In addition, in her scholarly work Vendler has endorsed Graham’s work by pairing critical essays of it with those that examine the work of established members of the canon. For example, Vendler’s book *The Breaking of Style* (1996) examines Seamus Heaney, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Graham. The inclusion of Graham with Heaney and Hopkins points to Vendler’s dogged effort to carve out space in the canon for her protégé. In addition, Vendler named a collection of essays about lyric poetry *Soul Says* (1995) after the final poem in Graham’s collection *Region of Unlikeness* (1991). Vendler’s book begins with the following lines from Graham’s poem “Soul Says,”

(This is a form of matter of matter she sang)

(When the hurry is stopped) (and held) (but not extinguished) (no)

²¹ In an interview with Henri Cole for *The Paris Review* Vendler said that the first thing that struck her about Graham’s work was its rhythm. She explains, “I am convinced her rhythms come from Italian, or maybe from French; it’s some foreign rhythm that she has brought into English. I hadn’t ever heard that rhythm before” (Vendler & Cole, 1996, p. 4).

Given Vendler's enthusiasm for Graham's work it is no surprise that Vendler was instrumental in appointing Graham to arguably the most prestigious academic chair in American letters. In 1999, after sixteen years of teaching at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, Graham left Iowa to become the first woman to hold Harvard's Boylston professorship in the Department of English and American Literature and Language. She replaced Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney and she holds the position currently.

Indeed, Graham seems to share a kind of symbiotic relationship with many critics. Literary scholarship typically proposes ways to understand literary texts. Given that criticism is interpretation and that Graham's work is known for, among other things, its opacity and syntactical confusion, she has provided critics with a buffet of material. In addition, Graham's poetry raises large philosophical questions that provide critics knowledgeable of Saussure, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Lacan with a richness and depth of material uncommon in contemporary American poetry. According to David Orr, the fact that Graham's poetry is "ostentatiously thinky...not only pleases certain parts of poetry's largely academic audience, but it soothes the art form's nagging status anxiety (anything involving this much Heidegger must be important)" (Orr, 2005, p. 2). As poet Mark Strand explains, "[Graham] writes big poetry. It's so dense and so crowded with thinking. Too many poets write a kind of chatter, and after you've finished the poem you feel you know everything this person is going to say for the next ten years" (Schiff, 1997, p. 62). Add to Graham's intellectual heft the fact that she is a wildly ambitious poet

with a mind for macroscopic issues, and her critics have even more to ponder. As James Longenbach explains, “For 30 years Jorie Graham has engaged the whole human contraption — intellectual, global, domestic, apocalyptic — rather than the narrow emotional slice of it most often reserved for poems.” (Longenbach, 2008, p. 1). Adam Kirsch astutely explains why Jorie Graham, “who is among the most difficult writers, in any genre, in contemporary American literature...has been received with virtually unanimous enthusiasm, even though hardly enough calendar time has passed for her poems to be fully understood by most readers” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 36). Kirsch writes,

The reason, I think, is that Graham writes about important and difficult subjects that most poets do not approach. Her poems are not mired in personal history and group identity; they treat nothing less than epistemology and metaphysics. And this makes them well suited to critics, who instinctively ask what a poem is about rather than what it is. Indeed, the key to understanding Graham’s poetry is that, more so than even most Modernist poetry, it lives and breathes on the level of theory, with corresponding diminishment of its phenomenal presence. Graham’s verse demands ‘readings’ even as it resists reading. (Kirsch, 2000, p. 36)

Given its scope and complexity, Graham’s writing is endlessly generative for critics. Put simply, Graham writes poems that necessitate literary scholarship and those bestowed with power by their institution or literary journal in turn validate and bolster Graham’s body of work.

Graham's detractors have a less favorable view of her close connections with influential critics and poets. An unnamed poet told journalist Stephen Schiff, "I just think it's really kind of disgraceful. Jorie Graham is extremely courting of people who can be useful to her, extremely flattering. She keeps all her little networks in good repair—other poets, older poets, people in a position to do her good" (Schiff, 1997, p. 62).

Still, there are many who argue that Graham's success is well deserved and that her prominence has benefited the entire poetry community. For example, Robert Casper,²² the program director of the Poetry Society of America and the publisher of *jubilat*, explains that Graham's strengths extend beyond her work as a poet. He writes,

Graham's new title at Harvard fits: her gift for rhetoric and oratory is unrivaled among America's poets, as proven by her brilliant lectures and readings at colleges, universities, literary centers, and conferences across the country. She is the kind of speaker one can imagine getting everyone and anyone – from farmers to heads of state – to love poetry, and the kind of teacher who would prove invaluable to both beginning students and experienced talents. At Iowa, Graham became the guiding force of the poetry program. Now, at Harvard, a generation of young writers is being wowed by her pedagogy. She is known to spend an hour in workshop on a single poem

²² Robert Casper is also the husband of Elliptical poet and University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop graduate Matthea Harvey. This excerpt comes from an introduction in the winter 2001-2002 edition of *Ploughshares* that was edited by Jorie Graham and in which three of Caspar's poems and three of Harvey's poems appeared.

– trying to get at, and work with, its underlying impulse. She moves deftly from poetics to prosody in her critiques, and with a focus that makes her reading all the more powerful. One-on-one, she bedazzles her students with insights and revisions – and she’s helped turn many an M.F.A. thesis into a prize-winning first book. (Casper, 2001, p. 1)

Simply put, Graham is highly regarded by a powerful segment of the poetry community and has wide influence as a lecturer and professor.

Graham’s accomplishments as a poet are nothing short of impressive. She cemented her status as a rising star in the poetry community in September 1981 when she appeared on the cover of *American Poetry Review* (critic Daniel McGuiness likens this honor to a musician appearing on the cover of *Rolling Stone*). Since then, Graham has published ten books of poems, an oeuvre that includes more than five-hundred poems. She has garnered nearly every major award given to American poets including a Pulitzer Prize for *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974-1994* (1996), a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship, a 1979 Discovery/ *The Nation* award, the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and various Guggenheim, Whiting, and National Endowment of the Arts grants. In addition, Graham served as one of twelve chancellors of The Academy of American Poets from 1997 to 2003 and edited the anthologies *Earth Took of Earth: 100 Great Poems of the English Language* (1999) and *The Best American Poetry 1990* (1990). Her work is widely translated in Europe and her work has been published in England as well as the United States. She served as the poetry editor of *Crazyhorse* and the *Colorado Review* and has been a

contributing editor at *Ploughshares*, *Boston Review*, *Conjunctions*, and *Denver Quarterly*. She has judged numerous book contests, including the Walt Whitman Award and the National Poetry Series²³ and she founded the DIA Center reading series in New York City.

Graham's background sheds considerable light on the work of this trilingual, cultured, and highly intellectual poet. Robert Casper describes Graham as "the kind of poet whose life is nothing less than cinematic" (Casper, 2001, p. 1). Graham was born in New York City in 1950 to Irish-American journalist Curtis Bill and Jewish-American sculptor Beverly Stoll Pepper. She was raised in Rome, Italy where her father was a war correspondent and the head of the Rome bureau for *Newsweek* magazine. Her artist mother became famous for her totemic structures. In Italy Graham attended the first Montessori school and then the Lycée Chateaubriand de Rome. As a teenager she helped out on Antonioni films and socialized with an array of writers, artists, and filmmakers who were family friends. Graham studied philosophy at the Sorbonne until she was eventually expelled for her involvement in student protests. She completed her undergraduate degree at New York University where she double-majored in film and classics and studied with Haig Monnogian and Martin Scorsese. It was while studying at New York University that Graham

²³ Graham's participation as a judge in contests has been the source of considerable controversy. In January 1999, a year before she married Peter Sacks, Graham chose his manuscript "O Wheel" as the winner of the University of Georgia Contemporary Poetry series contest. The now defunct website Foetry.com that aimed to "bring some much needed attention to the fraud, favor-trading, and corruption that have led to the marginalization and commodification of American poetry and the homogenization of its poets" targeted Graham and made public her pattern of awarding prizes to former students from the Iowa Writers' Workshop (n.d., p.1). Many poetry competitions have since adopted the "Jorie Graham rule" which prevents judges from selecting their own students.

passed a class taught by M.L. Rosenthal and was drawn to the sounds of a T.S. Eliot poem. For Graham, hearing a snippet of Eliot's poem was a defining moment that changed the trajectory of her life and career. Graham went on to earn a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. After completing graduate school, Graham taught in Kentucky, northern California, and New York before finally returning to the University of Iowa in 1983. Graham has a daughter with the poet James Galvin and is married to poet and fellow Harvard professor Peter Sacks.

What is it that distinguishes Graham's work and led to her influential role in official verse culture? In answering these questions, I will rely on Graham's own statements about her writing as an entry point for understanding the thinking that underlies what is a difficult and often an incomprehensible body of poetry. Next, I will discuss distinguishing features of Graham's work using Stephen Burt's (2009) categorization of Ellipticism as my organizing principle. Finally, I will attempt to trace some of these distinguishing features in the work of other Elliptical poets who have been heavily influenced by Graham.

In an interview about her collection *Sea Change* (2008), Graham describes her writing in relationship to the expectations of most readers of poetry. She explains, "I do not expect its reception to be easy. How could it be? We have come to expect most of our poets to be entertaining, distracting, or when really gifted, we have expected of them primarily the attentive scrutiny of the intimate, lyric life" (Wengen, 2008, p. 1). Graham's poetry disrupts these expectations though, to be fair, there are intimate, lyrical moments in much of her work. Her essay titled "Poetic Statement: At the Border" (2002) offers insight into the thinking that guides

her writing process, the importance of what she characterizes as a poet's "character," her preferences in poetry, her ideas about trustworthiness, and the limits of language. Her statement also provides an introduction to the fundamental lack of clarity in her writing. In discussing her process she explains,

As a possible working rudder, for my own use, I would say I try, in my acts of composition, to experience subjectivity and objectivity at their most frayed and fruitful and morally freighted juncture. I try to do so as 'honestly' as I can—as I believe that accurate representation of this juncture is possible, and that character is involved in approaching that border. (Graham, 2002, p. 146)

What does it mean to "experience subjectivity and objectivity at their most frayed and fruitful and morally freighted juncture"? I do not know. One has the sense that such a statement is important without understanding precisely what it means. Even this oblique prose statement is wildly more comprehensible than much of her poetry.

In contrast, Graham's discussion of "character" is delightfully intelligible. She writes,

Character: good faith, generosity towards the world (when it comes to letting go of some ego, for example); admission of the *sensation* of defeat into the thinking process without having to turn immediately to defensive action (irony, for example); effort; allowing and then taking responsibility for, ambition; regard for one's elders; admission of the fear of joy; admission of the fear of power; power; and, finally, courage—right there at the core of the

act of composition—the courage not to let up on the belief in language; right there at the core, feeling the essential self, not being afraid of being ‘found out’ by philosophy; not using intelligence to protect from that sensation of bedrock unknowing, fundamental empty-handedness. (Graham, 2002, p. 146)

According to her statement, Graham has a deep commitment to language, a dislike of irony, an investment in the act of composition, an unwillingness to use intelligence or philosophy as a shield, and a respect for not knowing.

What, according to Graham, does she enjoy most in her favorite poetry? She explains, “If there is anything I love most, in the poems I love, it is the audible braiding of bravery, that essential empty-handedness, and that willingness to be taken by surprise, all in one voice. It is what makes the ‘human’ sound to me. Another soul speaking across the distance—or just the difference—to me (Graham, 2002, p. 146). While it is unclear to me what Graham means by the auditorily satisfying phrase “the audible braiding of bravery,” I understand that she appreciates earnestness, vulnerability, and not knowing.

Graham’s definition of “trustworthiness” sheds light on the shifts in style that have been a fundamental aspect of her collective body of writing. She writes:

As for the trustworthiness—or even the possibility—of the experience of reality: I often feel like Johnson refuting Berkeley²⁴—my toe kicking the

²⁴ Berkeley was an Irish philosopher who advanced a theory called “immaterialism.” It is a theory that denies the material existence of everyday objects. He believed that the material items in the world around us exist only as ideas in the minds of perceivers and these items cannot exist without being perceived. Samuel Johnson attempted a refutation of Berkeley’s theory by kicking his foot against a large rock.

stone. The world is there, but the border between the self and the world is, as I see it, a differently fluid juncture according to each poem's occasion. I 'choose' occasions, therefore, with a mind to keeping the problem—with all its moral, political, spiritual, and aesthetic implications—as alive to me as possible. Shifts in my 'style' are a large part of that process. (Graham, 2002, p. 147)

Graham's explanation of trustworthiness points to her unwillingness to commit to a particular style or impose neat and clear parameters on her writing. She does not make a claim on the experience of reality or acknowledge a consistent border between the self and the world. She actively entertains contradiction and simultaneity. Unanswerable questions rather than absolutes anchor her writing and sometimes contribute to what critic David Orr describes as, "fogginess that has been a chronic problem in her work" (Orr, 2005, p. 3).

Graham's repeated use of the word "occasion" points to her fundamental belief about the origin of a poem. Graham believes that a poem almost always starts in occasion and that the occasion is the catalyst that compels one to have an experience. For Graham, the poem is not a record of an experience or the interpretation of its occasion but rather, as Wallace Stevens says, "an act of the mind in the process of learning what will suffice" (Graham, 2010). Like Stevens, Graham believes that, "the poem is the cry of its occasion" and like Coleridge she believes, "poetry compels the whole soul of man into activity" (Graham, 2010). She emphasizes the importance for her in the writing process of undergoing the physical events of the poem in order to be fully engaged in the location of the poem and to

write through (rather than around or about) experience. Her challenge is to find imaginatively satisfying ways to perceive the world. Graham believes that “the act of presence is a practice” and that “it’s very easy to feel that one is present when one is not” (Graham, 2010). Graham’s insistence on presence and emphasis on writing through experience is condensed by critic Sven Birkerts fitting phrase, “the participial drama of Jorie Graham’s poetry” (Birkerts, 2002, p. 1). The reward of genuine presence, according to Graham, is that “you get to undergo a depth of living” (Graham, 2010).

Graham’s poetic statement ends with an address of questions regarding language and representation. She writes,

I’m not sure I believe that the problem concerning the ‘limits’ of language—or of representation—actually affects us as much as we like to think it does. After many years of assuming that such a philosophical position was utterly natural to my own thinking—and pervasive, obviously, in the thinking of my era—I’ve come to some private conclusions. However much language and its capacity for representation might—and probably does have its tortured limits, we find ourselves, as the users of it, less near its border than we might like to imagine, and at no risk of reaching it, however much we all fuss (sometimes quite wonderfully and movingly) over the issue... If Shakespeare, Dickinson, and Celan didn’t reach that border, we probably needn’t worry the issue... As far as I can tell, there’s really nothing whose nature it is to be linguistic (even if not obviously or easily so, even thoughts or feelings that trill at the farthest reaches of the sayable) that can’t be ultimately rendered

by powerful and accurate uses of language... The astonishments of poetry, for me, reside most vividly in its capacity to make a reader receive utterable and unutterable realities at once. (Graham, 2002, p. 147)

Graham is committed to the possibilities of language. She believes in the power of the deep image or metrical variation to introduce certain “truths.” For Graham, language is a “magnificent instrument” that, when used skillfully, has the power to communicate whatever experiences or ideas dwell where the “terrain is linguistic” (Graham, 2002, p. 148)

A comprehensive examination of the distinguishing features of Graham’s body of work would require much more space and attention than this particular project permits. The enormity of such a task is due in part to the fact that each of Graham’s ten books of poems marks a distinct departure from the style used in the previous collection. In 2005 critic David Orr estimated that Graham had, over the course of her writing life, tried out approximately fifteen styles (Orr, 2005, p. 3). Vendler explains, Graham “has steadfastly refused to repeat herself technically, and has explored in successive volumes an extraordinary number of figurative and stylistic means—in typography, in syntax, in figuration, in voice” (Vendler, 2008, p. 7). In the following pages I will highlight the distinguishing features from a selection of Graham’s poems that most centrally demonstrate components of Burt’s (2009) definition of Ellipticism. My analysis will focus primarily on poems that Graham published while teaching at Iowa Writer’s Workshop where I believe her influence on the nation’s emerging poets was the strongest.

According to Vendler's former student Stephen Burt (2009), Elliptical poets "admire disjunction," "violate decorum," "explode assumptions about what belongs in a poem," "suspect the 'I's they invoke," and believe in "provisionality—the sense that they might change, that nothing they say counts as final" (Burt, 2009, p. 346). The reader of Graham's poetry and that of her coterie of Ellipticals learns not to read in search of answers, not to try and reconcile syntactical confusion, and not to expect the kind of clarity or epiphany present in many narrative poems.

Like Vendler, Graham underestimates the opacity of her elliptical poetry. Of her poems Graham explains,

[They] are intended to be clear. I don't use difficult vocabulary. If the poem is working, you should be able to get every image. Where the poems are difficult is in how they move. Why, when I was there, did I then go here? And those are difficulties that say to the reader, 'Your normal reading habits, which have to do with the follow-through of the plot, aren't going to work here. So let's go and see what else we can read with.' (Schiff, 1997, p. 62)

The following pages will investigate Graham's fundamental lack of clarity and her placement of responsibility for comprehension on the imaginative reading habits of the reader.

In her collection *The End of Beauty* (1987) Jorie Graham "violates decorum" and challenges assumptions about what belongs in a poem by introducing occasional blanks where nouns would normally be. The blanks appear as word-length line segments representing a word's absence. For example, the sixty-eight line poem "To the Reader" (one of Graham's first poems to use blanks) includes four

prominent blanks (Graham, 1987, pp. 23-25). Given that the disjointed and fragmented nature of Graham's poems make them difficult to excerpt or summarize, I have included "To the Reader" in its entirety below.

TO THE READER

I swear to you she wanted back into the shut, the slow,

A ground onto which to say This is my actual life, Good Morning,
onto which to say That girl on her knees who is me
is still digging that square yard of land up
to catalogue and press onto the page *all she could find in it*
and name, somewhere late April, where they believe in ideas,
Thursday, a little of what persists and all the rest.

Before that, dreams. The dream of being warm
and staying warm. The dream of the upper hand like a love song,
the dream of the right weapon and then the perfect escape.

Then the dream of the song of having *business* here.

Then the dream of you two sitting on the couch, of the mood
of armies (hand of God), of the city burning in the distance.

The dream of before and after (are we getting closer?) the dream
of finally after days...

(Miss _____ lets out a shattering scream.)

I swear to you this begins with that girl on a day after sudden rain
and then out of nowhere sun (as if to expose what of the hills—
the white glare of x, the scathing splendor of y,
the wailing interminable _____?) that girl having run
down from the house and up over the fence not like an animal
but like a thinking, link by link, and over

into the allotted earth—for Science Fair—into the everything of
one square yard of earth. Here it begins
to slip. She took the spade and drew the lines. Right through
the weedbeds, lichen, moss, keeping the halves of things that landed *in*
by chance, new leaves, ruffraff the wind blew in—

Here is the smell of the earth being cut, the smell of the four lines.

Here is the brownsweet of the abstract where her four small furrows
say the one word over.

She will take the ruler and push it down till its all the way in.

She will slide its razor-edge along through colonies, tunnels,
 through powdered rock and powdered leaf,

 and everything on its way to the one right destination
 like a cloak coming off, shoulders rising,
 (after one has abandoned the idea of x;
 after one has accorded to the reader the y)—
 her hole in the loam like a saying in the midst of the field of patience,
 fattening the air above it with detail,
 an embellishment on the April air,
 the rendezvous of hands and earth—

Say we leave her there, squatting down, haunches up,
 pulling the weeds up with tweezers
 pulling the thriving apart into the true,
 each seedpod each worm on the way down retrieved into a
 plastic bag (shall I compare thee), Say we

leave her there, where else it there to go? A word,
 a mouth over water? Is there somewhere
 neither there nor here?

Where do we continue living now, in what terrain?

Mud, ash, _____, _____. We want it to stick to us,

hands not full but not clean. What is wide-meshed enough
yet lets nothing through, the bunch of ribbon,
her hair tied up that the wind be seen?

If for instance, this was the place instead,

where the gods fought the giants and monsters
(us the ideal countryside, flesh, interpretation),

if, for instance, this were not a chosen place
blundered into, a place which is a meadow with a hole in it,

and some crawl through such a hole to the other place

and some hide in it and see Him go by

and to some it is the hole on the back of the man running

through which what's coming towards him is coming into him, growing larger,

a hole in his chest through which the trees in the distance are seen
growing larger shoving out sky shoving out storyline

until it's close it's all you can see this moment this hole in his back

in which now a girl with a weed and a notebook appears.

(Graham, 1995, pp. 62)

Here a “girl on her knees who is me” digs up “one square yard of earth” in the meadow “for Science Fair.” The earth that she digs is composed of “mud, ash, _____,” and “_____” (Graham, 1995, pp. 62). The girl wants to “catalogue and press onto the page *all she could find in it/and name*” (Graham, 1995, pp. 61). “Miss _____ lets out a shattering scream” and there is a “wailing interminable _____” (Graham, 1995, pp. 61).

One must search to find the poem's basic information. As Adam Kirsch explains, “We are forced to fill in the gaps, to provide paraphrases and references—in short, to interpret, to ‘do a reading’—from the very beginning” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 36).

There are a number of critics eager to fill in such blanks. Thomas Otten, for example, (2005) believes that the poem is an articulation of Graham's theory of reading and her “*ars poetica* around the image of a hole in the ground” (Gardner, 2005, pp. 187-188). He believes the scientific experiment suggested in the poem serves as a metaphor for poetic composition. Where Otten's argument stretches to desperate lengths is in his discussion of the poem's blanks and their relationship to the “hole” that factors so prominently in the poem's ending. He writes,

Instead of handing readers a flower, the poem hands them a _____, an analysis of the contents of a hole...The hole serves as a material model for

lyric because it gives a degree of density and definition to the spaces between persons while remaining true to the facts of absence and distance that are so often the lyric poem's generating cause. (Gardner, 2005, p. 188)

Otten's explanation of the poem's ending is even more convoluted. He believes that "The hole in the ground with which the poem has identified itself becomes a cognitive space that is in turn fleshed out by the hole in the running man's back" (Gardner, 2005, p. 189). He continues,

a formidable conceptual opacity remains here at the end of the poem, where the hole image is most highly elaborated; a sense of cognitive blockage sets in just where the poem offers an image that promises a clear aperture, windows between various selves. The poem's holes seem simultaneously transparent and opaque, void and material. (Gardner, 2005, p. 188)

It requires a hearty imagination to conjecture that the hole serves as "a material model of the lyric," "a cognitive space," and the basis of a treatise on the art of poetry. Here, Otten matches Graham's "conceptual opacity" with his own (Gardner, 2005, p. 188).

I argue instead that the poem's four blank spaces serve an entirely different purpose. On a basic level the blanks suggest a kind of Woolfian chaos of the inner life. In this reading the blanks serve as a figure of the unknown, incomplete, or constantly shifting portion of the interior mind. In an unrelated reading, the poem's blank spaces serve as an invitation *to the reader* (also the poem's title). Specifically, the blank spaces are invitations or entry points for academics (the bulk of Graham's readership) like Otten to apply their preferred literary theory and write imaginative

and sometimes persuasive analytical essays.²⁵ Simply put, the blanks are academic bait. In this reading, the scientific experiment serves not as a metaphor of poetic composition but as a metaphor for literary criticism. Just as the girl in the poem works “to catalogue and press onto the page *all she could find in it/and name*, literary critics like Otten are invited to “press onto the page” the literary theory of their choice.

The “hole” that dominates the poem’s final ten lines functions similarly as the blanks. Otten argues that this “extraordinarily complex image” demonstrates “that the poem’s continued life is somehow a matter of nebulous substances, holes, and blanks” (Gardner, 2005, p. 188). What he means by “the poem’s continued life,” I do not know. I argue that the opacity, obscurity, and general incomprehensible nature of the poem’s ending serve as an invitation for critics to fill the poem’s “hole” with meaning—to imagine the whole from which the fragmented image came. Like the blanks, the image of the “hole” functions as academic bait.

The poem’s ending reflects an additional distinguishing feature present in the vast majority of Graham’s work. There is a glaring absence of closure or

²⁵ To be fair, James Longenbach (2008) offers what I regard as a sensible reading of Graham’s use of blanks. He writes, “In ‘The End of Beauty,’ Graham leaves blanks in her lines (“looking into that which sets the _____ in motion”), as if to render as literally as possible the strenuous effort to accommodate language to things” (Longenbach, 2008, p. 1). In addition, Helen Vendler offers what I regard as a deeply intelligent and persuasive reading of “To the Reader” in her book chapter “Jorie Graham: The Nameless and the Material” (1995). According to Vendler, the poem is in part a consideration of “matter’s vulnerability to interpretation” (Vendler, 1995, p. 9). Of the complication in the poem’s ending she writes, “The desire for interpretation is simply a yawning vacancy, lethal to all hope of integrated summary in language. Look long enough at anything with the close-focus of interpretation and you kill not only yourself as receptor but also your object of vision” (Vendler, 1995, p. 9). For Vendler the poem’s lack of closure is “a formal consequence of interpretative instability” (Vendler, 1995, p. 9).

resolution and a preference instead for openness. Longenbach (2005) explains, Graham “strives most arduously to embrace poems that do not click shut” (Gardner, 2005, p. 90). Vendler adds that Graham’s poems “often end in a standoff between suspension and finality” (Vendler, 1995, p. 225). The absence of closure also factors prominently in the work of many other Elliptical poets.

The poem’s “x” and “y” marks (“the white glare of x, the scathing splendor of y” and “after one has abandoned the idea of x;/after one has accorded to the reader the y”) are yet another distinguishing feature of “To The Reader” sometimes found in the work of other Elliptical poets including Graham’s epigones. Like the blanks, the “x” and “y” marks invite the participation of the reader and can be read as Graham’s expression of the inexpressible as well as a reminder of the symbolic nature of language. As Adam Kirsch explains,

we are being instructed to read algebraically, to solve the poem for ‘x’ and ‘y’ and ‘_____.’ The entire organization of Graham’s poetry on every level—theme, narrative, syntax, metaphor, titles, footnotes—is also algebraic. At every level, something crucial is left out, which the reader is meant to find and put back in—or, just as significantly, to be unable to find, a failure which itself becomes part of the poem’s theoretical freight. (Kirsch, 2000, p. 26)

Kirsch’s candor is refreshing in a climate where influential critics like Helen Vendler see little evidence to view Graham’s work as difficult.

Both the blanks and the poem’s “x” and “y” marks are part of what Burt (1998) calls the Ellipticals’ “verbal gizmos developed over the last few decades to undermine the coherence of speaking selves” (Burt, 1998, p. 1). In her sequence of

self-portraits from *The End of Beauty* (1999), Graham uses another technique to suspect the I's she invokes and to undermine the coherence of speaking selves. Graham draws on her knowledge of film to produce a series of five self-portraits that can be likened to a montage of film stills.²⁶ The series includes "Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them," "Self-Portrait as Both Parties," "Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne," "Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay," and "Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone." On a basic level, Graham undermines the coherence of a speaking self by simultaneously assuming the role of opposing mythological figures (Demeter and Persephone, Orpheus and Eurydice, Apollo and Daphne). The "self" of the self-portraits is fragmented, multiple, contingent, and oppositional. As Vendler explains,

Eurydice in Graham's version both does and does not want to resume her body and be loved; Orpheus both wants her back as she is and wants her back on his terms. Eurydice's double wish (to rise up to Orpheus and to sink back to Pluto) and Orpheus' double wish (to raise her and himself) are voiced in an intricate portrait of the self at many cross-purposes, freeing lyric from its perennial trap in a single voice. (Vendler, 1987, p. 76)

Graham's amalgam of selves prefigures the fractured and multiple selves that appear in the work of the Elliptical poets she has influenced.

In a poem about Adam and Eve titled "Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them" Graham interrogates the idea of a stable, essential, and unwavering "I" often

²⁶ Commenting on the structure of the poems, Vendler says that Graham "ostentatiously separat[es] single lines by successive Arabic numbers, as though each line were a free-standing item, a freeze-frame in a stop-and-start film" (Vendler, 1995, p. 10).

found in lyric poetry and offers an untraditional self-portrait through myth. The poem begins:

1

The gesture like a fruit torn from a limb, torn swiftly.

2

The whole bough bending then springing back as if from sudden sight.

3

The rip in the fabric where the action begins, the opening of the narrow passage.

4

The passage along the arc of denouement once the plot has begun, like a limb,
the buds in it cinched and numbered,
outside the true story really, outside of improvisation,
moving along day by day into the sweet appointment.

5

But what else could they have done, these two, sick of beginning,
 revolving in place like a thing seen,
 dumb, blind, rooted in the eye that's watching,
 ridden and ridden by that slowest of glances the passage of time
 staring and staring until the entrails show.

6

Every now and then a quick rain for no reason,

7

a wind moving round all sides, a wind shaking the points of view out
 like the last bits of rain...

(Graham, 1995, p. 54)

Here Graham "shak[es] the points of view out" of the archetypal Genesis myth by offering a series of narrative snapshots that problematize the nature of narration.

Vendler explains,

Formally speaking, 'smooth' uninterrupted, unproblematic narration can no longer, for Graham, represent experience, which is forever probing, tentative, anticipatory, and open-ended, truly represented only when the slow

increments by which it happens are mimicked in unmistakable linguistic patterns of hesitation and inquiry and gradual realization. (Vendler 1995, p. 10)

The fall of Eden serves as a figure of departure from “unproblematic narration.” The poem highlights, “the feeling of being a digression not the link in the argument,/ a new direction, an offshoot, the limb going on elsewhere,” (Graham, 1995, p. 54).

Given its emphasis on digression, interruption, and the instability of narrative, Graham’s poem can be read as a kind of ode to provisionality. For Graham, the self-portrait she renders in “Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them” is a provisional product of montage as are the four other self-portraits she includes in *The End of Beauty* (1999).²⁷ From one self-portrait to the next, her mythological personae change and one gets the sense that nothing Graham says counts as final.

In the final self-portrait titled “Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone” Graham depicts Persephone’s experience in hell. Graham writes,

She watched the smoke where it began what it left off
 What will I recognize to have been she thought
 smoke smoke her fingers her eyes like static all over it
 Surely I can find it the point of departure she put her hand in
 The birds the beaks of the birds the song the heard song

²⁷ Stephen Burt (2009) cites John Ashberry as being an enormously influential poet for Ellipticals. It seems to me that Graham’s “Self Portrait as the Gesture Between Them” is in conversation with Ashberry’s poem “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror” which considers Francesco Parmigianino’s painting “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” The convex mirror present in both the Parmigianino’s painting and Ashberry’s poem serve as a logical launching point for a consideration of the problems of self-portraiture and of ekphrastic representation in the literary arts.

She reached in what is it begins at the end she thought
Where is the skin of the minutes will it ever come off
She reached in there was no underneath what was this coiling over her fingers
She reached in she could go no further she was sealed off
It pushed back against her it was hell she could finally lean
It was the given and it was finally given

In considering Graham's influence on other Elliptical poets, "Self Portrait as Demeter and Persephone" is noteworthy because of its ungrammatical syntax and narrative incoherence. Without punctuation, semantic units and sentences are indistinct, there are no pauses or transitions, and the poem functions as a compilation of unwieldy slippages. A line such as "She reached in what is it begins at the end she thought" reads as a nonsensical collection of unhinged words. Here, Graham demonstrates the Elliptical's penchant for violating decorum, exploding assumptions about what belongs in a poem, and undermining the coherence of speaking selves.

Similarly, in *Sea Change* (2008), Graham uses minimal punctuation and relies primarily on the dash and ampersand for brief moments of linguistic order. For example, the sprawling ninety-three line poem "Undated Lullaby" begins,

I go out and there she is still of course sitting on the nest, dead-center in-
visible in our flowing big-
headed

still young and staked acacia, crown an almost
perfect
circle, dark greens blurring now
in this high wind, wrestling it, compliant too—billion-mouthed transformer of
sun and the carbon—molecule
& you have to stand still and
look in to see her,
there where the wind splits open the head, slashes the branches, & you see her,
& her head does not even turn or
tuck—

(Graham, 2008, p. 51)

What makes “Undated Lullaby” and many of the collection’s other poems distinct is their orderly and unusual lineation (the lineation is consistent throughout *Sea Change*) combined with the near absence of punctuation. Vendler argues that,

In *Sea Change*, Graham has declared herself for simultaneity to such an extent that she has in effect eliminated punctuation whenever she can... Graham is willing to sacrifice punctuation and uniform line-length to her driving subjects in *Sea Change*: personal death, death of the earth, and death of humane action... Graham is acutely conscious of the falsity of bounded and orderly utterance to the conception—impossible to shut out in middle age—of life as a panorama of severely limited horizon. (Vendler, 2008, p. 3)

I believe that for the seventy-nine year-old Vendler who has dedicated her entire life to poetry, encountering “such an unprecedented type of lineation” from a poet she

admires must be nothing short of exciting. While I am persuaded by Vendler's assertion that Graham's minimal punctuation reflects her declaration for "simultaneity" and an awareness "of the falsity of bounded and utterly utterance," I also believe that it reflects Graham's savviness. Graham is undoubtedly well aware, for example, that Milton and Hopkins before her broke words between syllables at the end of lines as she does in the poem's opening ("in-/visible"). Graham aligns herself with literary giants by borrowing a trademark technique and then asserts her inventiveness through her "unprecedented" lineation. The combination of the borrowed and the new is a savvy recipe for a poet who has a clear understanding of the literary tastes of the nation's most powerful poetry critic.

The End of Beauty (1999), the collection in which Graham's series of self-portraits appear, was published at the end of Graham's sixteen year tenure at Iowa Writer's Workshop. Burt (2004) compares the influence of this book on the "post-Graham poetry world" to the influence of Nirvana's album *Nevermind* on post-Nirvana indie rock. Of the poets who studied at Iowa Writers' Workshop while Graham was establishing her status as America's post-World War II poetry star, Matthea Harvey stands out as a celebrated poet whose work demonstrates many of the distinguishing features of Ellipticism. While it is virtually impossible to draw direct lines of influence from Graham to Harvey, I believe Harvey's work shares undeniable connections with Graham's. In the following pages, I will outline Harvey's emergence as a poet of national prominence, gesture toward what I interpret as Graham's influence on Harvey, and examine the ways in which Harvey's work qualifies as "Elliptical." I have chosen to explore Harvey, in part, because she

is now a tenured faculty member at an MFA program with the power to spread her ideas about the literary arts to the next generation of emerging poets.

Matthea Harvey

Matthea Harvey was born in Germany in 1973, spent her early childhood in England, and moved to Milwaukee when she was eight years old. She completed her undergraduate degree at Harvard University. She is the author of the poetry collections *Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form* (2000), *Sad Little Breathing Machine* (2004), *Modern Life* (2007) as well as the children's books *The Little General and the Giant Snowflake* (2009) and *Of Lamb* (2011). *Modern Life* (2007) was the winner of the Kingsley Tufts Award²⁸, a New York Times Notable Book of 2008, and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In addition, Harvey received the Addison M. Metcalf award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She is a contributing editor to *jubilat* and *BOMB* and served for a period as the poetry editor of *American Letters & Commentary*. Three of her poems were featured in the winter 2001/2002 version of *Ploughshares* that Jorie Graham edited. Harvey teaches at Sarah Lawrence College and lives in Brooklyn with her husband Rob Casper, who is the editor of *jubilat* and whose poetry Graham also included in the edition of *Ploughshares* she edited.

²⁸ The Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award gives \$100,000 to the recipient. It is the world's largest monetary prize for a single collection of poetry.

In his *New York Times* review of Harvey's *Modern Life* (2007), David Orr does a very good job of not only introducing Harvey's work but also of illuminating the typical ascent of the "early career" poet in "official verse culture." Orr writes,

America's young poets are generating more than their share of our country's best writing. At 34, Matthea Harvey is a case in point. She is in many ways a typical American poet in early career: She teaches workshops, helps edit a journal, keeps a busy reading schedule, pops up at artists' colonies, publishes widely and has had to learn the basic steps of the pobiz hustle (her Web site is polished, her Wikipedia entry primed for expansion). And Harvey's technique is a variation of the trendiest contemporary style, which relies heavily on disconnected phrases, abrupt asyntactical shifts, attention-begging titles ("The Gem Is on Page Sixty-Four"), quirky diction ("orangery," "aigrettes"), flickering italics, oddball openings ("The scent of pig is faint tonight") and a tone ranging from daffy to plangent—basically two scoops of John Ashbery and a sprinkling of Gertrude Stein. It's not hard to write acceptable poetry in this mode, which is one of the reasons so many people make use of it. After all, poets need jobs, and for those, they need books—and for those, well, they need poems. (Orr, 2008, p. 1)

Orr goes on to say that while "it's relatively easy to write passable poetry in the style du jour, it's never easy to write good poetry in any style. Which is what makes Harvey's new collection *Modern Life*, such a pleasure" (Orr, 2008, p. 1). Orr's comments highlight the components of the "pobiz hustle" for emerging poets as well as the ease with which poets can produce satisfactory "Elliptical" poems. What Orr

does not mention is that Harvey has arguably the perfect combination of pedigree and skills for the contemporary poetry market. Her undergraduate degree from Harvard University, M.F.A. from Iowa Writers' Workshop, foreign birthplace, strong connections, cleverness, stellar creativity, and impressive self-promotion skills make her a good fit for professionalized poetry. Anecdotally, though Harvey is approximately half the age of Kay Ryan, I knew of Harvey long before Ryan. Harvey is a staple on the poetry circuit. Harvey seems as dedicated to carving a career in poetry as Ryan was to avoiding one.

As with Graham, one gets the sense with Matthea Harvey that all modes of writing other than the associative are inadequate. The obliquity, disjunction, fragmentation, and fracture present in so much of Graham's poetry is at the core of Harvey's work. Narrative, too, is undermined and deemed untrustworthy as is the self-descriptive lyric. Her poems are as aesthetically self-consciousness as Graham's but more playful, less overtly philosophical, and typically shorter.

Like Graham, Harvey is acutely aware that language is always a critique as well as a representation. Her poem "Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form," showcases the slippery syntax and preference for simultaneity present in much of her work.

PITY THE BATHTUB ITS FORCED EMBRACE OF THE HUMAN FORM

1.

Pity the bathtub that belongs to the queen its feet

Are bronze casts of the former queen's feet its sheen
 A sign of fretting is that an inferior stone shows through
 Where the marble is worn away with industrious
 Polishing the tub does not take long it is tiny some say
 Because the queen does not want room for splashing
 The maid thinks otherwise she knows the king
 Does not grip the queen nightly in his arms there are
 Others the queen does not have lovers she obeys
 Her mother once told her *your ancestry is your only*
Support then is what she gets in the bathtub she floats
 Never holds her nose and goes under not because
 She might sink but because she knows to keep her ears
 Above water she smiles at the circle of courtiers below
 Her feet are kicking against the walls which cannot give
 Satisfaction at best is to manage to stay clean

2.

Pity the bathtub its forced embrace of the whims of
 One man loves but is not loved in return by the object
 Of his affection there is little to tell of his profession
 There is more for it is because he works with glass
 That he thinks things are clear (he loves) and adjustable
 (she does not love) he knows how to take something

Small and hard and hot and make room for
His breath quickens at night as he dreams of her he wants
To create a present unlike any other and because he cannot
Hold her he designs something that can a bathtub of
Glass shimmers red when it is hot he pours it into the mold
In a rush of passion only as it begins to cool does it reflect
His foolishness enrages him he throws off his clothes meaning
To jump in and lie there but it is still too hot and his feet propel
Him forward he runs from one end to the other then falls
To the floor blisters begin to swell on his soft feet he watches
His pain harden into a pretty pattern on the bottom of the bath

3.

Pity the bathtub its forced embrace of the human
Form may define external appearance but there is room
For improvement within try a soap dish that allows for
Slippage is inevitable as is difference in the size of
The subject may hoard his or her bubbles at different
Ends of the bathtub may grasp the sponge tightly or
Loosely it may be assumed that eventually everyone gets in
The bath has a place in our lives and our place is
Within it we have control of how much hot how much cold
What to pour in how long we want to stay when to

Return is inevitable because we need something
 To define ourselves against even if we know that
 Whenever we want we can pull the plug and get out
 Which is not the case with our own tighter confinement
 Inside the body oh pity the bathtub but pity us too

(Harvey, 2000, pp. 3-4)

Harvey's poem is a compilation of lines with undefinable beginnings and endings. In its most successful moments, each line functions as its own unit of meaning and bleeds seamlessly into a next line that has its own unrelated unit of meaning. Words at the beginning and end of lines serve double-duty by often both completing a phrase and also catapulting the reader into the next phrase. For example, in the opening of part three, Harvey's first line, "Pity the bathtub its forced embrace of the human" reads as a distinct thought. The following line, "Form may define external appearance but there is room," also reads as a complete thought. When read in combination, the word "human" joins the word "form" adding a degree of specificity to the statement about "external appearance." Harvey refers to such moments in her poems as "swivel lines" or "hinges." She explains, "These lines are like simple machines, creating a magnetic enjambment which holds the poems together (or keeps them from flying apart)" (Harvey, n.d., p. 1).

In a moment of self-reflexive playfulness early in part three, Harvey reminds the reader that "slippage is inevitable." Such a phrase can be read as a humorous announcement of the obvious in a poem that is a compilation of slippages. Just as

Graham avoids nearly all punctuation in *Sea Change* (2008) and in the self-portrait poems such as “Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone” from *The End of Beauty* (1999), Harvey’s poem opts for the possibilities of simultaneity rather than punctuation’s confines. In addition, Harvey’s line as a unit of meaning is provisional—the reader tentatively grasps an understanding until the line slips and words get recruited to join the syntactical unit of the following line.

Given that there is no absolute coherence or unitary identity in Harvey’s poem, there can be no revelation or epiphany at the end. Like Graham, Harvey eschews epiphanies and prefers endings that are instead unresolved, questioning, ambiguous, or matter of fact. The poem’s final three lines demonstrate both Harvey’s playfulness with language and her inclination for dark undercurrents. At first glance, the line “Whenever we want we can pull the plug and get out” reads as a harmless statement about one’s freedom to get out of a bathtub. Read in combination with the lines, “Which is not the case with our own tighter confinement/ Inside the body oh pity the bathtub but pity us too,” the expression “pull the plug” shifts to a wildly darker register. Harvey suggests that just as the bathtub is stuck with the human form, the human is stuck inside its own body. The thought turns absurd when Harvey finally tells the reader, “oh pity the bathtub but pity us too.” Without punctuation to introduce the sentiment or a sense of the poet’s regard for the reader’s emotional investment, the line’s suggested affect reads as amusingly flat. It reads as a playful parody of the epiphanies found in the final lines of the kind of lyric poetry that Elliptical poets outspokenly dislike.

Similarly, Harvey's poem "First Person Fabulous" is in conversation with "traditional" literary modes and calls the reader's expectation into question. In "First Person Fabulous," Harvey "violates decorum," "explodes assumptions about what belongs in a poem," and playfully interrogates the underpinnings of narrative.

FIRST PERSON FABULOUS

First person fumed & fizzed under Third Person's tongue while Third Person slumped at the diner counter, talking, as usual, to no one. Third Person thought First Person was the toilet paper trailing from Third Person's shoe, the tiara Third Person once wore in a dream to a funeral. First Person thought Third Person was a layer of tar on a gorgeous pink nautilus, a foot on a fountain, a ton hiding the macaroons & First Person was that nautilus, that fountain, that pile of macaroons. Sometimes First Person broke free on first dates (with a Second Person) & then there was the delicious rush of 'I this' and 'I that' but then no phone call & for weeks Third Person wouldn't let First Person near anyone. Poor First Person. Currently she was exiled to the world of postcards (*having a lovely time*)—& even then that beast of a Third Person used the implied 'I' just to drive First Person crazy. She felt like a television staring at the remote, begging to be turned on. She had so many things she wanted to say. If only she could survive on her own, she'd make Third Person choke on herself & when the detective arrived & all eyes were on her, she'd cry out, 'I did it! Yes, dahlings, it was

me!’

(Harvey, 2004, p. 23)

Here Harvey satirizes narrative by humorously breaking it down into its component parts and exposing them to examination. On its most basic level the poem is an account of the generic “First Person,” “Second Person,” and “Third Person” interacting in odd ways. Harvey mocks the common presumption that narrative provides a complete or accurate account of unique individuals by inserting the surreal imaginings of the three generic “people” (“Third/ Person thought First Person was the toilet paper trailing from Third Person’s/ shoe,” “Third Person was a layer of tar on a gorgeous pink nautilus, a foot/ on a fountain, a ton hiding the macaroons”). Harvey stretches these details to their most absurd limits as if to highlight the impossibility of narrative accuracy and to demonstrate the great lengths one must go to generate fresh stories of the self.

As with Graham, Harvey demonstrates a mistrust of narrative forms. Tony Hoagland (2006) attributes this stance to the fact that “narrative poetry in America has been tainted by its over-use in thousands of confessional poems” (Hoagland, 2006, p. 4). He explains, “the inadvertent sentimentality and narcissism of many such poems have imparted the odor of indulgence to narrative. Our vision of narrative possibilities has been narrowed by so many first person autobiographical stories, then drowned in a flood of pathos poems” (Hoagland, 2006, p. 4).

Hoagland believes that “First Person Fabulous” “suggests the essential egotism of all first person narrative” (Hoagland, 2006, p. 3). Harvey’s cartoonish “First Person” feels “the delicious rush/ of ‘I this’ and ‘I that’” and longs to eliminate

“Third Person” and then cry out “I did it! Yes, dahlings, it was/ me!” I believe Harvey’s prose poem further accentuates “First Person’s” absurd longing for independence by ending the poem with the one word line “me!” In displaying “me!” on its own tiny pedestal, the final line functions as a mock heroic moment of giddy self-indulgence.

Harvey’s “Introduction” poems from her second book *Sad Little Breathing Machine* (2004), demonstrate her commitment to disjunction. Used to divide the book into sections, these “introductory” poems’ subject matter is wide ranging (“Introduction to Circumference,” “Introduction to the End,” and “Introduction to Narrative”) and sometimes darkly playful (“Introduction to Addiction” and “Introduction to a Diction”). Each of the nine “Introduction” poems utilizes the Elliptical techniques of fragmentation and parataxis and strongly reflects Graham’s influence. “Introduction to Eden,” echoes the opacity present in so much of Graham’s work.

INTRODUCTION TO EDEN

Call me What You Will.

This for your complicated hands—
my best mechanical tree.

Test?

No thank you.

can be read as a kind of loose imitation of Jorie Graham's work as what Calvin Bedient calls "an angle artist" (Gardner, 2005, p. 288). Bedient writes, "Just as modernist painters alternately broke up the plan of flat space and reduced sprung and cubic space to flatness, so Jorie Graham multiplies, scatters, and tilts lines of thought" (Gardner, 2005, p. 288).

In considering "Introduction to Eden," Adam Kirsch's comments about the "algebraic" nature of Graham's work can just as easily apply to Harvey's poem. Kirsch writes, "If we read [Graham] algebraically, it is always with the proviso that she alone—if even she—guards the complete solution, the master key that might unlock the poem" (Kirsch, 2000, p. 38). Interestingly enough, Harvey does have a kind of "master key" for this particular poem. In an explanation of "Introduction to Eden" she writes that Eden is, "imagined as a system literally in dialogue with humans. The system begins speaking, and the human voice (a collective 'we') tried to engage with and understand the terms of the conversation" (Harvey, n.d., p. 1). I feel quite certain that even Helen Vendler would have difficulty arriving at that reading.

Harvey's "engine poems" from *Sad Little Breathing Machine* (2004) are similarly cryptic. For each of the poems, there is a visual diagram in the space typically reserved for the epigraph. For example, underneath "No More Frisson Please" reads "Engine: I must look nice/ —><—!" and underneath "Reverberations in the Snail/World" reads Engine: "@_" (Harvey, 2004, p. 8). Harvey explains that "the engines 'run' the poems, mysterious except to their mechanic" (Harvey, n.d., p. 1). Unfortunately for Harvey, she does not yet have a critic like Vendler willing to

mine and make sense of what Harvey refers to as her “complex machinations” (Harvey, n.d., p. 1).

Like her other “engine poems,” “No More Frisson Please” reads an impenetrable experiment.

NO MORE FRISSON PLEASE

Engine: I must look nice

—><—!

Irrelevant, irrelevant sang

the xylophone to the mallet,

though without it plinking

were impossible. The ether

wasn't working either.

We could still see budgies.

The whole house waited

while you twirled in a tiny divan

between your fingers.

Ever tempted to linger, I

pixilated you, ate sugar
in the form of quince.

Haven't heard from you
since, hottie.

(Harvey, 2004, p. 8)

The unifying threads in this poem are sound and oddity. The nouns “frisson,” “xylophone,” “ether,” “budgies,” “divan,” “quince,” and “hottie,” for example, form the spine of a poem that is determinedly disconnected and fragmented. Harvey’s poem feigns coherency with its neat couplets that are in three instances further linked by sound (“sang” and “mallet,” “either” and “budgies,” and “fingers” and “linger”). Word pairings such as “ether” with “either” and “budgie” (the informal term for “budgerigar” used to refer to a small green Australian parrot) with “hottie” create a kind of entertaining mosaic of meaningless sound. Critic Joan Houlihan’s description of Harvey’s *Modern Life* (2007) as a book that relies on “impish acrobatics of diction, high junks of imagery, large dollops of wordplay and death-defying high wire walks from sense to nonsense without a net” could just as easily be used to describe Harvey’s “engine poems” (Houlihan, 2008, p. 1).

Mark Levine (and Lucie Brock-Broido)

Poet Mark Levine is yet another “early career” poet with strong connections to Iowa Writers’ Workshop and who is categorized by Burt (2009) as “Elliptical.” Levine was born in New York in 1965, grew up in Toronto, attended Brown University, and graduated from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1990. He has taught creative writing at the University of Montana, has received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, was a Hodder Fellow in the Humanities at Princeton University, and is now a part of the permanent poetry faculty at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. His first collection *Debt* (1993) was selected for the National Poetry Series²⁹ by Jorie Graham and was awarded a \$30,000 Whiting Writers Award. Levine is also the author of the poetry collections *Enola Gay* (2000) and *The Wilds* (2006) as well as the non-fiction book *F-5* (2007). He has written numerous journalism pieces for *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Outside Magazine*. Four of his poems appeared in the winter 2001/2002 version of *Ploughshares* that Jorie Graham edited. In addition, Levine and Graham worked together as editors of the Kuhl House poetry series at Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

Burt (2009) calls Levine’s *Debt* (1993) Ellipticism’s “emblematic first book” and “ellipticism at its most aggressive, rife with allusion and disillusion” (Burt, 2009, p. 1, p. 347). According to Burt (2000), the “edgy, difficult, estranged, and self-confident” poems in *Debt* (1993) “acquired a reputation with other young poets

²⁹ The National Poetry Series was established in 1978 and selects five manuscripts each year for publication by a participating trade, university, or small press publisher.

almost from the moment the manuscript left Iowa” (Burt, 2000, p. 1). In the following pages, I will explore the ways in which Levine’s work qualifies as “Elliptical” and gesture at Graham’s influence on Levine. Similar to my choice of Harvey, I have chosen to explore Levine’s work because of his position as a permanent faculty member at an M.F.A. program and his strong connections to Graham and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

Debt (1993) begins with the poem “Landscape,” an unemotional and fairly straightforward account of the speaker’s search for his friend. The speaker stands at the end of a cul-de-sac holding “the books a friend has been asking for” (Levine, 1993, p. 13). Searching for his friend the speaker asks, “Across the steel fence, across the canal that slices the landscape in two?” (Levine, 1993, p. 13). Here, the canal that carves a stark division in the landscape prefigures the stylistic shift that occurs in collection’s next section titled “At the Experimental Farm.” While Levine does nothing to suspect the “I” he invokes in “Landscape,” he explodes the idea of the self as a stable, continuous, and wholly realized entity in the following poem titled “Work Song.”

WORK SONG

My name is Henri. Listen. It’s morning.
 I pull my head from my scissors, I pull
 the light bulb from my mouth—Boss comes at me
 while I’m still blinking.

Pastes the pink slip on my collarbone.

It's OK, I say, I was a lazy worker, and I stole.

I wipe my feet on his skullcap on the way out.

I am Henri, mouth full of soda crackers.

I live in Toulouse, which is a piece of cardboard.

Summers the Mayor paints it blue, we fish in it.

Winters we skate on it. Children are always

Drowning or falling through cracks. Parents are distraught

But get over it. It's easy to replace a child.

Like my parents' child, Henri.

I stuff my hands in my shoes

and crawl through the snow on all fours.

Animals fear me. I smell so good.

I have two sets of footprints, I confuse the police.

When I reach the highway I unzip my head.

I am a zipper. A paper cut.

I fed myself so many times

through the shredder I am confetti,

I am a ticker-tape parade, I am an astronaut

Waving from my convertible at Henri.

Henri from Toulouse, is that you?
Why the unhappy face? I should shoot you
for spoiling my parade. Come on, man,
put yourself together! You want so much to die
that you don't want to die.

My name is Henri. I am Toulouse. I am scraps
of bleached parchment, I am the standing militia,
a quill, the Red Cross, I am a feather
in my cap, the Hebrew Testament, I am the World Court.
An electric fan blows
beneath my black robe. I am dignity itself.

I am an ice machine.
I am an alp.
I stuff myself in the refrigerator
wrapped in newsprint. With salt in my heart
I stay good for days.

(Levine, 1993, pp. 17-18)

Levine's speaker epitomizes the fragmented, fractured "I" that is such a pillar of Ellipticism. The poem begins with two simple declarations and a command: "My name is Henri. Listen. It's morning." Just as soon as Levine establishes a sense of

speaker's coherence in the opening line, he shatters the "I" into a surreal and incongruous collection of splintered parts. By the fourth stanza, the "I" is a "zipper," a "paper cut," "confetti," a "tick-tape parade," and an "astronaut/ waving from my convertible at Henri" (Levine, 1993, p. 17). As the poem progresses, "Henri" is "scraps/of bleached parchment," "the standing militia," "a quill," "the Red Cross," "the feather in my cap," "the Hebrew Testament," "the World Court," "dignity itself," "an ice machine," and "an alp" (Levine, 1993, p. 18). "Henri" is simultaneously a salmagundi of disparate beings and things.

I read Levine's strategy for fragmentation as an extension of the blanks and "x" and "y" marks that Graham uses to undermine the coherence of speaking selves. While "verbal gizmos" in the form of blanks and "x" and "y" marks factor prominently in poems such as Graham's "To the Reader" from *The End of Beauty* (1987), Levine opts to replace Graham's unknowns with an eclectic assortment of nouns. In this way, Graham's template functions as a kind of "Mad Libs" that Levine fills in and twists enough to separate itself from its creative source.

It is worth noting that Levine is not alone in writing disjunctive poems that undermine the self through incompatible declarations of being. The style is easily replicated and made to appear fresh through modification. For example, in the poem "Am Moor" from *The Master Letters* (1995), Elliptical poet Lucie Brock-Broido³⁰ writes a poem that addresses the fractured self without the use of the pronoun "I." The poem begins,

³⁰ Lucie Brock-Broido is the director of the Writing Division in the School of the Arts at Columbia University where she also received her M.F.A. At Harvard University she served as the director of the creative writing program and as the Briggs-

Am lean against

Am the heavy hour

Hand at urge,

At the verge of one, Am the ice comb of the tonsured

Hair, am the second

Hand, halted, the velvet opera glove. Am slant. Am fen, the injure

(Brock-Broido, 1995, p. 1)

Here, the grammatical slippages and absences interrupt the possibility of a coherent and whole self. Brock-Broido's erasure of the "I" is a logical extension of a multiple, contingent, and fragmented self with no identifiable core. As with "Henri" in Levine's "Work Song," Brock-Broido's speaker is a compilation of seemingly unrelated elements. For example, Brock-Broido's implied "I" is "lean against," "the heavy hour," "the ice comb of the tonsured hair," "the second hand," "halted," "the velvet opera glove," "slant," "fen," "numb," and "shoulder & queer luck." Brock-Broido distinguishes her Elliptical poems in the collection from those of her peers by occasionally erasing the "I" and by situating *The Master Letters* (1995) in the world

Copeland poet. She has also taught at Bennington College and Princeton University and is currently a visiting professor at Harvard. Burt (1998) describes Brock-Broido's *The Master Letters* (1995) as markedly Elliptical.

of Emily Dickinson (the book's starting point is the few letters left by Emily Dickinson addressed to "Dear Master"). Like Levine, Brock-Broido has filled in Graham's blanks, added her own flourishes, and explored alternative modes of expressing the fractured self.

Levine's poem "Jack and Jill" from *Enola Gay* (2000) addresses the endangered "I" of the lyric that Brock-Broido entirely omits. The poem uses the inherited cultural form of the nursery rhyme as a fresh launching point for an examination of selfhood.

JACK AND JILL

He galloped through the chill.

His purse rattling with pills.

On his tongue a desolate trill.

He pried a sack of rice

From a man with yellow eyes.

His name was Jack and Jill.

He clutched a steel device

against his ribs. It saved him twice,

once from x-rays, once from vice

and a woman. The land was ill.

His name was Jack and Jill.

His was a special case.

At dawn he scrambled pell-mell
 through the woods to the shadowed rill.
 He was hungry. Was he real?
 Was he a rhyme? Was he a trace
 of purple smoke escaped from base?
 He'd taken a great spill—
 he swallowed rain; he had a taste
 of precious metals and malaise.
 Is it easy to give praise
 when his name is Jack and Jill?
 He is rinsing his stained surface
 with heavy water and a drill.

(Levine, 2000, pp. 12-13)

Here Levine dismantles the traditional nursery rhyme and replaces it with a narratively and metrically deformed version. The poem's title and overdrawn end rhyme provide a kind of simulacrum of the nursery rhyme. The poem's content, however, marks a sharp departure from the culturally inherited version. Levine's "Jack and Jill" is a male individual carrying a "purse rattling with pills." Referring to the man "Jack and Jill" Levine asks, "Was he real?/ Was he a rhyme? Was he a trace/

of purple smoke escaped from base?" The person "Jack and Jill" is little more than a "verbal gizmo" that propels the poem to the level of theoretical inquiry.

Burt (2000) reads "Jack and Jill" as a commentary on "the old-fashioned (male, Western, liberal, rational) notion of the 'subject,' who limps along as violently as 'his' song form, inviting with-it readers to cheer his demise; in another sense he could be any of us, and invites our sympathies, like the Tin Man" (Burt, 2000, p. 5). According to Burt, the poem's protagonist "aspires to represent everybody (Jack and Jill)—and anyone else who tried to do his job would find herself faced with his old problems" (Burt, 2000, p. 5). I believe that Burt's reading is more compelling than the poem itself and that the revision of cultural archetypes almost always yields a kind of low hanging fruit for critics. The modification of an iconic nursery rhyme through the collapsing of dual protagonists into a single male protagonist is a kind of lob for an astute critic like Burt. As one of Graham's protégés, Levine is likely fully aware of the benefits of baiting critics.

I believe that the dissemination of Ellipticism's central tenets has been accelerated and made possible by its close association with Iowa Writers' Workshop and Harvard University. On the surface, the overlapping affiliations of Jorie Graham, Helen Vendler, Stephen Burt, Matthea Harvey, Mark Levine, and Lucie Brock-Broido are quite simple. Of the four poets discussed, all but Brock-Broido attended or taught at Iowa Writers' Workshop (she has given numerous readings there) and all but Levine attended or taught at Harvard University. In addition, Burt and Vendler

whose criticism I use to frame much of this chapter, worked together at Harvard University while Burt was Vendler's doctoral student. Burt is now a professor and Brock-Broido a visiting professor at Harvard. Together, these poets and critics form one of the most influential blocks of power in contemporary American poetry.

Ellipticism as a school in American literary arts brings together Iowa Writers' Workshop and Harvard University, two of poetry's biggest institutional powerhouses. Since its inception in 1942, Iowa Writers' Workshop has been the most prestigious and indisputably powerful M.F.A. program in the nation. In his chapter titled "Understanding Iowa: The Religion of Institutionalization," Mark McGurl (2009) explains the institutional power of the Iowa Writers' Workshop.³¹ He writes,

rarely does one encounter an institution as thoroughly dominant in its discipline as the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Not only was it the first full-fledged program of its kind, it has never been other than the most prestigious example thereof, even as some 300-odd competitors have arisen in its mist.

(McGurl, 2009, p. 177)

According to McGurl, Iowa's long lasting reign as the nation's most prestigious M.F.A. program has led to a "narcissistic collective self-appreciation and memorialization" among its affiliates (McGurl, 2009, p. 177). In addition, McGurl comments that "Iowa has dominated its field not so much through direct competition with other programs as through a 'viral' process of self-reproduction

³¹ *The Program Era* (2009), where McGurl's chapter on Iowa Writers' Workshop appears, was awarded the 2011 Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism. The \$30,000 award is administered for the Capote Estate by the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Helen Vendler has been a past recipient of the honor.

across the system of higher education, as innumerable Iowa graduates have gone on to found similar programs elsewhere” (McGurl, 2009, p. 177). As McGurl explains, “Iowa is in a sense everywhere” and that its power lies in its vast network of literary connections (McGurl, 2009, p. 177). Such connections “place [Iowa alumni’s] work nearer the top of the five-foot-high submission piles that crowd the offices of most literary magazines” (McGurl, 2009, p. 177). As Molly McQuade explains, “Publishing is the business of opinion” and the Iowa pedigree and accompanying connections are often an effective means of swaying opinion (McQuade, 1999, p. 143). Such preferential treatment of Iowa graduates increases their likelihood of publication and of consequently landing a coveted teaching job in a creative writing program. McGurl argues that “as the number of programs grows, this network [of Iowa alumni] has become a network of *teachers* whose primary function is to distribute teaching jobs” (McGurl, 2009, p. 177). McGurl believes that Iowa’s dominance is nothing short of “hegemony” and that its rule has fortunately been both “peaceful and prosperous...for all concerned” (McGurl, 2009, p. 177). While I agree with McGurl’s characterization of Iowa as hegemonic, its rule has been far from “peaceful and prosperous” for the large contingent of the poetry population unimpressed with Ellipticism and frustrated with Iowa’s dominance. The overwhelming sentiment expressed to me in conversations with established poets who see little merit in the poetry discussed in this chapter is simply, “This too shall pass.”

Connect Iowa’s vast network of literary connections and steady stream of emerging poets with Harvard University’s history, wealth, and influence, and it is no wonder that Ellipticism developed into a recognizable literary trend. Helen

Vendler's status as the nation's most prominent poetry critic, grooming of critic Stephen Burt who coined the term "Ellipticism", and championing of Jorie Graham have fueled the production of poems that problematize the "traditional" lyric, favor disjunction and provisionality, contain associative leaps, suspect the "I"s they invoke, and "violate decorum." When asked by the art historian Bruce Cole, "What do you see as your role as a critic?" Vendler responded, "Well, all critics broker art" (Cole, 2004, p. 8). Vendler has served as an intermediary between poets and academics and in the process helped to popularize a set of aesthetic values modeled largely after Graham's.

Chapter 5: “Discourtesy” and its Discontents: Billy Collins as a Poet of the People

Another morning comes: I see,
Dwindling below me on the plane,
The roofs of one more audience
I shall not see again.

God bless the lot of them, although
I don't remember which was which:
God bless the U.S.A., so large,
So friendly, and so rich.

W.H. Auden, “On the Circuit”

Of the well-known living American poets, there are few who have as little in common with Jorie Graham as Billy Collins. Called “the Oprah of poetry” by *Entertainment Weekly* and the “most popular poet in America”³² by *The New York Times*, Collins is the rare living poet for whom the term “best-selling poet” is not oxymoronic (Geler, 2005, p. 1; Weber, 1999, p. 1). Just as Graham’s poetry is known for its “difficulty,” Collins’ poetry is known for its accessibility. Graham writes “sumptuously ‘poetic’” and “ostentatiously thinky” poems with titles such as “Notes on the Reality of the Self,” “Relativity: A Quartet,” and “A Short Organum for the Theater,” while Collins writes plainspoken and humorous poems with titles such as “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes,” “Introduction to Poetry,” “Victoria’s Secret,” “Schoolsville,” “Oh My God,” and “The Trouble With Poetry” (Orr, 2005, p. 1). Graham’s philosophical poems lean heavily on Saussure, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Lacan while Collins’ most scholarly detectable references are to William Wordsworth and Wallace Stevens. Collins is known for his wit while

³² Sales figures actually indicate that the musician Jewel who published the poetry collection *A Night Without Armor* (1999) is the nation’s best-selling poet. *A Night Without Armor* is the best-selling debut volume of poetry ever published by an American.

Graham is committed to utter seriousness. As Dwight Garner simply explains, Collins is “the anti-Jorie Graham” (Garner, 2001, p. 4). The fact that two such stylistically opposed poets occupy prominent positions in contemporary American poetry highlights the expansiveness and complexity of the genre.

Despite their wide-ranging stylistic and epistemological differences, Graham and Collins are quite similar in their assertive engagement of their respective audiences. Graham gained prominence through her courting of academe while Collins gained popularity through his courting of a largely non-academic audience. I believe that the poetic reputations of both charming, charismatic writers were consummated through this strategic process of self-marketing and courtship. Graham’s ascent illuminates how the canonical preferences of critics such as Vendler weigh heavily in the establishment of poetry stardom while Collins’ ascent gives insight into the power of popular culture to pick its own poetry stars. Obviously, the vastly different preferences between academe and those unaffiliated with academe point to a discernible cultural divide. In the following pages I will explore the relationship between “academic” poetry and “popular” poetry³³. How has the university as an instrument of exclusion influenced popular attitudes toward poetry? In relation to this question, in particular, I will use Billy Collins, America’s most popular poet, as a gateway for exploring “popular” interests and the role of audience in contemporary American poetry. What can we learn from Collins’

³³ I use the term “popular” poetry to refer to poetry that falls outside of “official verse culture.” This includes but is not limited to performance poetry, cowboy poetry, and rap.

popularity and what relationship, if any, does his success have to the rise of the creative writing program?

Billy Collins

Billy Collins was born in New York City in 1941. His mother Katherine Collins was a nurse who often recited verses to her son and whom he credits with cultivating in him a love of language. Collins was raised in Jackson Heights, Queens, attended Catholic high school in White Plains, received his undergraduate degree in English from Holy Cross, and received his M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Riverside. He does not have an M.F.A. and has never participated as a student in a poetry workshop. When asked about his beginnings in poetry he explained, "Eighty percent of the reason I was attracted to poetry was that it is something you did by yourself" (Gillogly, 2008, p. 2). Collins is a Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College in the Bronx where he has taught since joining the faculty in 1968. At Lehman College, Collins also serves as a founding member of the Institute for Irish-American studies. In addition, Collins is a faculty member of SUNY Stony Brook Southampton College, where he teaches poetry workshops. He has also taught at Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence College, City University of New York, and University College Galway. Collins is also a Senior Distinguished Fellow at the Winter Park Institute (an affiliate of Rollins College) in Winter Park, Florida and on the advisory board at the *Southern Review*.

Collins is the author of twelve collections of poems and one collection of video poems. He edited the anthologies *Poetry 180* (2003), *180 More Extraordinary Poems for Every Day* (2005) designed to encourage high school students to read a poem a day, and a book of poems about birds. He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation and has been recognized by the New York Public Library as a “Literary Lion.” In addition, he was awarded the Mark Twain Award for Humor in Poetry, the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, the American Irish Historical Society Cultural Award, the Oscar Blumenthal Prize, The Bess Hulcan Prize, the Frederick Bach Prize, the National Poetry Series publication prize for *Questions about Angels* (1991), and the Levinson Prize. Collins served as a two term United States Poet Laureate and as the New York State Poet Laureate.

Poetry collections are typically deemed successful by publishers if they sell in the range of one to two thousand copies. According to David Ebershoff, Collins’ editor at Random House, “Every collection of poetry that Random House has published by Billy has sold in the six figures, which is huge for any book and monumental for poetry” (Gillogly, 2008, p. 1). Such astounding numbers prompted critic Dwight Garner to refer to Collins’ sales figures as the poetry world’s version of “Harry Potter numbers” (Garner, 2001, p. 1).

Collins’ popular appeal is due largely to his skill as a reader of his own poetry in addressing a general audience accustomed to entertainment. Gioia (2003) argues that popular poetry’s emphasis on orality has reshaped the course of contemporary poetry so that “an author’s print readership now heavily depends on attracting an

audience initially through oral performance” (Gioia, 2003, p. 9). Gioia believes that the poetry reading is now a poet’s primary means of publication. Regardless of how one categorizes Collins’ work, his popularity is indisputably due in large part to his engaging presence as a reader. Collins did not publish his first full-length collection of poetry until he was in his forties. In 1991 Edward Hirsch selected him for the National Poetry Series and he was named a New York Public Library Literary Lion. By 1998, Collins had published three full-length collections with the University of Pittsburgh Press. That same year, Garrison Keillor, the radio show host of the program “The Writer’s Almanac,” read a number of Collins’ poems on the air and then invited Collins to appear on his program “A Prairie Home Companion” (Gillogly, 2008, p. 29). Soon after, Terry Gross, from the National Public Radio show “Fresh Air,” interviewed Collins. Prior to his appearances on “Fresh Air” and a “Prairie Home Companion” (which ensured his exposure to listening audiences of over two million people), Collins released a recording of twenty-three poems called *The Best Cigarette*. Critics agree that the total sum of Collins’ media exposure catapulted his career and made him a household name. Collins explains, “When I look back, that actually was a very significant confluence of two exposures to an extremely wide audience for poetry” (Gillogly, 2008, p. 30).

While luck may have contributed to Collins’ entrance into the public consciousness, his skill as a reader of his own work cemented his place there. Collins’ talent as a reader provides a good match for the contemporary audience that emphasizes orality and that is “impatient with the silence of books” (Gioia, 2003, p. 3; Foley, 1993, p. 3). Collins’ good friend and fellow poet Eamon Grennan

admires Collins' ability "to engage with an audience at a level that is uncondescending, unmythifying, undogmatic. He has a mixture of dignity and intimacy and humor that makes those readings extraordinary" (Gillogly, 2008, p. 31). Eric Antonow, the producer of Collins' recording *The Best Cigarette* explains, "Part of the reason why his poetry is so inviting is not just because of the language, it is because he is such an oral poet. He has an ear for what things will actually sound like in front of other people" (Gillogly, 2008, p. 30). Collins' emphasis on the sounds of language make him well suited to perform for audiences accustomed to the musical entertainment world.

Even with his gifts as a reader, what attributes to such staggering sales figure in a climate not known for its enthusiasm toward poetry? An examination of the complicated context in which Collins gained such a sizeable following is necessary to understand his ascent to the status of America's most popular poet. While McGurl (2009) argues that the rise of the creative writing program is the most significant development in American literature since World War II, Dana Gioia (2003) believes that the emergence of electronic communication has influenced literature even more significantly. In his essay "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture," (2003) Gioia explains that for the first time since the invention of moveable type in the late fifteenth century, print is no longer the primary form of communication. According to Gioia, electronic communication has had a profound impact on our relationship with language and the way that we perceive the world. He asserts that, "the shift in the modes of communication has had an extraordinary impact on every aspect of contemporary life, but literature, an imaginative

enterprise created entirely from words, has been profoundly affected in ways that we are still in the process of comprehending” (Gioia, 2003, p. 1). Woven into Gioia’s argument is the idea that the conventional academic perspective is not equipped to assess such radical change. The strength of such a perspective, according to Gioia, is in understanding texts in a historical and thematic framework. He believes that the academy still relies on the conceptual framework of Modernism³⁴ to discuss poetry and that its use as a historical frame is no longer relevant. He asserts that a critic cannot “accurately see what is most innovative in contemporary poetry through the now-antiquarian assumptions of Modernism and the avant-garde”³⁵ (Gioia, 2003, p. 2). The disagreement between McGurl and Gioia about the most significant influence on contemporary poetry points to the divide between academe and the general public. Gioia is a former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts and former businessman who is unaffiliated with the university system while McGurl is an English professor at UCLA. Gioia’s argument suggests that an academic like McGurl does not have the proper perspective to assess poetry’s innovations. I

³⁴ Though Gioia does not explain his conception of the “framework of Modernism,” I interpret this phrase as a reference to the basic tenets of literary modernism that were codified in the pedagogy of New Criticism. For example, literary modernism draws a clear distinction between “high art” and popular culture and privileges impersonality and objectivity over the lyrical expression of the personal. As discussed in my methods chapter, New Criticism dictates that exclusive attention be given to the words on the page and that a reader’s subjective experience of the poem be excluded from literary analysis. New Criticism encourages “impersonal” analysis that rejects a consideration of historical or biographical contexts. “Correct” readings are based solely in and of “the text.”

³⁵ Unfortunately, Gioia also does not specify the “assumptions of Modernism and the avant-garde” that he believes are now “antiquarian.” I take “assumptions of Modernism” to mean the idea that difficulty is a sign of value. I believe that he is using the term “avant-garde” somewhat synonymously with “Modernism” to refer to forward thinking Modernists such as Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound.

believe that though Gioia's argument is built on sweeping generalizations of academe, it does point to a very real chasm between "official verse culture" and "popular" poetry.

Gioia feels that academe is largely responsible for poetry's dwindling readership. He writes,

The history of art tells the same story over and over. As art forms develop, they establish conventions that guide creation, performance, instruction, even analysis. But eventually these conventions grow stale. They begin to stand between the art and its audience. Although much wonderful poetry is being written, the American poetry establishment is locked into a series of exhausted conventions—outmoded ways of presenting, discussing, editing, and teaching poetry. Educational institutions have codified them into a stifling bureaucratic etiquette that enervates the art. These conventions may once have made sense, but today they imprison poetry in an intellectual ghetto. (Gioia, 1992, p. 24)

Gioia's characterization of the contemporary poetry climate is exaggerated and alarmist but does shed important light on the role of educational institutions in promoting poetry that adheres to well-worn conventions. As discussed in the previous chapter, critics like Vendler function as arbiters of taste and wield considerable influence in determining which poets are taught and in what manner. I believe an important consequence of such control is the alienation of general readers.

As poetry's gatekeeper, academe has long demonstrated a preference for difficulty. In his essay "Metaphysical Poets," T.S. Eliot professes the dictum, "poets, in our civilization...must be *difficult*" (Eliot, 1921, p. 248). He writes, "the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into its meaning" (Eliot, 1921, p. 248). I believe that modernism's program of difficulty (that lives on in poets like John Ashbery and Jorie Graham) has negatively impacted the general reader's³⁶ relationship with poetry. Critic Vernon Shetley writes, "common readers of poetry...seem to have been driven closer to extinction. The last time they were sighted in large numbers was in the 1960s, refreshing themselves in the New England landscapes of Robert Frost. Since then, their numbers seem to have steadily dwindled..." (Shetley, 1993, p. 2). According to Shetley, poetry's declining readership is, in part, due to the insufficient skills of contemporary readers. He writes, "Today poetry itself, any poetry, has become difficult for even the more ambitious general reader as the habits of thought and communication inculcated by contemporary life have grown to be increasingly at variance with those demanded for the reading of poetry" (Shetley, 1993, p. 3). Implied in Shetley's argument is that the American public has debased taste because our "entertainment-oriented television-based culture has cheapened and trivialized all forms of public discourse" (Gioia, 2003, p. 9). Academe, according to Shetley, is blameless for the fact that the general reader of poetry is an endangered species. He argues that poetry should be made "more difficult rather than less" (Shetley, 1993, p. 3). Not surprisingly, in her

³⁶ I define "general reader" as a non-specialist reader of poetry. Critics such as Shetley prefer the term "common reader."

blurb featured on the back cover of Shetley's book, Helen Vendler calls Shetley "the most powerful new voice in the criticism of poetry" (Shetley, 1993). Shetley's "powerful new voice" echoes Vendler's elitism and reads as an extension of Eliot's dictum on difficulty.

I believe that the celebration of difficulty (a remnant of Modernism) in university English departments largely accounts for poetry's sense of irrelevance among general readers. Difficulty, as I discussed in the previous chapter, rewards literary scholars whose work requires that they propose ways to understand literary texts. Clear, accessible texts provide little to discuss. Critic Hank Lazer explains,

Poetry used to matter in our culture; with the advent of modernism, it grew too complex for the average reader and passed into the hands of academia and its professionalized explainers; as a result, contemporary poetry has become a culturally irrelevant art distant from the general population.

(Lazer, 2004, p. 1)

Lazer adds, "Many poets, especially those in academia tend to become so absorbed in aesthetic conflicts with colleagues that we lose sight of the larger, more diverse practice of poetry" (Lazer, 2004, p. 12). The tendency on the part of the members of "official verse culture" to lose sight of the expansiveness of poetry and to choose instead to focus on the fraction of poetry deemed "literary" is evidenced by Vendler and Shetley. While inbred academics like Shetley argue that only through the increased "intellectual challenge it offers can current poetry once again make itself a vital part of intellectual culture," I believe that such a stance only further alienates

non-specialist readers (Shetley, 1993, pp. 3-4). As an alternative, Shetley might expand his elitist definition of “intellectual culture” to extend beyond the university caste and investigate poetry in his scholarship that does not privilege difficulty.

Another way to understand the divide between academe and general readers is through the opposition of what critic Adam Kirsch calls “courteous and discourteous poetry” (Kirsch, 2008, p. 113). According to Kirsch, the courteous/discourteous division is “the most profound division in contemporary poetry” (Kirsch, 2008, p. 113). Kirsch defines “poetic courtesy” as “a question of how the poet approaches his or her reader—the central choice from which many decisions about style and subject flow” (Kirsch, 2008, p. 113). Kirsch elaborates,

The courteous poet meets his ideal reader on conditions of equality. He approaches language as a medium of communication, which must be brought to a height of precision and eloquence in order to move and delight that reader. Concretely, this means that the courteous poet will try to make clear the subject or argument of the poem, its basic grammar and concepts. Reference and allusion will be used to deepen understanding... All this emphatically does not mean that the experience the courteous poet offers will be inoffensively pleasant. It means simply that the poet’s knowledge—even of extremity, perplexity, and tragedy—will be made available to the reader, so that it can be genuinely shared.

For the discourteous poet, by contrast, novelty and complexity are the fundamental values, both because they provide aesthetic pleasure and because they differentiate the poet from his predecessors. The reader does

not need to be invited or seduced into the poem; his presence is either assumed or ignored. As a result, no effort is made to avoid confusion about the subject or argument of the poem; on the contrary, it is welcomed. The finished poem will not disclose the event or emotion that brought it into being, finding it more valuable to demonstrate the incommunicability of experience. Reference and allusion tend to be idiosyncratic and alienating, and form is conceived intellectually and theoretically rather than discursively or musically. (Kirsh, 2008, pp. 113-114)

He adds that both “courteous” and “discourteous” poets can produce work of the highest order. Kirsch emphasizes this particular division in contemporary poetry because he believes “the balance today has swung so far in the direction of discourtesy” (Kirsch, 2008, p. 114).

I argue that Collins’ success is due to his courtesy and accessibility in a climate of discourtesy and difficulty. The total regard for the general reader reflected in his poems functions as a kind of antidote to the alienation of the reader caused by “discourteous” poetry such as Jorie Graham’s and Mark Levine’s. As critic Donna Stonecipher explains, “Collins’ poems are in the business of making themselves palatable to the most disenfranchised of poetry readers” (Stonecipher, 2004, p. 2). Collins believes, as do I, that it is too easy “to play games with a reader and have him down in the bushes looking for a painted egg” (Potts, n.d., p. 2).³⁷

³⁷ Interestingly, Collins refers to the twenty-five year period leading up to his publication in 1987 in *Poetry* as a time during which he was “writing badly under various influences.” Collins explains, “I went to graduate school, got a Ph.D. and began a career as a professor. The poet emerged gradually. I was under the

Given the abundance of “discourteous” contemporary American poetry, Collins’ work is a refuge for readers who prefer clarity to opacity. His work implicitly recognizes the frustration generated by poetry’s sequestration in academe and targets an audience other than the established literary coterie.

As arguably the most “courteous” poet in America, Collins has been praised for “building a rare bridge of admiration for his work between [the] serious literary fold and poetry novitiates” (Weber, 1999, p. 1). Garner has humorously referred to him as “both prom king and starting point guard” for the “Amiable School of American Poets” (Garner, 2010, p. 1). Collins’ popular appeal can be read as proof that the American public is not metrophobic but simply hungry for accessible poetry. Ernest Hilbert writes, “His [Collins’] immense popularity (by poetry standards) may be all the evidence one needs that many people *want* to enjoy poetry... They do not want to be shut out, any more than they want to be spurned from a recital hall or art gallery” (Hilbert, 2006, p. 2). Courting the audience is a top priority for Collins. He explains, “I think a lot of readers are frustrated with the obscurity and self-indulgence of most poetry. I try very assiduously to court the reader and engage him. I am interested more in a public following than a critical one” (Stonecipher, 2004, p. 1). Collins views the invitation of the general reader into his work as simply a matter of manners.

In the article “Dear Reader: What Makes Billy Collins One of America’s Best-Known (and Best-Selling) Poets? Perhaps its his attention to What Matters

mistaken modernist belief that there was an unbreakable connection between value and difficulty, so I wrote a lot of impenetrable poetry” (Plimpton, 2001, p. 5).

Most—His Audience” (2008), Elizabeth Kelley Gillogly explains that Collins “understands the importance of his audience better, perhaps, than any other contemporary American poet. Collins never ignores his readers. He never makes them feel stupid. He never pretends he does not need them” (Gillogly, 2008, p. 27). Gillogly describes Collins as, “the kind of guy who can—and does—talk with anyone and everyone: the waiter, the cabdriver, and the old man on the corner. He acknowledges them, just as he does his readers. Collins sees this as basic etiquette” (Gillogly, 2008, p. 28). Anecdotally, my first in-person encounter with Collins occurred during a softball game for poets at Sarah Lawrence College where I was the pitcher and he was the lead-off batter. I view his willingness to participate in such a game as reflection of his genuine desire to engage with the public. Whether interacting with his cabdriver, softball pitcher, or reader, Collins demonstrates courtesy. Collins explains, “Not to be aware of the reader’s presence is sort of like being in a room with somebody and ignoring them, which I don’t think is an acceptable way of behaving in life or in literature” (Gillogly, 2008, p. 28). About his consciousness of the reader, Collins told *New York Times* reporter Bruce Weber,

I have one reader in mind, someone who is in the room with me, and who I’m talking to, and I want to make sure I don’t talk too fast, or too glibly. Usually I try to create a hospitable tone at the beginning of a poem. Stepping from the title to the first lines is like stepping into a canoe. A lot of things can go wrong. (Weber, 1999, p. 3)

In an interview with Alexandra van de Kamp, Collins expressed a similar sentiment in slightly different terms. He explained, “I want to bring the reader along to share

whatever surprises the journey may hold. I try to begin the poem on a common ground, which is a way of assembling a little group around the campfire of the poem. Scoutmaster Collins will then tell some scary stories” (van de Kamp, 2001). Collins’ trademark attention to his audience is what, in part, makes his work so accessible to the non-specialist reader of poetry.

Collins’ “courtesy” as a poet comes not just from an acknowledgement of the reader’s presence but also from a keen understanding of what brings many readers to literature. In a chapter titled “Reader’s Life,” Stephen Dobyns (2003) writes that people read fiction and poetry because,

It gives us information about our lives. We read in part to see ourselves. We read to see what our futures will be. We read to see that our most private joys and fears are in fact shared with the human community. And we read to have our opinions about the world challenged or even strengthened. Our question is what is it to be a human being, what is it to be me. At some level the subject of any story or poem is always the reader, and the writer who ignores this does so at his or her peril. (Dobyns, 2003, p. 40)

Despite his presumptuous use of the universal “we,” I believe Dobyns’ statement does express many of the most significant reasons why readers turn to literature. I also believe these motivations are often best addressed by the clear communication of “courteous” poets like Billy Collins.

In the introduction of *180 More Extraordinary Poems for Every Day* (2005) Billy Collins refers to the word “accessible” as the “scarlet A-word” (Collins, 2005, p. xvii). He explains that it is an overused praise word “used to loosely mean poetry

that can be readily understood” (Collins, 2005, p. xiv). Collins offers an alternate definition that, in his estimation, avoids a “stone-throwing argument between the Camp of Clarity and the Camp of Difficulty” (Collins, 2005, p. xiv). Collins suggests that “accessible” be used to mean “easy to enter” (Collins, 2005, p. xiv). He likens an accessible poem to a building with an open or unlocked front door. According to Collins, a poem with a clear entrance may or may not have a body that’s meaning is readily available. Collins explains that poems with the front door left open are “hospitable toward their readers” (Collins, 2005, p. xvi). According to critic Dwight Garner, the distinction between accessibility and hospitability is an important one for Collins. Garner writes, “When he [Billy Collins] gets tarred with the label ‘accessible’—only in today’s mandarin poetry world, by the way, could that be an insult—he demurs and says the term calls to mind on-ramps for the ‘poetically handicapped.’ He suggests ‘hospitable’” (Garner, 2001, p. 1). Collins considers what happens to readers encountering inhospitable poems when he asks, “If you need to cut an entrance into a poem, who is going to bother? Why should a reader be asked to commit repeated acts of breaking and entering?” (Collins, 2005, p. xvi). In considering a poem’s complexity, Collins asks, “If a question has no clear starting place, how can it go anywhere? If a poem does not begin in lucidity, how can it advance into the mysterious?” (Collins, 2005, p. xvi). Collins asserts that clarity does not preclude depth.

Nowhere is Collins’ “hospitality” more glaringly apparent than at the openings of his poetry collections. His introductory poems reflect Collins’ belief that the reader “is someone who doesn’t care about [him] or has no vested interest”

(Plimpton, 2001, p. 11). He explains, “I start the poem assuming that I have to engage his or her interest. There is no pre-existing reason for you to be interested in me and certainly not in my family, so there must be a lure at the beginning of the poem” (Plimpton, 2001, p. 11). He adds, “why not make sure he or she is on board at the beginning of every book of poems by throwing down a welcome mat, an address to the reader before the book (or play) proper begins?” (van de Kamp, 2001, p. 8). Collins’ “welcome mat” in *The Art of Drowning* (1995) is the prefatory poem “Dear Reader” that lures the reader into the collection through flattery.

DEAR READER

Baudelaire considers you his brother,
 and Fielding calls out to you every few paragraphs
 as if to make sure you have not closed the book,
 and now I am summoning you up again,
 attentive ghost, dark silent figure standing
 in the doorway of these words.

Pope welcomes you into the glow of his study,
 takes down a leather-bound Ovid to show you.
 Tennyson lifts the latch to a moated garden,
 and with Yeats you lean against a broken pear tree,
 the day hooded by low clouds.

But now you are here with me,
composed in the open field of this page,
no room or manicured garden to enclose us,
no Zeitgeist marching in the background,
no heavy ethos thrown over us like a cloak.

Instead, our meeting is so brief and accidental,
unnoticed by the monocled eye of History,
you could be the man I held the door for
this morning at the bank or post office
or the one who wrapped my speckled fish.
You could be someone I passed on the street
or the face behind the wheel of an oncoming car.

The sunlight flashes off your windshield,
and when I look up into the small, posted mirror,
I watch you diminish—my echo, my twin—
and vanish around a curve in this whip
of a road we can't help traveling together.

(Collins, 1995, p. 3)

The poem uses ordinary speech and a companionable tone to welcome the reader and enlist her services. The appearance of the word “you” in each of the first four

lines followed by the description of the reader as an “attentive ghost, dark silent figure standing/ in the doorway of these words,” serves as a pronounced and respectful acknowledgement of the reader. Such direct address stands in stark contrast to Jorie Graham’s previously discussed poem “To the Reader” in which the reader is never addressed and the word “you” never mentioned. Like Charles Baudelaire and Henry Fielding before him, Collins respectfully summons his reader but unlike William Butler Yeats, he does so without the “Zeitgeist” of Modernism “marching in the background.” Collins infers that he has no aesthetic agenda and so there will be “no heavy ethos thrown over us like a cloak.” Instead, he underscores the casualness of his “meeting” with the reader by describing it as “brief and accidental,/ unnoticed.” Collins further endears himself to the general reader by acknowledging that these serendipitous “meetings” may very well involve his local fishmonger, a man at the bank, or the countless pedestrians he passes. Collins’ tone here is unassuming, humble, and appreciative. In the final stanza he recognizes the ephemeral nature of the “meeting” by describing the reader as someone who will eventually “diminish” and “vanish around a curve in this whip/ of a road we can’t help traveling together.” Read as a whole, the poem is a simple, unpretentious, and artful invitation for a neglected portion of the poetry readership to join Collins.

Collins’ poem “Night Letter to the Reader” offers a similar display of hospitality toward the reader. As the opening poem in the collection *Nine Horses* (2002), it portrays Collins as an everyman and works to dispel any associations of poetry with pretentiousness. The poem begins, “I get up from the tangled bed and go outside,/ a bird leaving its nest,/ a snail taking a holiday from its shell.” He

equates himself with a bird and a snail and describes himself a few stanzas later as “an animal in pajamas.” Such comparisons serve to deflate any preexisting notions of the poet as a pompous bard. Collins is an “ordinary insomniac” who is no better than any other sentient being. Unlike the epistolary opening of “Dear Reader,” it is not until the seventh stanza in “Night Letter to a Reader” that Collins directly addresses the reader. He writes, “I am wondering if you are even listening/ and why I bother to tell you these things/ that will never make a difference,/ flecks of ash, tiny chips of ice.” Collins’ self-effacing tone here reads as an exaggerated display of humility. Such a tactic subverts any notions of the poet as high priest and demonstrates Collins’ capitalistic savvy for recognizing an ignored niche of poetry readers.

In addition to Collins’ hospitality, he actively seeks to distance himself from “discourteous” poetry. In “A Portrait of the Reader with a Bowl of Cereal,” Collins takes aim at Modernism’s pomposity. The poem begins with the following epigraph from Yeats: “A poet... never speaks directly,/ as to someone at the breakfast table.” In an act of amusing defiance, Collins’ poem addresses a reader sitting across from him at the breakfast table. The poem serves as an expression of disagreement with Yeats’ pronouncement on the merits of obscurity and difficulty in poetry. The body of the single stanza poem reads:

Every morning I sit across from you
 at the same small table,
 the sun all over the breakfast things—

a curve of a blue-and-white pitcher,
a dish of berries—
me in a sweatshirt or robe,
you invisible.

Most days, we are suspended
over a deep pool of silence.

I stare straight through you
or look out the window at the garden,
the powerful sky,
a cloud passing behind a tree.

There is no need to pass the toast,
the pot of jam,
or pour you a cup of tea,
and I can hide behind the paper,
rotate in its drum of calamitous news.

But some days I may notice
a little door swinging open
in the morning air,
and maybe the tea leaves
of some dream will be stuck
to the china slope of the hour—
then I will lean forward,
elbows on the table,

with something to tell you,
 and you will look up, as always,
 your spoon dripping milk, ready to listen.

(Collins, 1998, p. 3)

The poem's conversational tone and uncomplicated diction and syntax function as a mockery of Yeats' espousal of difficulty and obscurity. Collins adopts a persona as a discourteous speaker and describes himself as dressed in "a sweatshirt or robe" and the reader as "invisible." The poem's ill-mannered speaker "stare[s] straight through" the reader and sees no reason to perform niceties such as passing the toast or pouring the reader a cup of tea. The self-absorbed speaker prefers instead to "hide behind the paper." In the rare instance when the speaker "may notice" the reader, it is because "the tea leaves/ of some dream [are] stuck to the china slope of the hour." The set of circumstances Collins deems necessary in order for the reader to be made visible to the speaker is nothing short of absurd. Collins deepens his criticism of Yeats' pronouncement in the poem's final lines when the speaker describes the invisible but attentive reader "as always...ready to listen." The reader here is at the speaker's beck and call. The "portrait" Collins depicts is not ultimately of the reader as much as it is of the self-absorbed speaker who depends on the reader's subservience. Overall, the poem operates not only as a rebuttal of Yeats' epigraph but also as a caricature of the "discourteous" poetry he espouses.

Collins' poems of departure for his collections reflect a similar attentiveness to the reader as his introductory poems. In "The Flight of the Reader," Collins' final

poem in *Sailing Around the Room* (2001), he offers a humble farewell and expression of appreciation to his loyal readers.

THE FLIGHT OF THE READER

You'd think we would have had enough
of one another
after all the rain streaming down these windows,
the walks out to the garden when it clears,
the same yellow and white flowers,
all the sleepless nights—
the toy car going in circles on the bed table.

But still, you stay perched on my shoulder,
cricket or bluebird,
wild parrot digging your claws into my loud shirt.

Is it because I do not pester you
with the invisible gnats of meaning,
never release the whippets of anxiety from their crates,
or hold up my monstrous mirror,
a thing the size of a playing field?

Whatever makes you stay,
I hate to think of that morning
when I will wake up to find you are gone,
heading toward the open sea,
dragging the cables that bound us together,
leaving me with nothing more to say.

But don't get me wrong.
It's not that I cannot live without you,
cannot sit under an ordinary green tree
with no desire to reach for the pen in my pocket,
or lie contented on a couch all day,
one hand over my mouth.

(Collins, 2001, p. 171)

Here Collins questions the reasons for the reader's steady accompaniment. Taking a jab at "discourteous" poetry, Collins asks, "Is it because I do not pester you/ with invisible gnats of meaning." His questioning implicates John Ashberry's canonical poem "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror" as well as self-indulgent poems of introspection when he asks if the reader decided to stay because he did not "hold up my monstrous mirror,/ a thing the size of a playing field?" The tone here is far from one of genuine curiosity. Collins knows that most general readers desire neither Ashberry's obscurity nor poems that focus on the autobiographical "I" at the exclusion of the reader. He is well aware that his wit, accessible language, and

charm are what lure readers to his writing and seduce them to stay. He is a kind of puppeteer controlling “the cables that b[i]nd us together” and then coyly feigning surprise at the reader’s decision to “stay perched on [his] shoulder.” One of my interpretations is that as a result of such artful self-marketing Collins “can live without you” and “lie contented on a couch all day” basking lazily in thoughts of his impressive book sales. The final lines are less an expression of smugness or self-congratulation than they are a self-assured acknowledgement of hard-earned popularity and general contentment.

For this plainspoken and egalitarian poet, “official verse” culture provides a kind of authority against which he can affirm his status as a poet of the people. As an English professor for over thirty years, Collins is well acquainted with the literary traditions, poetic forms, and preferences of “official verse” culture. Such knowledge provides perfect fodder for illuminating the idiosyncrasies of the poetry establishment and calling into question its cultural authority. In “Paradelle for Susan” Collins takes aim at corseted formal verse and the members of “official verse” culture who monitor its use. He does so through an elaborate joke that makes various forms of literary authority its punch line. “Paradelle for Susan,” more than any other of Collins’ poems, demonstrates why he has earned a reputation as “the class clown in the schoolhouse of American poetry” (Whitney, 2004, p. 1). According to Collins, the poem was the result of wanting “to write an intentionally bad formal poem, which would look like the result of an inept poet working over his head” (Plimpton, 2001, p. 18). Collins explains,

Rather than write a terrible sonnet or villanelle (there are enough of those), I decided to make up a new form complete with its own rules. To add some silliness, I presented it as an obscure form begun by the troubadours, the boys who gave us many of the forms so popular as assignments in poetry workshops. You know, this week we'll write a villanelle, next week a sestina. Such an artificial way to proceed! (Plimpton, 2001, p. 14)

Collins' "paradelle," which is a fusion of parody and the strict French villanelle, reads:

I remember the quick, nervous bird of your love.
 I remember the quick, nervous bird of your love.
 Always perched on the thinnest, highest branch.
 Always perched on the thinnest, highest branch.
 Thinnest love, remember the quick branch.
 Thinnest love, remember the quick branch.
 Always nervous, I perched on your highest bird the.

It is time for me to cross the mountain.
 It is time for me to cross the mountain.
 And find another shore to darken with my pain.
 And find another shore to darken with my pain.
 Another pain for me to darken the mountain.
 And find the time, cross my shore, to with it is to.

The weather warm, the handwriting familiar.
 The weather warm, the handwriting familiar.
 Your letter flies from my hand into the waters below.
 Your letter flies from my hand into the waters below.
 The familiar waters below my warm hand.
 Into handwriting your weather flies you letter the from the.

I always cross the highest letter, the thinnest bird.
 Below the waters of my warm familiar pain,
 Another hand to remember your handwriting.
 The weather perched for me on the shore.
 Quick, your nervous branch flew from love.
 Darken the mountain, time and find was my into it
 was with to to.

(Collins, 2001, p. 116)

Beneath Collins' farcical poem is a cheeky pseudo-academic footnote that reads:

NOTE: The *paradelle* is one of the more demanding French fixed forms, first appearing in the *langue d'oc* love poetry of the eleventh century. It is a poem of four six-line stanzas in which the first and second lines, as well as the third and fourth lines of the first three stanzas, must be identical. The fifth and sixth lines, which traditionally resolve these stanzas, must use *all* the words

from the preceding lines and *only* those words. Similarly, the final stanza must use *every* word from *all* the preceding stanzas and only those words.

(Collins, 2001, p. 116)

Collins' poem is an absurd mess that meets the technical requirements of his invented form but that has no discernible poetic merit. In a display of impressive incompetence, words (that Collins cannot manage to recycle properly in order to meet the demands of the form) pile up in an incoherent heap at the end of each stanza. For example, the line "Darken the mountain, time and find was my into it/ was with to to" is a model of ungrammatical muddlement formed from leftover words.

What Collins' hoax lacks in poetic merit, it more than makes up for in its clever exposure of "official verse" culture's sanctioning process. "Paradelle for Susan" was first published in 1997 in *The American Scholar*, the official journal of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. According to Collins, he knew the journal's editor Joseph Epstein "had a sense of literary humor" (Plimpton, 2001, p. 15). What began as an exercise of incompetence grew into something much larger with the poem's publication. Collins explains,

Epstein wrote to tell me about the mail they were getting. Subscribers were sending angry letters questioning the magazine's judgment for having published such a slovenly poem. How could the journal of the Phi Beta Kappa Society endorse such literary incompetence? One person said it was the worst paradelle he'd ever read. (Plimpton, 2001, p. 15)

One such critic in a review of *Sailing Around the Room* (2001) where “Paradelle for Susan” was republished wrote, “Collins is a sloppy craftsman, and he doesn’t care. This is nowhere more evident than in ‘Paradelle for Susan.’ A paradelle is a particularly restricting French form...Not a form for a lazy poet” (Darling, n.d., p. 3). In describing his response to angry readers of *The American Scholar* Collins explains, “I didn’t want to fess up and spoil all the fun, so I wrote a letter that asked for sympathy. The paradelle is an extremely difficult form, my defense ran. I did the best that I could” (Plimpton, 2001, p. 15). Fallout from Collins’ prank did not stop even after he revealed the fraudulent form’s fabricated pedigree. Amazingly, the paradelle became a legitimate form and the subject of Theresa Welford’s *The Paradelle: An Anthology* (2005). Collins explains,

I began hearing rumors that the paradelle was being assigned as a workshop exercise...I agreed to write an introduction [for the paradelle anthology] titled ‘A Brief History of the Paradelle’ accounting for the disappearance of all the paradelles written between 1200 and 1998. My ultimate dream is to see the term ‘paradelle’ in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.
(Plimpton, 2001, p. 15)

The paradelle phenomenon gained further momentum when poet Annie Finch included a chapter on the paradelle in her book *An Exaltation of Forms* (2002).

The paradelle’s subversive beginnings coupled with Collins’ impressive popularity serve as a counterweight to the literary authority of “official verse” culture. Not only does Collins command the attention of the non-specialist reader excluded by the literary “elite” but his paradelle stunt exposes the fallibility of the

“literary elite’s” critical standards. The poem’s reception raises the possibility that there are other “paradelles” in our midst multiplying and being codified by “official verse” culture. Collins’ prank also sheds light on the pipeline of poets who privilege pedigree, are eager to adopt the latest literary trends, and disseminate particular modes of writing in their workshops.

While Collins attributes his sense of humor and penchant for pranks to his father who was known for his practical jokes involving co-workers on Wall Street, his poetic influences are less predictable. The poets Collins cites include Howard Nemerov, Karl Shapiro, Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, the Beats, Philip Larkin, and Charles Simic. Perhaps one of Collins’ greatest influences is Wallace Stevens, a poet who on first glance shares little in common with Collins. This Harvard educated American Modernist poet celebrated by Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom is known for his philosophical and meditative poems that are concerned with the relationships between the real and the imagined. His work is known for its technical and thematic complexity, abstractions, and overall difficulty. Not surprisingly, Stevens has had significant influence on Jorie Graham and the Ellipticals. Stevens’ influence on Collins is less readily apparent. A self-described former “Wallace Stevens acolyte,” Collins early on aspired to write poems as willfully difficult as Stevens’. Collins explains, “I came under the sway of Wallace Stevens when I was in college and graduate school, and basically set as a life goal the ambition of writing third-rate Wallace Stevens. I thought I would be completely content if I was recognized at some later point in my life as a third-rate Wallace

Stevens” (Whitney, 2004, p. 1). Collins describes his thinking as a young poet as misguided. He explains,

I wrote very difficult poetry and I was really guilty of not knowing what I was talking about. I was going for a kind of clever verbal effect. I was trying to sounds linguistically or verbally interesting. I had a sense, I guess from just reading a lot of poetry of how a poem would start and how it would end but really I didn't know what I was doing. It had very little connection to my life. I was committing these acts of literature—there was no wiring that was connected to thought, feeling, or experience—it was purely literary. And I think I kind of brought the assumption that poetry had to be extremely gloomy and incomprehensible, or nearly so. And when I wrote I took on the role of the despondent and difficult to understand person. Whereas in life, I was easy to understand, to the point of being simple-minded maybe.

(Whitney, 2004, p. 2)

Fortunately for the poetry world, Collins found an alternate way to write that did not involve what he calls “the rather involuted style of high modernism whose high priests were Pound, Eliot and Stevens, and Crane perhaps” (Whitney, 2004, p. 2). I believe that Collins' early experimentation with the Modernist sensibility through imitations of Stevens was fundamental to his eventual shift to clear, accessible writing. Stevens provided the backdrop against which to rebel and to eventually seek out a highly profitable poetry niche. Such experimentation also gave Collins insider knowledge of “official verse culture” that would later prove useful in stunts

such as “Paradelle for Susan” intended to “mock poetry, to knock it off its altar” (Whitney, 2004, p. 2).

For Collins, the alternative to Modernist difficulty carried significant risks. He explains, “I think clarity is the real risk in poetry because you are exposed. You’re out in the open field. You’re actually saying things that are comprehensible, and it’s easy to criticize something you can understand” (Whitney, 2004, p. 2). Collins moved away from Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane and found new models in Karl Shapiro, Philip Larkin, Howard Nemerov, Ted Hughes, and Thom Gunn. With this shift, I believe that Collins smartly sought out a non-academic audience that would not criticize his clarity as simplistic but rather see in him an invitation to sip from the well of a literary art that too often excludes the non-specialist reader.

Chapter 6: Points of Arrival and Departure

The seeds of this dissertation that were sewn during my experiences as a student and teacher became a serious area of inquiry due largely to Mark McGurl's groundbreaking research on postwar fiction and the rise of the creative writing program. Mark McGurl argues that, unlike their colleagues in traditional academic disciplines, writers are not cogs in a knowledge machine and that the current structure of creative writing programs provides the opportunity for universities to function as a "difference engine" (McGurl, 2010, p. 85). Investigating beyond the well-worn claim that institutionalized creative writing programs produce McPoetry, my research has helped me to understand that alone as individuals (as in the case of Kay Ryan) or as parts of a siloed creative writing department, poets often do function as a kind of "difference engine." Individuals like Ryan often write against the grain of literary trends, and siloed creative writing programs operate as an isolated bastion of creativity in the institution at large. In the case of Jorie Graham, however, I found that McGurl's assessment does not hold true. Graham and her close contingent of Iowa affiliates have smartly combined forces with Helen Vendler and the Harvard empire (certainly considered by most to be exemplary of the emphases and workings of "traditional academic disciplines") to promote their work. Graham and her "Elliptical" understudies give academics, exhausted with the seeming simplicity of "traditional" lyrics and narratives, something to decode and the poets are in turn lauded for their "difficulty" and freshness. Such attention from academics brings with it significant perks. As discussed in my chapter on Jorie Graham, academics like Vendler have the power to dole out fellowships, endowed

professorships, and bring their preferred poets to the attention of a large audience of literary scholars. With this attention comes book contracts, the opportunity to judge book competitions, the presence on university syllabi, the power to hire like-minded fellow poets, the power to influence emerging poets, and esteemed positions like chancellorships at the Academy of American Poets. The lines of power seep well beyond the confines and cogs of a “knowledge machine” lodged within the university and into, for example, the publishing industry and national organizations that fund and celebrate poets. In the case of the Graham and Vender, the university serves not as a “difference engine” but as hegemonic block with enormous influence. During the course of my research, insights about the extent of their influence both surprised and alarmed me.

Billy Collins demonstrates that despite critics’ claims about the death of poetry and the dwindling audience for poetry, general readers are alive and well but are too often ignored. In contemporary American poetry, much of academe has proven itself synonymous with “discourtesy” and so opened a niche for Collins to exploit. During the course of my research, I was surprised to see the extent of Collins’ business skills. I found him to be an accomplished capitalist with a business model that is beholden to his readers. I view his work as evidence that some poetry can be packaged and sold in the marketplace and that it is not an art simply reserved for a poet’s contemplative pleasure or for academe’s literary scholars. It is the best refutation of Thomas Lux’s line, “No poem/ ever bought a hamburger, or not too many. It’s true,” that we have in contemporary American poetry (Lux, 1997, p. 69). I believe that Collins’ book sales are proof that the non-specialist reader

makes a worthy patron and that the university need not be viewed as the only form of contemporary patronship for poets.

I also believe that Collins is a particular kind of “difference engine” in that he serves an important function for non-specialist readers of poetry. Just as his initiative as U.S. Poet Laureate was designed to promote poetry in secondary schools through the anthologizing and distribution of accessible contemporary poetry, his own work invites general readers and gives them an entry point to explore more challenging poetry. As Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky might explain, Collins offers the familiar as a gate of departure and leaves open the possibility that the reader might experience the revitalizing force of defamiliarization in the work of more challenging poetry. As an English educator and advocate for poetry, I view Collins’ writing as an important tool for recruiting the next generation of poetry readers.

My research on Kay Ryan both confirmed and assuaged my fear that, in this “program era,” talented poets operating outside of academe are being overlooked. As I discussed in chapter three, Ryan labored diligently in obscurity for years before finally receiving recognition. While her case confirms that “outsiders” can make it, I am concerned that such a breakout may become increasingly rare. In an article titled “The New Math of Poetry” David Alpaugh (2010) argues that, as the amount of poetry published grows each year, so too does the likelihood that “masterpieces are getting lost in the jungle of verse” (Alpaugh, 2010, p. 1). One of the potential consequences of the increase in the number of creative writing programs and the connected increase in online and print journals is that upcoming Kay Ryans may

face an even more challenging path to public recognition. As a participant in the contemporary poetry world, I have observed that talent is rarely enough in gaining exposure. My most recognized poetry peers are typically also the most skilled self-promoters. While poetry crafted in isolation away from the homogenizing forces of the poetry workshop may be occasionally outstanding, its disconnection from the entangled worlds of creative writing programs and publishing make its discovery unlikely at best. Still, I am hopeful that “outsider” poets will find a way to flourish because if Kay Ryan, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman are any example, much of our nation’s best writing comes from them. Without the pressure to publish prematurely, the distraction of pursuing a creative writing career, the influences of tenure, the demands of teaching apprentice poets, and participation in literary trends, these outsider poets can focus entirely on their craft. However, as the “great creative writing fungus” assumes a more dominant presence in the literary landscape, I believe it will take even greater effort to unearth our nation’s hidden literary truffles (Ryan, 2005, p. 2).

My research also gave me important insight into the role of critics. By definition, contemporary poetry has not yet been vetted by history and is particularly susceptible to the influences of contemporary critics and institutions. One needs look no further than Elizabeth Bishop to find a poet who was largely overlooked during her lifetime. Bishop’s close friend Robert Lowell, who was born six years after her in 1917, was a literary celebrity by the time of his death in 1977. Helen Vendler declared Lowell, “our greatest contemporary poet” in a review of his work two years before his death (Vendler, 1975, p. 1). Lowell’s front-page *New York*

Times obituary said that he “was regarded by many critics as the best English language poet of his generation” (McQuiston, 1977, p. 1). Conversely, Elizabeth Bishop’s *New York Times* obituary two years later explained, “Miss Bishop, although less widely known than contemporaries such as Robert Lowell, enjoyed extraordinary esteem among critics and fellow poets” (Schwartz, 1979, p. B13). As David Orr explains, “very few contemporary critics considered her to be Lowell’s equal. And almost nobody thought she might be his superior” (Orr, 2011, p. 106). Bishop is now regarded as a major 20th century poet with enormous influence while Lowell’s reputation has declined considerably. The notable shift demonstrates the fallibility of critics working in a contemporary context and the importance of time in separating the wheat from the chaff. My research highlighted for me the possibility that with time even accomplished critics such as Helen Vendler may be proven wrong.

During the course of my research I was also mildly surprised by the uncritical stance on the part of many critics toward the historical role of the university. With the exception of McGurl, the critics most willing to address the role of the university in their scholarship are not employed by universities. McGurl himself labels many of these individuals “literary journalists” rather than “scholars.” My sense is that this gap in the research is largely a result of the inherent risk involved for a university-employed scholar in criticizing her employer and potentially implicating influential members of the field. Interestingly, a recent article by Jeffrey Williams titled “Deconstructing Academe: The Birth of Critical University Studies” (2012) suggests that criticism of the university is on the rise. In the coming years, I will be

interested to see whether English professors more frequently incorporate conflicts related to higher education into the curriculum and make the influences and power structures of the university a more central subject of their research.

Finally, the act of writing this dissertation has confirmed one of the ideas I learned long ago from writing poetry. That is, what we perceive is only a partial rendering of the world. Our accounts are always partial and this dissertation is no different. In his introduction to *The Art of Description* (2010), Mark Doty reminds us that

Perception is simultaneous and layered, and to single out any aspect of it for naming is to turn your attention away from myriad other things, those braiding elements of the *sensorium*—that continuous, complex response to things perpetually delivered by the senses, the encompassing sphere that is such a large part of our subjectivity. (Doty, 2010, p. 3)

Throughout this process, I have been both daunted and humbled by contemporary poetry's glacial scope and constantly shifting landscape. It is a field that by definition is in a continuing state of flux. Poetry is, as Stephen Dobyns tells us, "a country whose boundaries [are] never fixed, that always seem to expand" (Dobyns, 2011, p. 2). It is my hope that this research has opened avenues for discussion about the ways in which the rise of the creative writing program has broadened and complicated the boundaries of contemporary American poetry.

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