The signature poetics of Sharon Olds and John Cage

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by

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Table of Contents

List of Figures
Abstract
Chapter 1—Signature: Protocol
   Introduction
   Tone
   A Very Short Primer on the Unconscious
   On the Signature: Derrida’s Work on Poetics
   Mimetology
   Poetics and Impersonality
   Protocol
Chapter 2—Sharon Olds: In Two Places At Once
   Introduction: the Fetish Double
   Sharon Olds
   “Satan Says”
   “Love Fossil”
   “Rising Daughter”
   “I Go Back to May 1937”
   “Nurse Whitman”
   Poems About Mothering
Chapter 3—“The Lifting” and the Superego
   “The Lifting”
   The Golden Rose
   “Fate” and Oil
   Anticipation
   “35/10”
   “What if God”
   “Greed and Aggression”
   Conclusion
Chapter 4—The Development of John Cage’s Signature Theory
   “Get Out of Whatever Cage You Find Yourself In”
   The Empty Cage: Space of Difference
   Poetics and Silence (Lecture on Nothing)
   Open Cage, Open Form
   Cage and the Cage: the Rebus Signature
Cagean Signature Theory, Stage I: Resistance to Idiom 121
Robert Rauschenberg: A Silent Signature? 128
Cagean Reception Theory 132
Signature, Order Words, Superego: From Rauschenberg to Duchamp 139

Chapter 5—Cage Joins the Wake 148
Protocol: Funeral Arrangements 148
Glasification of Mourners 149
Scoring the Signature 152
Reading Joyce Cagefree 153
Joyce-Cage: The JC-effect 155
Colossal Writing 160
Protocol: Forget It 163
The DoubleJoynted JJ 165
Syntax Return 166
Conclusion: Rolling Doubles 169

Works Cited 171

Works Consulted 175

Appendices 181
Appendix A: Review of Criticism on Sharon Olds 182

About the Author  End Page
List of Figures

Figure 1. The first page of Cage’s poem as it appears in *Empty Words* 150
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies and applies the signature theory of Jacques Derrida to two American poets, Sharon Olds and John Cage. I begin by looking at the two texts by Derrida that most closely apply signature theory to poetics: Glas and Signsponge. Along the way, I narrow the scope of Derrida’s writing somewhat by focusing on psychoanalytic aspects that relate to Jacques Lacan’s ideas and to the concept of the superego. From this work I isolate some protocols for reading, which are then used to study Olds and Cage, two poets who have clearly developed their own signature styles. Here are the protocols:

1. Treat Olds’ and Cage’s texts as blazons.
2. Read for anthonomasia—Derrida’s neologism combining the words anthology and antonomasia (the trope of using proper nouns as common nouns and vice versa).
3. Look for (and practice) hypogram and anagram.
4. Trace the placement in abyss.
5. Post-death-of-the-author, read and write for and as if mourning.
6. Eat the proper names, continuing whatever encryption of the letters can already be read.

My studies of Olds and Cage alternate between application of these protocols and my attempt to follow the respective laws of their own signatures. In Olds’ poetry the most prominent signature effect is the encryption of the Sh-effect. Cage’s poetics places his rebus-signature in the abyss of his texts.
Chapter One

Signature: Protocol

Introduction

Jacques Derrida’s reputation among American literary scholars has largely to do with deconstruction and the role that term plays in poststructuralism. Three of Derrida’s early books, *Writing and Difference* (1967), *Of Grammatology* (1967), and *Margins of Philosophy* (1972) are more or less canonized in the American literary establishment, and a few of the essays contained in them are usually anthologized in readers designed for literary theory courses. Derrida’s theory of the signature comes on the second wave of his texts and ideas, taking up and developing certain ideas present in the prior works. Those aspects of the signature theory that interest me the most come embedded in two texts, *Glas* (1974) and *Signéponge/Signsponge* (1977). *Glas* focuses on the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel and the French writer Jean Genet, and *Signsponge* is devoted to the French poet Francis Ponge. It is likely that Derrida’s works, among those of theorists in general, have had the single greatest influence on the contemporary theories of Anglo-American literature, but while the later projects (roughly from *Glas* onward) have influenced Anglo-American literary studies, it is generally thought that the “basics” of Derrida’s work should be grasped through the early texts. In my view, the difficulty of all these texts persists, no matter the order of approach. Many of the later texts and interviews seem at least as useful as the early texts for looking at issues of poetics and literature in general.
Derrida’s work is interdisciplinary in radical ways, and his theory of the signature is typically complex for this reason. Geoffrey Hartman explains:

Derrida’s mind is so assimilative (“reprosuctive,” he puns, benefiting from a slip of the pen) that neither literature nor philosophy nor the sciences of man or of the mind can be identified as exclusive sources. Indeed, his very understanding of writing (“écriture”) rejects such source-hunting in favor of a more comprehensive haunting. (xviii)

Nevertheless my work will go against the grain of this haunting because I am particularly interested in the roles that psychoanalysis and the work of Jacques Lacan play in Derrida’s signature theory. The single image that best sums up this relationship is probably “The Ear of the Other,” a phrase that titles a collection of “texts and discussions with Jacques Derrida” (as the title page announces), which are subtitled Otobiography, Transference, and Translation. To the extent that the theory behind the “ear of the other” is psychoanalytic, it is designed to let the unconscious, as theorized by Freud and Lacan, be heard. And up to a point, Derrida’s project draws on that of Lacan. One of Freud’s texts, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, models theory formation as autobiographical (the famous fort-da formulation arising from Freud’s observations of his grandson—a familial and autobiographical scene). Derrida moves orthogonally, punning from auto- to oto- (ear), from “self-biography” to “hearing-biography” or “ear-biography.” Autobiography is then understood as hearing-oneself-speak: not auto-biography because the signatory narrates, but otobiography because he tells himself the story of his life. Of this scene of writing, Lacanian psychoanalysis would hold that only another (an analyst) can discern or hear within the discourse of the speaker/writer that accent among the signifiers that marks the movement of the unconscious. Only the analyst can read the double inscription, both what is written consciously and what is
written through unconscious agency. Derrida translates this possibility into the realm of academic discourse. In “Tympan” he talks about piercing the ear of philosophy by listening to the discourse of philosophy with the ear of the psychoanalyst (Margins ix-xxix).

Yet Lacan, like Hegel, remains logocentric within the Western tradition to the extent that he privileges the paternal. Derrida’s project in Glas, and the signature poetics implicit therein, seeks to redress the balance between the name of the father and the place of the mother. Genet’s writing is taken by Derrida to exemplify a mother tongue, as opposed to a patriarchal language of reason, exemplified in Hegel. Or in other words, Genet’s writing is a promotion of dissemination, a writing that would not return to the father. Hartman writes:

> With Derrida dissemination enters a new phase. It is now directed *analytically*—prosaically, if you wish—against the mimetic principle (the “collect” or “legein” of the logos) in major texts of the Western tradition. They are so separated from a direct logo-imitative intention by his deconstructive readings that they cannot be returned to the father: their author, or their author in heaven. Instead of converting the straying text to a central truth by a mode of interpretation similar to allegoresis or sacred parody, Derrida absolutizes the text’s “error.” What emerges is an anti-allegoresis . . . Interpretation no longer aims at the reconciliation or unification of warring truths. . . . For the movement away from the father does not lead to the redemptive adornment of a complementary, maternal presence, except in certain Jungian or mythological versions of the attack on the “masculine trinity” of the logos. Instead the prestige of all origins, of all ultimate sources (spermatic word or immaculate womb), is questioned. (51)

So Derrida’s text tries to de-authorize itself. Glas endlessly theorizes the mother-text, but figures of actual mothers are generally withdrawn. Derrida’s anti-patrology allows the possibility of the “calcul” of the mother. The pun between figuring and *calculating* works in both French and English: a figuring out, a working out of the mother. He reads in
Genet’s corpus a signature “event” that is described as womb-like, or not just womb-like, but womb/tomb/labor-of-mourning-like. Furthermore Glas attempts to repeat this event, by placing himself, Derrida, in the womb of Genet’s text—or rather by simultaneously placing his signature in the womb of Genet’s text and of his own text. This event is a kind of death, castration of the name and signature, that breaches the boundaries of propriety. The text-as-event buries the signature in the womb/matrix of itself and then the funereal birth-labor of resurrection begins. This becomes Derrida’s excuse for what Hartman describes as a very cold and rational style of comedy. Glas could be called a funeral comedy; the word “glas” itself means the death knell. Derrida works at a distyle text, di-style, or two-styled writing: we could say die-style, too. Not just Hegel-Genet, a totally improper coupling of genres, philosophy and literature, but Genet-Derrida. Besides following the aigle (eagle) in Hegel and the flower in Genet in Derrida’s attempt to discover the relation between their signatures and their texts, Derrida’s readers can also read Derrida putting his own name in the abyss of his text: one notable example of this is the derrière in his writing: a near constant thematics of the rear, butt, following, behind, bottom, trailing, etc. The calculus of the mother, the poetics that Derrida presents in this text, comes mostly from the Genet column, which mixes Derrida and Genet styles.

Glas does not produce the mother, but asserts that a maternal calculus constitutes its method of textual production: Derrida writes that he is “seeking the good metaphor for the operation I pursue here. I would like to describe my gesture, the posture of my body behind this machine” (204b). What happens there in the womb of text is that the signature becomes the new body of the writer, the corpus or body-of-work he leaves at his death, not unlike the gift a mother makes of/to her child to/of the world:
Stone, stele, *gisant*, patiently agglomerated concretion: I am (following) the calculus of my mother.

I counterband erect for her, after all, with the remain(s) of which I make myself a gift {*je me fait cadeau*}. (203b)

The term “patiently agglomerated concretion” would refer to the text or corpus as a piling up of bits, morsels, and words—the matter of writing. A “stele” is a stone erected as a monument, usually with writing on it. *Gisant* means recumbent statue, as found at graves. Derrida combines or fuses together the monumental and the scene of writing. Following Hegel, one of Derrida’s constant arguments in *Glas* identifies the mother as the figure who constructs this scene. Derrida’s metaphorology of the mother places him *against* Genet:

> I do not know if I have sought to understand him. But if he thought I had understood him, he would not support it, or rather he would like not to support it. What a scene. He would not support what he likes to do, himself. He would feel himself already entwined. Like a column, in a cemetery, eaten by an ivy, a parasite that arrived too late.
> I wormed my way in as a third party, between his mother and himself. I gave him/her. I squealed on him/her. I made the blood {*sang*} speak. (203b)

Another name for this aspect of the mother-style is the “placement in abyss,” which I will come to shortly.

**Tone**

The tone of *Glas* constantly balances on the grotesque. The columns are described on the opening page as stumps: womb/stumps. There is also a constant chewing and spitting: the morceling of pre-texts, emblematized on the opening page in the first words of the Genet column, a quote torn from some text of Genet’s:

> “what remained of a Rembrandt torn into small, very regular squares and rammed down the shithole” is divided in two. (1b)
This morceling, and the tone of it, takes place as part of the maternal poetic. From “seeking the good metaphor for this [textual] operation” Derrida slips to “seeking the good movement”:

What [Genet] would support with the greatest difficulty would be that I assure myself or others of the mastery of his text. By procuring—they say, distyle {disent-ils}—the rule {règle} of production or the generative grammar of all his statements.

No danger stepping there {Pas de danger}. We are very far from that; this right here, I repeat, is barely preliminary, and will remain so. (No) more names, (no) more nouns. It will be necessary to return to his text, which watches over this text here during its play.

So I am seeking the good movement. Have I constructed something like the matrix, the womb of his text? On the basis of which one could read it, that is, re-produce it?

No, I see rather (but it may still be a matrix or a grammar) a sort of dredging machine. From the dis-simulated, small, closed, glassed-in cabin of a crane, I manipulate some levers and, from afar, I saw that (ça) done at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer at Eastertime, I plunge a mouth of steel in the water. And I scrape {racler} the bottom, hook onto stones and algae there that I lift up in order to set them down on the ground while the water quickly falls back from the mouth.

And I begin again to scrape {racler}, to scratch, to dredge the bottom of the sea, the mother {mer}.

I barely hear the noise of the water from the little room.

The toothed matrix {matrice dentée} only withdraws what it can, some algae, some stones. Some bits {morceaux}, since it bites {mord}. Detached. But the remain(s) passes between its teeth, between its lips. You do not catch the sea. She always re-forms herself.

She remains. There, equal, calm. Intact, impassive, always virgin. (204b-05b)

This “machine” which Derrida manipulates would be the grotesque image of the poetics, “the generative grammar,” that he both takes from Genet and applies to Genet’s (and Hegel’s) texts. Or rather than taking it, he is re-born with it out of Genet’s text-womb where he had “wormed” his “way in as a third party” between Genet and his mother (203b). The new generative grammar is a hybrid. This dredge model of intertextuality emphasizes the mouth, and its scraping, scratching, and biting of . . . the mother, which
could figure for other texts, the sea of text. In what kind of hallucinated metaphor could the bucket of a dredging crane be taken for a “matrix” or womb? This dredge image refigures a certain psychoanalytic recognition. The dredging of language, the scraping of words, not simply paronomasia, but the channeling and shifting of language plays at Lacan’s notion of signature, which I will come to shortly.

Ulmer points out that the “movement” Derrida seeks in this passage has to do with cadence or rhythm as signature effect. Derrida’s caveat, “No danger stepping there,” disavows any mastery of Genet’s rule. Of course he has grafted Hegel and Genet together. As a result, his text won’t return to either one. The return comes in the water flowing out of the dredge-womb, and back down to the water it came out of. The rest of the debris goes from Hegel to Genet and Genet to Hegel.

This delirium of language is the aspect of Glas that most appeals to me. In some respects Glas attempts to turn academic discourse against itself, in line with its parody of phallogocentrism. Derrida is deriding and his readers are along for the ride. This is why we have to put up with the near obscene “objesting” as someone, I can’t remember whom, calls it. The pulse of Derrida’s text, the movement of language that draws me along, is the constant alteration of language, the (impossible) movement away from language by means of language. So this attraction is not for the derision, not the obscene turns, in themselves, but the inside-out quality of the text of which they are an aspect. When I read Olds and Cage, something similar in their texts, having to do with the signature, has been the object of my reading. Their texts attempt to move language: they move a lot of language and I seek the cadence of that movement in my reading. In Derrida’s dredge image I see this in the crunching, chewing, scraping, crushing of
language.

The particular alterity that Derrida accentuates gives us another way to hear the theorizing or tympanizing that takes place in the texts of Hegel and Lacan: when they put emphasis on the place of the father or the “name of the law of the father,” the mother’s voice and its law become muffled. Derrida does not try to counter-muffle the sound of the father, but merely to pose a stereophony or a stereography. Each page consists of two columns, the one on the left devoted to Hegel, the one on the right devoted to Genet. We can think of *Glas* as a pair of headphones, the speaker on the left represented by the Hegel column, the speaker on the right represented by the Genet column. This head-dress bifurcates the text and the act of reading. And the pleasure of reading *Glas* requires a hard-to-acquire taste for it. Reading the “double erection” of the two columns is uncomfortable as one’s attention oscillates back and forth like a shuttle, but it enables a logic that draws out potential alterities of both columns. Trying to read one column, one’s awareness is always haunted by the presence of the other column on the page. As words, images, ideas, events, etc. echo back and forth between the columns, the various texts of Genet offer a commentary on those of Hegel and vice versa. Neither side muffs or mutes the other side. My project has been to read Olds and Cage in a stereographic mode, to hear a related bifurcation in their poetries. But I am not reading Olds and Cage against each other, as Derrida reads Genet against Hegel. With Cage the bifurcation results from the extreme intertextuality of his work, specifically with James Joyce. With Olds the bifurcation has to do with the tension between the patronym and the given name.

The idea of the signature sets up a stereography. I have been trained in an American university setting where the baseline for reading poetry is the idea of close
reading, that is, paying close attention to the text as opposed to, say, the biography of the author. And when I read and write about poetry, I’m trying to perform in this mode of close reading. Or at least I think I am. In addition to this mode, I am trying to read the signatures of Olds and Cage in a manner after Derrida. How do their proper names enter into the texts? So these are two poles or columns of my efforts, close reading in one ear and signature effects in the other. While close reading does not rule out attention to issues of the unconscious, such attention isn’t required of it either. But theorization of the unconscious deeply informs Derrida’s theorizations on signature.

A Very Short Primer on the Unconscious

And what is the unconscious anyway? Here are the main theoretical points I have in mind. There are Freud’s two theories. First, the earlier topographical model consisting of three systems or places: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious. Early on Freud theorized that the contents of the unconscious could not re-enter the conscious-preconscious without distortion because of the dynamics of repression. Freud’s later structural theory of the mind presented the familiar id/ego/superego structures of agency, all of which have unconscious components. My study focuses on issues of the superego. The concept of the superego analyzes the issue of authority figures. With respect to Olds, this has to do with the parental imagoes, on which the self-analysis at the heart of her poetics depends. In the case of Cage the superego is useful in analyzing his critique of the aesthetic ideology of the master artist. I’ll say more about this in a moment. The concept of the superego seems made to order for articulating the poetics of both Olds and Cage. It allows a productive focus on their texts; Olds and Cage can be read as guides for dealing
with issues of the superego.

Continuing with my working definition of the unconscious, there is Lacan, for whom the unconscious is primarily linguistic; thus, it is learned, exterior rather than interior. The symbolic order imposes its structure on the unconscious of the subject. In fact, the unconscious is the discourse of the symbolic order, i.e., the discourse of the big Other. Thus, it has to do with the radical alterity of language and the law, that which cannot be assimilated by the subject. Yet it is the “place” where speech is formulated.

Lacan’s notions of memory and knowledge are particularly germane to the signature. The unconscious-as-memory consists of the semantic evolution or history of the individual’s signifiers. Derrida’s idea of the signature stands as a corollary to Lacan’s unconscious-as-memory. The signature is the idea of contract with the symbolic order itself. It is the most essential contract with the Other. Lacan’s idea of knowledge, savior, helps articulate the nature of this contract. “The unconscious is simply another name for symbolic knowledge insofar as it is an ‘unknown knowledge’, a knowledge which the subject does now know he knows” (Evans 94). Our relationship with our proper name and our signature tends to suffer from this condition of savior. My experiment in reading Olds and Cage would ask how the structure of intention works in relation to signature poetics. When writing becomes a conscious attempt to (un)veil one’s name in one’s (text’s) abyss, then what happens? And what happens when someone else tries to do this to the text?

Lacan himself used the term “signature” to designate the language of delirium symptomatic of language beginning to speak on its own. It is savior (from and of the Other) taking over the speaking apparatus of the subject. Greg Ulmer goes into this
Lacanian underpinning of Derrida’s *glas* style, by reading Lacan’s third seminar, *The Psychoses*, which reviews Freud’s case study of Schreber and his sudden madness. Lacan’s analysis of the psychosis revolves around inner speech. Derrida famously translated this concern with inner speech into a critique of western philosophy. The unity of hearing-oneself-speak almost always defines the logos and logocentrism. Schreber’s case is about the loss of this unity.

Derrida takes up Schreber’s psychosis in two key ways. First, he adopts and adapts Schreber’s own “calcul of the mother”: Schreber thought he needed to save the world “by becoming a woman and bearing God’s child” (Ulmer 39). Second, Derrida’s style in *Glas* owes much to the linguistic character of Schreber’s hallucinations. Schreber developed a persecution paranoia: he began to hear God persecuting him. Lacan’s work on Schreber theorized the language of delirium that seems to fuel Derrida’s style. The “root language” in which Schreber heard himself persecuted by God is key to the paranoid psychosis. Ulmer redacts Lacan’s reading this way:

> In his verbal hallucinations the psychotic confuses the inside and the outside. What he hears comes to him not from his ears but from the preexisting structure of language . . . . this situation gives access to the “great paradox of unconscious thought” that Freud attempted to conceptualize, and that Lacan understands as “the thing that articulates itself in language” [Psychoses 128]. “This language we could call interior, but that adjective already falsifies everything. The so-called interior monologue is perfectly continuous with exterior dialogue, and it is just for this reason that we say that the unconscious is also the discourse of the Other” (Psy 128). Thinking, in short, takes place as much outside as inside the subject, with the permanent murmur of inner speech, producing an “inmixing” of the subject and the symbolic order, constituting a kind of “poison” against which it is the function of the ego to defend.

It is precisely in the space of “the thing that articulates itself in language” that Derrida locates the event of the signature. Schreber’s paranoia produced this “inmixing,” his ego
unable to defend against it. According to Ulmer, Schreber heard himself persecuted by God in the mode of “a variety of agents in a ‘root language’ consisting in part of antiquated, euphemistic German, and fragmented, incomplete phrases” (39). This language of Schreber’s exemplifies what Lacan labeled “signature”: “certain words acquire a special accent, a density which manifests itself sometimes in the very form of the signifier, giving it a frankly neologistic character so striking in the productions of paranoia” (Psychoses 42, qtd. in Ulmer 45). Derrida’s image of the dredge is of a machine for producing this kind of language: “hallucinated” in some sense but not psychotic—“No danger stepping there” (Glas 204b).¹

It may seem that Olds and Cage are an unlikely pair of subjects for this study. Their styles are completely different. Thematically, Olds often writes in a now traditional confessional mode. Her formal mode is not unusual, the standard short lyrical poem, about a page in length, exhibiting a typical free verse. Cage, on the other hand, always pushes the limits of form. His poems defy almost all expectations for poems. Thematically, they often focus on the texts of other writers by applying chance operations to those texts. In very different ways, however, both poets are deeply concerned with the unconscious. Olds’ confessionalism has to be seen largely as a work of catharsis and redemption. On this heading, the superego presents an excellent tool for reading her work, especially Lacan’s caveat concerning the obscene character of the superego—as it has to do with sexuality. Patriarchal structures of the signature, and specifically the fact that Sharon Olds is named after her father and by her father, exist through and with the parental structures of the superego. This issue is the primal scene of Olds’ poetry, and she

¹ Derrida’s style in Glas is also about verbal hallucination. In fact the theory of the signature works over issues of presence and absence via the mechanics of hallucination. When Derrida makes qualifying remarks about taking chances, this hallucinated style is often at stake.
treats it directly. Cage’s poetry, on the other hand, has none of this tone. The dynamics of the obscene superego play no role in his poetry. However, Cage’s experimentalism always seeks to escape the received ideas that govern aesthetic expectations. By dismantling texts, Cage opens a space for normally unconscious processes to operate. Those processes become the new frame for nonintentional poetic events, a framing that prevents or at least qualifies the formation of aesthetic superegos. For Cage, style identifiable with the author should be completely eliminated. The modernist doctrines of impersonality and intentionality are pushed to extremes in Cage’s texts. Cage’s intertextual poems seek out the alterity of their pre-texts, largely by reducing intentional structures of language. Although Cage probably wasn’t familiar with Derrida, his poetics would take Derrida’s “mimetology,” which I discuss below, to the limit. Cage makes it hard to cling to the personality of the author/composer by shifting the burden of aesthetic production toward the reader. Yet Cage’s texts hold to the proper names of their subjects.

On the Signature: Derrida’s Work on Poetics

The signature theory of this dissertation draws primarily from two texts by Jacques Derrida. We have explored *Glas* a little bit. In *Signsponge*, Derrida treats the work of Francis Ponge. Both texts are signature studies. According to Gregory Ulmer, the “literary nature of the method used to compose *Glas* is explained in greatest detail in *Signsponge*, Derrida’s text on the name ‘Francis Ponge’” (“Sounding” 67), wherein Derrida outlines three modalities of the signature. My readings of Olds and Cage depend mostly on the third modality.

The first of these modalities is an ordinary sense of the term, “signature,” the
sense of authenticating the fact that the signer is the person who is writing. The second
modality, Derrida calls “a banal and confused metaphor for the first,” “the set of
idiomatic marks that a signer might leave by accident or intention in his product”
(*Signsponge* 54)—in other words, the style of a text considered as a function of its author.
The third modality is the poststructuralist moment in this theory of the signature, which
Derrida follows in his own signature readings, the “general signature”, or “signature of
the signature.” Derrida writes:

Thirdly, and it is more complicated here, we may designate as general
signature, or signature of the signature, the fold of the placement in abyss
where, after the manner of the signature in the current sense, the work of
writing designates, describes, and inscribes itself as act (action and
archive), signs itself before the end by affording us the opportunity to
read: I refer to myself, this is writing, I am a writing, this is writing—
which excludes nothing since, when the placement in abyss succeeds, and
is thereby decomposed and produces an event, it is the other, the thing as
other, that signs. (*Signsponge* 54)

In this aspect of the signature there has been a disconnection between the signature and
the signer. This disconnect amplifies and particularizes the structuralist notion that the
signifier and signified only arbitrarily relate to each other. Language and writing bring
the textual existence of the signature to the foreground of a text in ways which are not
strictly controlled by the signer, ways which are overdetermined by the textual
environment within which the composer works, and the signature assumes an otherness,
an objectness apart from the identity of the signer. The signature becomes a kind of
program within itself.

This event can be read in both Olds’ and Cage’s texts. In Olds’ work it is most
obvious in the way the name Olds begins to travel as the phoneme “old” in words like
fold, cold, and gold. More bluntly, Cage uses the image of the cage like a rebus for his
aesthetics of release and escape.

Another point to remark about this passage concerning the third modality of the signature is the use of heraldic terminology. Derrida extends the terms of heraldry as emblems for the processes that the theory of the signature organizes. The term “placement in abyss” denotes a small shield bearing a coat of arms, or simply a coat of arms, placed in the center of a larger shield or coat of arms. This then refers to a “structure in which the whole is represented in miniature in one of its parts” (“Coming” 147-48; qtd. in Ulmer, “Sounding” 69). Ulmer points out that Derrida has also made much of the heraldic term “blazon” (coat of arms, or the proper method of depicting such symbols) in Glas, The Post Card (1980), and especially in Cinders (1987), where Derrida suggests that the punning connection from blazon to blaze and cinders may be finally the best metaphor for the trace (69). Thus, heraldic terms come to articulate and extend the theoretical thrust of Derrida’s texts as they embody the signature effects that he seeks to address and exercise.

Although the three modalities of the signature are quite dissimilar, Derrida shows that Ponge “is able to fold all three into a single one, or in any case combine them in the same scene for the same drama and the same orgasm.” Derrida’s exposition of a textual erotics takes on a literary quality—the metaphorology of the signature theory branches out into the domains of drama, sexuality, and death:

The law producing and prohibiting the signature (in the first modality) of the proper name, is that, by not letting the signature fall outside the text any more, as an undersigned subscription, and by inserting it into the body of the text, you monumentalize, institute, and erect it into a thing or a stony object, but in doing so, you also lose the identity, the title of ownership over the text: you let it become a moment or a part of the text, as a thing or a common noun. The erection-tomb falls. Step, and stop, of man. (Signsponge 56)
Part of the difficulty of reading this passage (especially in translation) has to do with the doubleness of the word *tombe* in the French: the noun *tombe* denotes grave, tomb, or tombstone; the intransitive verb *tomber* denotes falling (over or down). In addition, the phrase *tomber sur* also means to come to some topic conversationally. Derrida exploits these senses of the word, letting them illustrate the textual event that relates a signature to a text. Writing is a kind of death in which one’s identity, in so far as it has to do with the proper name, is given over to the text. When the text is read, the absence of the writer corresponds to the absence of the dead person at his or her grave. Like the name on a tombstone, the signature keeps living on as long as it is read, and the memory of the deceased person also lives on according to the constraints of this reading. The textual processes are bound to the signature; the reading keeps the signature going as if the author is dead, whether or not he or she has died. Thus, reading constitutes a form of mourning. The signature falls into the grave/text and it becomes a grave itself, marking the absence of the author. Reading is a kind of grave visitation.

Derrida’s metaphorical contextualization of Ponge’s writing in the passage quoted above stretches the scene of writing until it illustrates what he calls the double bind and double band of the signature, the double movement of rising and falling related to the programmatic processes of life, death, and, in particular, mourning. This double movement consists figuratively of a death of the author and a birth of the text. The proper name is monumentalized as signature, erected like a tombstone, but it is also lost, given away with and to the text. As the proper name begins to operate at the level of common nouns, Ponge’s texts figuring like sponges (*éponge*) for instance, the countersignature takes place, the signature signing for itself. Derrida’s draws examples of this from
Ponge’s texts to show that Ponge squeezes the sponge of his name “Across the entire corpus” (70). For instance in “The Orange,” Ponge compares the “ignoble” sponge to the orange. Derrida prefaces his reading of this text by noting that in the rebus signature, “the metonymic or anagrammatic signature,” the thing loses or soils the proper name and simultaneously would soak up, retain, and hold the proper. Then Derrida crushes the two word-things, sponge and orange, to get the ge out so that he can pun to “ob-ge,” “two obges,” two objects which present the problem of deciding between the two things (64). The problem is that one of the things, the sponge, absorbs the qualities of the other, and becomes undecidable in itself. Which makes Derrida happy, because it characterizes the signature event itself, the movement between proper and common denotations of the words in the proper name.

In The Seine, Derrida finds a typical example where the sponge resides fully in the abyss of the text:

Solid or plastic, full of air or water, what does the sponge resemble? An animal swollen with water, it is, in effect, a medusa. You will find this in The Seine, “water,” says he, “profoundly soiled and impure”—and dirt is always determined between linen and water. You will find this in The Seine, which also sets out to describe a sort of “Genesis”: “. . . certain marine organisms, for example the medusa, contain more than ninety percent water . . .”

. . . . The sponge is not named in this passage. (70,72)

When the signature falls within the text, identity and ownership of the text is lost in that particular signing but any signifier that somehow shares an affinity with the proper name may then hold up that proper name, binding to it like a bandage, banding with it to support or buttress it. All these senses are operative in the French word bande, which is also the French term for the male sexual erection; Derrida’s use of the term bande and a constellation of related terms also goes back to the question of tone. Glas, especially,
mounts a parody of phallogocentrism with its constantly inflated double bind/double band. The text is constantly suggesting (that it has) a hard-on.

Derrida’s working over of the passage cited from *The Seine* could be considered the defining moment of his poetics. According to Richard Rand, the term “placement in abyss” also means “the way in which the operations of reading and writing are represented in the text, and *in advance*, as it were, of any other possible reading. In ways that the reader can never bypass, the role itself of the reader is perpetually spelled out beforehand; and if the reader ever hopes to come forth with a new reading, he or she must, as an essential preliminary, read off the reading lesson already at work in the work at hand” (ix). It is as if the text presents a self-organizing poetics. Derrida argues in *Signsponge* that Ponge’s sponge represents writing itself:

Able to hold gases or liquid alternatively, “to fill itself with wind or water,” the sponge is, above all else, writing. Like all things. You will fish this, too, out of *The Seine*, and we shall presently see how it is put on the page: “. . . in spite of the very certain non-discontinuity between thought and its verbal expression, as between gaseous and liquid states of matter—the written text presents some characteristics which render it very close to the thing signified, in other words to objects in the external world, much in the same way that liquids are very close to solids.” . . . The sponge is not named in this passage, but as an analog to the medusa, or to any state intermediate between all states—an analog in this respect to the written text, if it can put itself into every state, and serve as an intercedor, or a universal witness—the sponge not only constitutes the term of an analogy (allegory or metaphor), but also constitutes, in addition, the very medium of all figures, metaphoricity itself. (70, 72)

The way the thing works, detached from the signature in the event-abyss, becomes the model for writing and the emblem of (Ponge’s) poetics. The thing, the sponge in this case, begins to model the processes of the text. So—can anybody go out and find in the corpuses of our poet-subjects the thing-in-abyss that has come from the poet’s signature? And then read a theory of writing modeled in its operations? What are the chances of
this? My readings of Olds and Cage experiment with their texts in order to test Derrida’s “science of chance (alea)” (116). What are the chances that a proper name, a signature, will supply a theory of writing or a poetics of the text, that it will be locatable in the abyss of those texts subscribed by that signature, and that something pertinent can be said about the signatory?

**Mimetology**

Text as monument, as tombstone, makes it possible for the proper name of the author to survive or live on. In *Glas* Derrida’s text plays with this idea. In a complex analogy, Derrida likens himself to a mother or wife in the cultural function of mourner at the funeral of a son or husband. Derrida develops this image by describing the work of the funeral mime: “As for the strangeness of the word, here is the end of the text that this very *glas* has not ceased to accompany, to escort or precede, or betray: ‘Where? I read that Rome—but maybe my memory is deceiving me—had a funeral mime? what was his role? Preceding the cortege, he was in charge of miming the most important facts in the dead man’s life when he—the deceased—was alive’” (*Glas* 259bi). Ulmer points out that “Derrida’s procedure follows that of the mourner, accompanying the body of the author’s work, miming in figures his celebration or deceleration of the great name. One text accompanies another, along side” (“Sounding” 49). Through this operation, the names of Hegel and Genet are carried on, and Genet’s name lives on via figures from his own writing, signature figures that seem ambivalent toward his mother, Camille Gabrielle Genet, as Derrida re-cites death and funeral scenes from Genet’s works that include mothers and, invariably, flowers (one French meaning of the word “genet” is
broomflower). *Funeral Rites* is remarked for this (*Glas* 183b). In Genet’s play *The Balcony*, it is the Madame, the “mother” of the girls in the brothel, who fears she will die beneath a crush of funeral flowers (*Glas* 48-9b). Genet’s figures figure on as Derrida inflates the language and rhetoric of flowers into a poetics of *Glas*.

One of Derrida’s strategies in *Glas* is to write as if he were such a funeral mime, miming not only the mime but also the mother who accompanies her husband’s body in the funeral procession. Hegel saw this as part of the marriage contract; it is the duty of the wife to write the name of the husband in stone, to save the name, “entrusting her with his death” (*Glas* 143a). This is a very Genetian activity: Genet is always writing about “women” who are counterfeits, i.e., transvestites. The character “Divine” in *Our Lady of the Flowers* is the most famous example. So Derrida makes it a pretense to write about himself—as if he were (miming) a woman. This is the calcul or ruse of the mother. Silently, in *Signsponge*, Derrida works this strategy by retracing Ponge’s play on plant mimesis, for which the Mimosa is named. The plant contracts when touched. The appearance of this action is like the grimace of a mime; hence, Mimosa’s etymology (136-8). Derrida links this contraction with the Pongian signature (or contract) via the squeezing of the sponge. Prepare to scowl or smile: “Mimosa” is also one of Genet’s transvestites. The silence of the mime also pleases Derrida because it goes back to a movement between writing and speech. The fall from speech to writing is a kind of death, a silencing of the speaker, a silence that follows the death knell and which the death knell announces.
Poetics and Impersonality

Signature theory tends to perform its own formal disruptions, or structural disturbances, since the formal qualities we would like to codify are so readily disrupted by proper names allowed to behave improperly, which is what happens in the third modality of the signature. Indeed, the theory is designed to let the Freudian-Lacanian unconscious be heard. In this regard, Derrida’s work relates to the work of the concrete poets, surrealists, and other avant-garde artists who put into artistic practice the insights of Freud and the psychoanalysts. But it also enacts an impersonality theory as well.

The modernist theories and poetics of impersonality, at the heart of the criticism and poetry of Pound and Eliot, are illuminated by Derrida’s notion that Hegel did not want to sign his text:

Hegel presents himself as a philosopher or a thinker, someone who constantly tells you that his empirical signature, the signature of the individual named Hegel is secondary. His signature, that is, pales in the face of truth, which speaks through his mouth, which is produced in his text, which constructs the system it constructs. This system is the teleological outcome of all of Western experience, so that in the end Hegel, the individual, is nothing but an empirical shell which can fall away without subtracting from the truth, or from the history of meaning. As a philosopher and as a teacher, he seems to be saying basically that not only is it possible for his signature and his proper name to disappear without a loss, to fall outside of the system, but that this is even necessary in his own system, because it will prove the truth and the autonomy of that system.... Yet, in fact, Hegel signs. (Ear 56)

The denial of personality as a condition of truth is one of those recurring axioms of occidental thought that have been interrogated, again, this time by poststructuralism. Of course, this denial’s confused and paradoxical manifestations in high modernist ideas of impersonality set the stage for postmodern reversals. Symptomatically, one concern of New Criticism was to earn the poetic text autonomy from the empirical desires of composers and readers. The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (1993),
which seems representative of an influential and still widely cited view of modernism, argues that the New Critics narrowed “Yeats and Eliot to their self-doubts and [by] virtually ignoring Stevens, Williams, and Pound, ... translated the modernist desire to have art produce direct testimony to values into an account of aesthetic experience which subordinated everything to the exposure of internal ironies and paradoxes. Modernism then became tragic resignation to the failures of Enlightenment optimism” (794). The entire entry on Modernism and Postmodernism in the *NPEPP* orbits the issue of impersonality, describing the various stages of postmodernism as moving away from and back toward the sense of personal immediacy.

Modernist conceptualizations of impersonality probably find their most immediate corollaries in the problematic of the subject which poststructuralism entwines with its characteristic themes—perspectivism, binarism, presence, genealogical narrative vs. ontology, power/knowledge, ideological domination, etc. Marxist, Freudian, Nietzschean and feminist critics all engage the problematics of the subject just as they use the techniques of deconstruction nowadays, and self-reflexivity concerning the construction of the writing subject constitutes one of the challenges of writing under the sign of deconstruction. For instance, when Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari stress the concept of becoming, a Nietzschean program, they invoke a problematics of subjectivity similar to that of modernist “impersonality.” One of Deleuze and Guattari’s central concepts, the BwO—body without organs or received organization—is something like impersonality if we understand the organization of the body as the physical/emotional encoding of state/oedipal ideology. By way of contrast with Deleuze and Guattari, Eliot’s concept of the synthetic emotion, which he elaborates in “Tradition and the Individual
Talent,” would transmute, possibly during the process of composition, the dross of personal emotions into the poetic representation of refined or pure emotions (representation sanctioned by proper poetic tradition). Deleuze and Guattari, instead, implicitly and self-reflexively position the concept of the BwO so that it cannot function as an ideal, like the ideal of a proper poetic tradition, that would ultimately reproduce the power formations of ideology which the concept strategically opposes. In this sense, the BwO would be just the body, escaping power. Hence, Deleuze and Guattari do not allow their theorization to close on the certainty or truth of concepts, nor do they identify their standpoint as that of the BwO. But for Eliot, a good poet, or his text, is something like a BwO, a body that has transcended the ideological encoding and emotional organization that reproduces the order of the state within the subject—and of course, Eliot is a good poet. The fact that Eliot’s theorizations might begin to read a certain alterity within the poet himself is obscured by the fact that Eliot’s binarism is strictly hierarchical, privileging one half of the opposition unquestioningly and positing a single ideal tradition, however heterogeneous that tradition of reading by various great poets may be.

Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida and Lacan are more directly invested in the structuralist investigation of language. Yet all “three” projects are similar in some ways. Geoffrey Hartman’s explanation of how Lacan and Derrida similarly approach the positioning of the subject within language may also serve to map them onto the conceptual topography of the BwO:

Did Freud really succeed in ushering in an era of “deconversion” or of purely “psychological man”? With Lacan in particular, the project of psychoanalysis is not only involved in what the relation of analyst and analysand may mean for the “order of discourse” each embodies—just as Derrida, in Glas, explores simultaneously the question of a relation between the paternal discourse of a magister ludi called Hegel and the thievish, maternal “calculus” revealed by
Genet. Lacan’s project is not only this sensitive exploration of the power relations between codes or idioms within language; it is also an attempt to restructure them, in order to build a new communitarian model on the basis of psychiatric experience. (Saving 98)

In its (de)celebration of singularity, the theory of the signature resembles the concept of the BwO. Where D & G see the possibility of the wolfpack as a model for community among BwOs (in a kind of signature reading of Virginia Woolf), Derrida can bring Genet and Hegel together in a textual community that celebrates the two signatures simultaneously by listening to the play of their names in their texts with a psychoanalytic ear.

At first glance, Olds and Cage seem about as far apart as Genet and Hegel. But my study is not about pitting literature against philosophy. Rather I try to read Olds and Cage the way Derrida reads Ponge. When Derrida reads Hegel/Genet this way, via signature theory, the ramifications are great because Hegel is one of the most important philosophers in the Western tradition, and Derrida’s reading exposes his backside. When he reads Ponge this way, academic style and its relation to poetics is the issue. According to Geoffrey Hartman, the signature project of Glas aims at, among other things, “a commentary style that eschews all allegoresis, all ideologizing moves”: “it resist[s] being in the service of political power” (xxv). To write something impossible to co-opt would require an impossible discourse. I don’t even pretend to this kind of rigor in my commentary on Cage and Olds. I think of my work here as preliminary, a chance to explore the “literary” techniques, which Derrida employs to read Ponge—as a preparation for reading Glas. And more importantly as an experiment in literary style: to begin to try to write with the poets.

The first and foremost of these protocols would be to submit to the law of the
signature. Derrida says he “ought to submit to the law of his name [Ponge’s]”

(Signsponge 18). There is an “ought” here for several reasons. First, how could a text signed by Derrida submit to a Pongian law of signing? As per the first modality of the signature, Ponge would not sign Derrida’s text. Even if he did, he would have to sign behind Derrida. Second, what sort of ruse would enable the law of “Francis Ponge,” in its unconscious action as well as its manifest aspects, to be made explicit. If Derrida can reproduce the “Francis Ponge” textual event, how can the unconscious aspects of it be certified? I’ll stop there: arrêt-law.

Protocol

To sum up this limited and brief investigation of Derrida’s signature poetics, I present a few rules. They tend to overlap and part of the glas effect is to heap them up on each other. In the way of the pun, punning is probably the main rule of Derrida’s signature texts. In “Proverb: ‘He that would pun . . .’” Derrida remarks that Glas is an analysis of the pun, although “by definition a pun must not be absolutely controllable and subject to the censorship of rational consciousness and its representatives” (18). Puns open on the unconscious, and Glas builds up a vast network of punning associations. As such, its protocols are violations of protocol. And yet there is plenty of glue, excessive glue to hold it together: “protocol” means first-glue. For fun and excess in the style of Derrida here is some of the OED entry on protocol:

[Early mod.E. prothocoll, a. OF. prothocole (a 1200 in Godef. Compl.), prothecolle, mod.F. protocole (= Prov. prothcolle, It. protocollo, Sp. protocolo), ad. med.L. protocoll-um, ad. Gr. - the first leaf of a volume, a fly-leaf glued to the case and containing an account of the MS., f. - PROTO- first + glue. The history of the sense-development of this word belongs to mediæval Latin and the Romanic languages, esp. French; in the
latter it has received very considerable extensions of meaning: see Du Cange, Cotgr., Littré, Hatz.-Darm., etc. The word does not appear to have at any time formed part of the English legal vocabulary; in Sc. from 16thc. probably under French influence; otherwise used only in reference to foreign countries and their institutions, and as a recognized term of international diplomacy in sense 2, until its comparatively recent entry into the general vocabulary of English in senses 5b, c.]

1. a. The original note or minute of a transaction, negotiation, agreement or the like, drawn up by a recognized public official, notary, etc. and duly attested, which forms the legal authority for any subsequent deed, agreement, or the like based on it; sometimes applied to a book or register in which these were written by the official concerned, as they were drawn up by him; = protocol book: see 7 (obs.). In the parts of the United States acquired from Mexico, the name is used for the original record of a grant, transfer, etc. of land; under the Spanish law this was an entry made in his book by the official recorder of such transactions.

1726 AYLIFFE Parergon 304 An Original is in other Terms stiled the Protocol, or Scriptura Matrix; and if the Protocol, which is the Root and Foundation of the Instrument, does not appear, the Instrument is not valid.

2. a. spec. The original draught, minute, or record of a dispatch, declaration, negotiation, treaty, stipulation or other diplomatic document or instrument; esp. a record of the propositions agreed to in a conference, signed by the parties, to be embodied in a formal treaty.

b. transf. (familiar) A preamble, a preliminary.

1897 MRS. RAYNER Type-writer Girl xi. 126 When all protocols were settled he went on, ‘Can you come in at once?’

c. [In Gr. sense.] The first sheet of a roll of papyrus, bearing the manufacturer's official mark; this mark itself.

e. Philos. A statement which forms an essential part of a person's description of something experienced or perceived; a basic statement that can be verified or assessed.

3. A formal or official statement of a transaction or proceeding; spec. the detailed record of the procedure and results in a scientific experiment; hence, experimental procedure.

4. An official of police in some foreign countries.

1865 BARING-GOULD Werewolves xiv, When taken before the Protokoll at Dabkow.

5. a. In France, The formulary of the etiquette to be observed by the Head of the State in official ceremonies, relations with ambassadors, foreign sovereigns, etc.; the etiquette department of the Ministry of
Foreign Affairs; the office of the Master of the Ceremonies. Also used of analogous departments in other countries.

b. An official form of procedure and etiquette in affairs of state and diplomatic relations; the observance of this.

c. In extended and general uses, any code of conventional or proper conduct; formally correct behaviour.

protocol, n.

Add: [5.] d. Computing and Telecommunications. A (usu. standardized) set of rules governing the exchange of data between given devices, or its transmission via a given communications channel.

I include this long definition from the *OED* as a means of observing Derrida’s protocol in *Glas*. The two columns of Glas often have such definitions “tattooed” into them. Derrida calls them “judases” because they betray the words they define, exposing them, as it were. My plan here is to betray my protocols. As per Derrida’s instructions for a science of the signature in *Signsponge*, I have tried to get busy with my own name in this text: “For me, Francis Ponge is someone first of all who has known that, in order to know what goes on in the name and the thing, one has to get busy with one’s own, let oneself be occupied by it” (26).

I have laws in my name: but they run backward, like *walls*. The *ret-law* has to do with the production of linen. To *ret* is to season flax (or wood) by soaking it in water in preparation for weaving. And this is an *alteration* of the materials by means of water, itself a simple alteration of my name. My siglum, well, it’s WEL. There is water in the well and *we* (the royal WE) we could throw the flax or hemp in to *ret*, but running water is better for soaking (or, etymologically, rotting) the flax. But there are two laws, two protocols, two cops. The law of the patronym would stand in lieu of the other, in place of the other. This place with its double law is my ex- for the superego figures I analyze here in this text: the good cop, bad cop nature of the superego—the figure of conscience and
its obscene double. This double law returns already (*déjà*) in my signature.

But where is the etiquette, the protocol? Where is the agreement produced beforehand, the (electronic) handshake, or the flyleaf glued into the beginning of these readings? Does this text have a protocol? After Derrida, it has to do with the GL-effect, as in the slippage from *glas* to glue. By accretion, here is a list of the primary reading protocols I take from this watered down look at JD’s theory.

7. Treat Olds’ and Cage’s texts as blazons.
8. Read for anthonomasia—Derrida’s neologism combining the words anthology and antonomasia (the trope of using proper nouns as common nouns and vice versa).
9. Look for (and practice) hypogram and anagram.
10. Trace the placement in abyss.
11. Post-death-of-the-author, read and write for and as if mourning.
12. Eat the proper names, continuing whatever encryption of the letters can already be read.

Number 6 is the key to putting these rules together. Recall Derrida’s dredge image discussed near the beginning of this chapter. The bucket, described as a toothed matrix, “scrapes the bottom of the sea, the mother {*mer*}.” In the passage, this is happening to “Hegel.” One strategic aim of the *glas* effect, or Gl-effect is the dissemination of Hegel’s name, the unnaming of Hegel (and Genet, as we have seen). Note first that the “generative grammar” of Genet is referred to as *a règle* (rule), rhyming with Hegel.

Second, in the image Derrida sits in a glass box: “From the dissimulated, small, closed, glassed-in cabin of a crane, I manipulate some levers and, . . . I plunge a mouth of steel in the water.” Encased in *glass*, Derrida can “barely hear the noise of the water” below.

Among the bits (*morceaux*) of chewed material that the bucket “bites” (*mord*), there is some algae, in which the g-l-a is mixed up. Early in the text, readers are warned about this rotting of language: “For the first and last time, and as an example, here you are as if
forewarned by this text of what clacks here—and decomposes the cadaver of the word (balc, tale, alga, clatter [éclat], glass, etc.) in every sense” (3bi). The gl-effect is always about the end of Hegel’s name, the syllable –gel shortened to gl, at least until that fact is forgotten.

The gl-effect puts Schreber’s linguistic delirium in play, enabling Derrida to hear himself crack or “clack” language and then glue it back together. Derrida hints at this in his description of Glas’ two-column structure: “A dialectics on one side, a galactics on the other, heterogeneous and yet indiscernible in their effects, at times up to hallucination” (qtd. in Leavey 28). I chose the figure of eating the names of the signature from among Derrida’s various metaphors for this process because I think it goes well with the hallucinated calcul of the mother. Part of the galactics of course has to do with breasts: Derrida uses the obsolete word seing, which means both breast and signature, to connect the eating of the body of the mother with the eating of the signature. The poetics of the mother, the image of the womb, requires the ongoing digestion of language to begin the process of birthing and nursing the new text.

The chewing of language also takes the theory of the signature down to the level of the letter. For Lacan, the letter is that which returns and repeats itself, insistently inscribing and re-inscribing itself in the subject’s life. Derrida plays at this with the gl and other sigla. The condition of savior operates in the action of the letter, which for Lacan links the destiny of the subject to the letter or “cryptogram” and its decryption or decipherment (Ècrits 160). In the famous dispute between Lacan and Derrida, Derrida argues that the letter does not necessarily return to mark the destiny of the subject. It may simply get lost or never arrive at its destination or never arrive on time. Or go looping off
through the signatures of others.

The gl-effect is the first glue, or first protocol of *Glas*: “A gl-effect (glue, birdlime, spit, sperm, chrism, ointment, etc.) forms the conglomeration without identity of this ceremonial” writes Derrida (Leavey 28). This introduction to signature theory has been overweighted with Lacan. In spite of all the galactics of Derrida’s theory, I think the word “glacan” never appears although there is plenty of play on lactation. We have balc, talc, alga, clatter [éclat], glass, etc.; clearly glacan is there hypogrammatically. Maybe Derrida and Lacan are the two laws of my adaptation or alteration of Derrida's theory.

But the protocol, the first protocol, is to tear up the etiquette and flush it down the *chiotte*, the shithole, as Leavey (another JL, but a john this time) translates in the second first sentence of *Glas*. My first protocol in this dissertation should be to shoulder some more signature effects into the signature theory: from “Sharon Olds” the *sh*-effect, and from “John Cage,” the *JC*-effect and the blazoning of the cage. Strangely, nowhere in her works does Sharon Olds give her parents’ names. They have been withdrawn, silenced, shushed finally, if not flushed. Putting these effects together, the *sh* and the *JC*, I arrive at the W.C. To read Sharon and John together, is to visit the old water closet. That would be the dredge image of this dreadful poetics in its double *glas*, or double law: to chew up their signatures, to digest them, and then to pass them (on). That would be the *je suis*, the I am, or the I follow (behind Derrida), which becomes Jesus, if you die and take out the I, as Ulmer points out. After Genet (another john, *Jean*), JD alternates between a cogito of mourning, “I am therefore dead,” and the Immaculate Conception, the IC (from Hegel’s christianic philosophy and Genet’s Catholic-inflected textuality), these letters always arriving in the wake, the litter of *Glas*, as part of the calcul of the mother. Tracing the
abbreviations, the sigla, the morcellation, toward the subjects of this book the *Glas*-effect 
would continue along something like this: jd, jg, jl, wl, gl, ic, jc, wl, sh, ww, jj . . . .

At the heart of both their poetics, Cage and Olds place a desire to resist the 
proper. Maybe it can be articulated as tearing down walls, a waltering down, more or less 
well played.
Chapter Two

Sharon Olds: In Two Places At Once

Introduction: the Fetish Double

I ought to submit to the law of the signature “Sharon Olds.” That said, the protocol for communication with “Sharon Olds” needs to be laid out: and the sh-effect is put down in the first poem in the first book, prescribing, in the abyss, the etiquette for reading her corpus. There is a certain tearing sound in the dialogic of the poem. This chapter emphasizes what I am calling “fetish logic,” and most of the readings explicitly show how this concept informs the poems I discuss. Chapter 3 de-emphasizes the fetish logic in order to continue to allow the signature “Sharon Olds” to unfold itself according to its primordial Biblical intertextuality. “The Lifting” works over this proto-intertextuality; this poem also depends on a certain tearing effect.

In this chapter, this fetish logic seemed to direct the discursive movement of the reading. By default I had begun writing with a chronological approach for lack of concepts or tropes that had asserted themselves as ordering devices and due to my desire not to force a conceptual grid over the signature and poems. In the process of reading and writing, however, the fetish logic, a logic of two scenes or two times unfolding at once, seemed to manifest itself everywhere I happened to be reading in her first five books.² This led to departures from the chronological reading. So there are several readings that defy the book-by-book order of analysis. Yet the general shape of my analysis goes book

² Although I offer no readings of poems from The Wellspring, I find many of Olds’ signature effects as I’ve delineated them operating there.
The thematic that I most identify with Olds’ poetry has to do with the oedipal relations to which she has always returned. In particular, this thematic marks her work via her signature effects. Fetish logic connects the oedipal scene, the childhood of abuse, with the present of the speaker in most of these poems. The speakers of the early poems wonder at having survived. Many poems also construct a healing imagery that exploits signature effects. I argue in the second half of the chapter that this healing imagery is articulated by a psychoanalytic reading, and in particular that the name of the father opens to reveal a reconfiguration of the subject, enabling her to live and love against and through the oedipal experiences associated with the proper name. This reconfiguration amounts to an analysis of the superego and the gender roles that go to construct it. While Olds manages to carry out this analysis of her identity, her texts also treat her signature, especially on the question of the relation of the two names, Sharon and Olds.

**Sharon Olds**

The first name is a place: the Plain of Sharon, an area of Israel, a fertile plain extending along the Mediterranean coast, a western coast. Sharon is a place name that appears in the Old Testament books of First Chronicles, the Canticles, and Isaiah. The sexual aura of the name Sharon emanates from the Song of Solomon: probably the book’s most famous line is the King James Version 2.1: “I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.” Sharon Olds has played heavily on this etymology of her name, but it has been only by means of the third modality of the signature. I find no direct reference to this line in her work.

Aside from the name of the Old Testament, the name Olds lacks this specifically
religious-erotic etymology or association. Under the first entry for “old” in the *OED* database there are some 16,000 words according to my computer’s word count tool. It is hardly possible to describe the word’s play or rootedness in the European languages. As a proper name it apparently derives from its use as kind of nickname adjective: old Smith or old So-and-So. The entry for “Olds” in the *OED* refers only to the “Oldsmobile car, *esp.* a large family saloon [sedan] model.” The American Heritage Dictionary lists only “Olds, Ransom Eli,” who “founded the Olds Motor Works, manufacturer of the Oldsmobile.” This automotive signification, so common in American English, rarely comes into play in Olds poetry. However, her poetry seems to originate in an obsession with her *elders*. In that sense, her poetry makes up an *Olds Testament*.

Certainly the two preceding paragraphs could be as misleading as they are informative. Nevertheless, they indicate some of the possibilities of the words. But the research task is to discover how this proper name plays through the poems aurally, visually, conceptually, metaphorically, etc. What event takes place when the words are released into the depths of the poems? Where do the names in her signature lead? And as to the name’s movement in the abyss, what are its chances, between the aleatory and the necessary, of its countersignature?

“*Satan Says*”

The speaker in the first poem of the first book enters this maze, matrix or erection of the proper names immediately. In “Satan Says” the speaker tries to write her way out of an enclosure, a cedar box with “a gold, heart-shaped lock and no key.” Implicitly, this is a struggle to forget and escape her name, to let it go insofar as it has to do with “the
pain of the locked past,” and to write with her body: “I am trying to write my / way out of
the closed box / redolent of cedar” and her “spine uncurls in the cedar box like the pink
back of the ballerina pin with a ruby eye.” The spine is the central line of the body, the
structure that encloses the central nervous system. It extends from the region of the
sexual organs to the brain. “Spine” also rhymes with line. In this controlling image (the
body and its double, the ballerina pin, within the cedar box) of the poem there is a
possible escape from the scene. The speaker is writing, and although there is no key,
Satan comes in. As the narrative of the poem unfolds, the arrival of Satan is contiguous
with the attempt to write:

    I am trying to write my
    way out of the closed box
    redolent of cedar. Satan
    comes to me in the locked box (3)

The speaker says to Satan, “I love [my parents] but I’m trying to say what happened to us
in the lost past.” Satan gives her the words to describe the past, and as she says them, he
enables her to leave. But the speaker refuses to leave, realizing that “The exit is through
Satan’s mouth.” She insists that she loved her parents too. As the poem closes, she warms
her “cold hands at the dancer’s ruby eye— / the fire, the suddenly discovered knowledge
of love.”

   The movement from gold, early in the poem, to cold in the closing image of the
poem, follows the drift of the phoneme old through the abyss of emotions and memories
evoked by the struggle of the poem: this drift traverses the unconscious of the speaker.
The color gold also is displaced by the color red, of the ruby eye, which suggests female
power, as well as the rose of Sharon. That red also suggests shame is not overlooked in
the poem:
The pain of the locked past buzzes
in the child’s box on her bureau, under
the terrible round pond eye
etched around with roses, where
self-loathing gazed at sorrow. (3)

Roses of Sharon surround her image in the mirror. How has her sexuality been prostituted? Satan gets her to say, “My mother is a pimp,” which makes whores of her daughters. And the “round pond eye”: could it be the O in Olds? The box also suggests the female genitals.

Where does the name of the signatory go in the language of the unconscious? I am interested in what the signature says, reveals, conceals, does (pick your predicate) about the unconscious, according to the signature discourse of the poems, and from there to discern the poetics of Sharon Olds. Like reading the Song of Solomon, we could be reading a language that exceeds the limits of propriety: aspects of its economy would, if unconscious, work in the interstices between strictures, laws, letters, or rules of the signature. And she allows it to happen. It could be unintentional. Boxes, roses, gold, red, Os: the trace of the signature would be nonrepresentational—mise en abyme. Or is it just her idiom? The crude, reductive violence of banal obscenities forms a kind of visual and tonal maze: shit, fuck, cock, cunt, come. These words are all worked on Satan’s waxy tongue; they all are repeated by the speaker—except “come.” She does not come. She does not come out: desire to resist, resistance to desire. It is also about the fall of “Sharon.” She is dead already, in her coffin, in the tomb: or within the walls of a cedar house.

The second modality of the signature is about control. The idiomatic marks, that “banal and confused metaphor for the first [modality]” as Derrida says, that constitute
what is sometimes called style, are in the command of the writer when she has become a stylist, when intention modulates idiom, although, as Derrida remarks, a signer might leave the marks by accident (Signsponge 54). But what we are interested in here is a poetics or style that gives up something to the third modality. Maybe it can be traced in the accidentals. The element of control is given away at some point; otherwise, there can be no countersignature. Whatever signature effects are isolated and capitalized on no longer represent the general economy of the text, even though they may participate in it. This is why Derrida refers to the third modality, the countersignature, as le pas de Ponge, the step, and stop, of Ponge or, more broadly, pas d’homme, of man (Signsponge 50, 56).

In a restricted economy nothing would be lost. The writing would only come back to the signatory. Olds would control everything. But a general economy admits loss.

The placement in abyss, mise en abyme, slides easily into a thematics of mourning and burial. And if Olds buries her signature, puts it to rest, what happens? In the French, a second meaning of mise is wager, gamble, or stake. Is it by chance or necessity that the shit is disseminated in this poem in the words “shepard” and “heart-shaped” but mostly in the word “shit”? There is a buzzing in the box. The word “shit” appears four times, twice as often as any of the other casual obscenities. It could get cold and red hot. The word “shepard” resides en abime, a picture placed very carefully within the opening image, a picture “pasted onto / the central panel between carvings.” In the end the speaker is left behind this abyss below the mirror.

The agon of “Satan Says” pits the speaker against Satan. Satan personifies the obscene superego, that figuration of authority that not only knows the moral codes but also enjoys such knowledge by violating it. Thematically, the agon pits love against an
obscene, linguistic force for the right to represent the past: this force manifests itself through profane naming (“Say / My father is a shit.”; “Say your mother is a pimp.”), profanity (“Say shit, say death, say fuck the father”), and reduction of the past to trauma (“say: torture”). Lacan refers to the superego as the “ballast of the unconscious,” and these obscenities all conform to classical Freudian notions of repressed desires and memories. When the speaker responds to Satan verbally, love becomes the form of resistance to the obscene superego—in the poem and in the act of writing. But the play of forces, the emotional energies and exchanges of the poem, never resolves itself; rather, it cools down and the reader is left with the image of the speaker warming her cold hands “at the dancer’s ruby eye,” heated by “the knowledge of love.”

Writing becomes a struggle with Satan, another proper name beginning and ending with the same letters as Sharon. It is also a struggle with the past, at and with the oedipal scene itself, with what is old in the life of the speaker. Perhaps most of all, writing becomes the struggle to write one’s name and to write in one’s name. The main argument of my study is that Sharon Olds’ imagery usually implies a certain fetish logic that characterizes the topology of Olds’ poetics, as if the logic of two scenes or two times are unfolding at once, as if the speaker were in two places at once.

In “Satan Says” the scene of writing is connected with the scene of conception:

Say: the father’s cock, the mother’s cunt, says Satan, I’ll get you out.
The angle of the hinge widens
until I see the outlines of
the time before I was, when they were
locked in the bed. (4)

The word locked recalls the gold lock of the cedar box, the opening image of the poem, while figuring a metonymy for the locking together of the genes that form the daughter
(the poem opens the section of the book entitled “Daughter”). On a more primal sexual level, “locked” is used of dogs copulating: sometimes two become literally stuck together, unable to separate. This image is of her (own) conception, including the tone of it. “I see the outlines of the time”: that would be gazing at the Olds. Old, the morsel of the name, functions like a shuttle between the two scenes, the scene of writing, which is the present tense of the poem, and the scene of the past, “redolent of cedar.” Both scenes, a double signature scene, fold into the abyss.

The word redolent combines within it red and ole and contains an anamorphic spelling of the word old. Redolent and cedar evoke old clothes and the smell of the means of preserving them. In the dreamlike sequence of the poem, the cedar box is displaced by a cedar house:

> Come in my mouth, he says, you’re there already, and the huge hinge begins to close. Oh no, I loved them, too, I brace my body tight in the cedar house. Satan sucks himself out the keyhole.

The house figures the double bind of the poem, the fact that the tools for exploring the past, language and memory, were formed in that past and continue to exercise their powers on the speaker in the present. The speaker’s language is born out of the linguistic economy of the parental home, but she cannot let herself be born along by the forces of that language. Her poetry, her poetics, must be about her parents, whose imagoes go to form the superego. Yet the language she has to use carries within it the obscene properties of the superego. Although Satan withdraws, sucking himself out the keyhole, he may be the outside. It seems as if the universe itself, that which lies outside the house,
is Satan, the obscenity. This possibility is both temporal and spatial. The obscene superego always lies in wait.

In the words *gold* and *cold*, the force of the signature and the unconscious of the signature remain an origin and destination of the poem. The hands of the writer are cold, having rejected the heat of Satan’s breath and mouth, in essence having rejected his proffered exit from the oedipal scene. She remains locked in the box with her past: “*It’s your coffin now*, Satan says.” But the ruby eye of the ballerina pin warms her hands. The speaker, no longer “pinned,” instead *sees*, powerfully—but not by escaping the box, her gender. This warmth in the recognition of the dancer, “the suddenly discovered knowledge of love,” suggests the poetic dance between the past and the present of the text that will come out of the struggle to make the past into text. At the end of the poem, as the verbal exchange with Satan fades out, the hands are being warmed, presumably in preparation for the task of writing. This suggests a transition from hellish discourse to writing. The hand warming contrasts with the heat of Satan’s breathy invitation to come out of the house: “the air around the opening is heavy and thick as hot smoke.” Satan’s language would be hell. In contrast, it’s not clear what the practice of writing will produce beyond resistance.

*“Love Fossil”*

The poem following “Satan Says,” “Love Fossil,” at first reading might seem silly, but it capitalizes an exploration of what is old and at the same time carries out a logic of the name

Sharon:
My da on his elegant vegetarian ankles
drank his supper. Like the other dinosaurs
massive, meaty, made of steak,
he nibbled and guzzled, his jaw dripping weeds and bourbon,
super sleazy, extinct beast my heart dug for.

The paleontology implicit in “my heart dug for,” an archeology of love, continues the
thematic of “Satan Says.” At the same time it is an archeology of the proper name. How
big is the surname, the name of the father? How old is it? It is nothing less than
monumental. The father is characterized as a Brontosaurus in this poem, a huge joke.
And the speaker is later figured as a carnivore—but in the surprising form of a “storm of
mosquitoes” in the dinosaur image. This predatory, parasitic pack makes a good image
for characterizing the way in which “Sharon” can be read in this poem. The singularity of
the name is dispersed across a multiplicity of carnivores. Similarly, “Sharon” launches
many separate semes when it begins to work in the unconscious of the text and the text of
the unconscious, where it feeds on the name of the father.

The word “rose” makes a second appearance here, following its first in “Satan
Says,” this time as a predicate: “Love rose in me, a storm of mosquitoes / hovering over
La Brea.” This sentence suggests red and black, the red hinted at in “rose” and the red of
swollen mosquitoes together with the black of the tar pits. In the next clause, the plurality
of “mosquitoes” resolves into the singularity of the first person pronoun: “Carnivore that
I was.” This resolution passes through the word “carnivore,” categorizing the speaker
among those organisms that consume other organisms. In the poem “California
Swimming Pool” from The Gold Cell, mosquitoes are likened to sharks: “sated
mosquitoes hung in the air like sharks.” The word “shark” appears in a several of Olds’
poems, and this deformation of “Sharon” is of a piece with her penchant for imaging the bodies of others as meat, red and raw, as well as her penchant for metaphors of predation. The confusion of sexual desire, love, fear, and hunger remains a constant concern in Olds’ poetry, and this recurrent imagery of eating of the Other begins in the first two poems. As we shall see, this predation is an Oedipal reversal, something she learned from her father. And one of his nicknames for her was “Shar,” which appears to be pronounced like “shark” without the k.

“Chevy” and “Sharon” begin with the same opening phoneme, the sh sound. The image of the “Chevy” figures the paternal: “He was dark as a reptile and splashed with mud like an old Chevy, / he was souped-up and stunned and cruel”; “An old Chevy,” constitutes another predation of the name “Sharon” on the name “Olds.” Not an old Olds(mobile) but a Chevy, as if the surname has been condensed (encrypted) with the forename. The proprietary emphasis shifts, conferring on her father and his name the sibilant “sh” sound of the name “Sharon.”

The sentence following the image of the Chevy traces a genealogy of love and anger from the surname into the pit, the abyss, of La Brea, and up into the storm of the forename’s semes which hover above the pit of time and still survive today. This genealogy neatly figures and subtly re-centers the emotional struggle of the previous poem, “Satan Says,” with an automobile image: “He taught me to love / what was stuck, what couldn’t help itself, / what went down mute into time like tar, like anger.” Rather than personifying the angry superego as Satan, time mutes and transmutes the anger-trapped hulk. It is the father himself who sinks into and becomes the tar, i.e., an

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3 In The Gold Cell see “Alcatraz” and “The Premonition” in addition to “California Swimming Pool.”
incredibly dangerous, age-old trap and repository of repressed and silent anger. This image also continues the incestuous language of “Satan Says.”

Like the phrases “come in my mouth” and “sucks himself out” from “Satan Says,” the words “went down” continue the image of oral sex, although only as an undertone in this poem. But the possibilities of incestuous desire are more direct here. This oral quality of these images suggests a non-procreative sexuality, linked to hunger and aggression, those more primitive forms of desire than genitality, less sublimated, more “partial” and perhaps more fetishistic.

The tar pit is another figure for the crypt of the father, the memorial. The image of going down into tar presents an aging process. The place of the speaker, interior and exterior, is woven together with the past in the labyrinth of the name. Making the name the scene of transgression, finding the way to write within the propriety of the name while exploring topics that are normally taboo, using one’s name to search for what ordinarily seems veiled and absent from thought or from propriety, all occurs through the play of the names. The death of the father imagined here requires mourning. The encryption and decryption of the names enacts a mourning that reaches down into the unconscious. The end of the poem presents a shift in the subject structure of the speaker by means of an encryption of her name in the body of the father. She refuses the predation inherent in the image of a storm of mosquitoes by refusing to eat of her father: “Carnivore that I was I watched his / bare white shoulder and I went hungry.” An odd image perhaps, an Apatosaurus with a white shoulder, but the word “shoulder” makes a portmanteau of “Sharon Olds,” merging the two names into a single word, a single

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4 If you visit a museum looking for a Brontosaurus, there is a good chance it will be called an Apatosaurus, this “new” name having gained favor among paleontologists in recent years since it was the original name given to the species.
The shoulder and the mouth would converge if she chose to bite, and she would take the blood of her father into her body—but the joining takes place on the level of the letter, the level of the signature, and most generally on the level of the word. And “shoulder,” the double encryption of the two names, results from this step and stop of desire.

The sharing of signature names in this portmanteau represents a specular dynamics of the Oldsian oedipal abyss. Her relation to the specular other, the parent, undergoes a change as she fights her own predisposition for predation. The recognition that informs this change comes via the exploration of violence and aggression germane to her sexual textuality. This violence and aggression would be well figured in the primordial image of the male animal, like a tiger, biting the shoulder of his female sexual mate, reflecting the confusion of drives in the acts of predation and copulation. In “Love Fossil” the sexual nature of this image is latent in the theme of predation, and it is the female that would bite.

In terms of drives, this refusal to eat of the father suggests the Freudian distinction between “partial drives,” including orality (the sucking of mosquitoes), and genitality proper, the sum of the partial drives in an oedipalized sexual subjectivity. Lacan challenged this notion of an integrated drive, suggesting the partial drives represent sexuality only partially: they do not represent the reproductive function but only the dimension of enjoyment. If Olds’ imagery of predation suggests a regression to the partial drive of orality, this poem refuses that demand. Lacan also suggests that the drives and desire all originate in the field of the subject, whereas the genital drive would find its

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5 For pointing out this merging of the names in the word “shoulder,” I owe my student Craig Clements.
form on the side of the Other (*Four* 189). In Olds’ poem the drive moves from oral
(mosquitoes that bite and suck) to scopic (just watching him sink). But the word shoulder
is still on the side of the other. It is a shoulder drive rather than a genital drive: a
sharonolder drive to watch its object go down into the abyss.

*“Rising Daughter”*

In “Rising Daughter” the color gold travels into the daughter’s body like an
invader bringing the father’s name in with the mother’s milk. The jealousy that begins at
the breast, according, to Freud is mixed with the law of the name of the father in this
poem, which interiorizes the split between the two scenes of a fetish logic:

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delicate as shrimp, the Japanese frogmen
swam, slowly. They approached from the west,
their gold faces glowing like specks of
mica, in the heavy Pacific,
their flippers the fins of prawns. I lay
and sucked, and in great numbers, like yellow
flakes of butter, they entered me
with my mother’s milk, a vocation. I would be
for myself, then, an enemy
to all who do not wish me to rise.
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Not just an enemy to those who do not wish her to rise, she contains an enemy within
herself, an enemy to parts of herself, as the line break suggests: “I would be / for myself,
then, an enemy /.” The gold faces are a part of her, like yellow flakes of butter (risking
the racial stereotype in the word “yellow” in order to cross the names “Sharon,” *sharing*
of milk, and “Olds,” *gold*, yet again), and they come from the west, like the western part
of her name, Sharon, the name of a place along a western coastline. The separation of the
name from the person, the split between the subject and the subject-in-language, is
figured in the image of the golden cream rising to the top within her. The presence of her
mother, sharing the gold cream with her, completes the oedipal triangle across the caesura of her signature. Although sharing does not seem to connote resistance, this sharing of gold takes place during wartime. She is born at war, as the title note of the poem indicates:

**The Rising Daughter**

*(b. San Francisco, 1942)*

The suckling that the poem describes figures a warlike becoming-masculine, the Japanese frogmen entering her like shrimp. In this movement, the splitting of the subject in language elicits another problem inherent in this signature: the potential conflict of its masculine and feminine elements. The conflict of gender is complicated then, the frogmen identified with the gold that resounds the patriarchal, masculine, surname and yet comes through the maternal milk. The division of parental gender is implicit in the image of the milk/butter, and this division is “sucked,” introjected, at the level of daughter/subject. The interiorizing violence of this conflictedness is finally redirected toward “all who do not wish [the daughter] to rise.”

Thus, the rising daughter moves between genders, between states (Japanese/American; liquid milk/solid butter), between multiplicity (“great numbers,” like the mosquitoes in “Love Fossil”) and singularity (“I would be for myself”), between interiority (the interiorizing violence of institutional war as it is projected and sanctioned by state ideology) and exteriority (of the nomadic outside of the state personified in the Japanese frogmen, a nomadic war machine, a wolfpack at the border of the American state), between the anti-oedipal transference across the mother-daughter boundary and the oedipal inheritance of gold faces, the nomadic war machine locked in mutually defining opposition to state and patriarchal ideology.
“I Go Back to May 1937”

In “I Go Back to May 1937,” fetish logic is used to temporally bracket the oedipal scene thematized in “Satan Says.” The poem reads as if the speaker is examining a photograph of her parents and traveling back in time to the moments of their respective graduations from their colleges and the moment of their marriage. From the perspective of the present of the speaker, with implacable hindsight, she imagines warning her parents by saying “STOP,” by saying no to her own life. But as the poem progresses the voice undergoes a reversal of viewpoint, finally taking an affirmative stance: “I want to live.” This present tense recognition is followed by a revised and reversed version of the warning she would issue, the imagined speech act which closes the poem: “I say / Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.”

These speech acts embedded in the temporal structure of the poem embody an instance of what Derrida calls “the absolute past.” This imagined commencement address to the parents poses the problems of origin, resurrection, rebirth, alternation and alteration of the past, the pasts that were never present, etc. The structure of the poem frames a movement between two minds, one of negation, saying no to the past, and one of affirmation, saying yes to the past and yes to the reflexive moment of the present. This movement forms an axis along which the thought of the poem reverses itself freely, moving back and forth between the moment of enunciation and 1937, as if the speaker were in two places at once. The two logics contaminate each other, and gradually the affirmative logic wins out. But before this seemingly simple anagnorisis or recognition is concluded, the mixing of the two logics produces a literal fetish image of conception:
I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips like chips of flint as if to
strike sparks from them,
the speaker says, as if the images (apparently) in the photograph are paperdoll cutouts
with the properties of voodoo dolls. This fetish event will come to be the dianoia, the new
way of thinking that develops from the recognition that affirmation is preferable to the
Stop, which the speaker initially desires. Across Olds’ oeuvre, this oedipal material is a
constant point of return, the figures of the parents taken up again and again and banged
about in decelebration of the past and in the conception of the textual event. But it is not a
simple affirmation; the speaker’s existence was mortgaged with the parent’s unspeakable
suffering. The yes is a yes to both the affirmation and the refusal, yes to the conflict of
the poetic faculties, yes to the past and the absolute past, yes to the conflict of desire and
$jouissance$ within the subject.

“Nurse Whitman”

Inserted between one poem thematically concerned with the faulty mother and
another concerned with the surrealist mother-magician, “Nurse Whitman” seems a
relatively traditional invocation of the great American bard. But the poem re-genders
Whitman, who worked as a Civil War nurse, as a mother, and since the speaker likens
herself to Whitman, the poem implicitly suggests that the speaker fashions herself as her
own poetic mother. Maybe this image stands in opposition to her biological mother,
toward whom she is only ambivalent. The last lines of the poem make clear this self-
fashioning with Whitman as model. They do so, furthermore, in oedipal terms: “we
conceive, Walt, with the men we love, thus, now / we bring to fruit.” The particular man
the speaker loves and touches in the poem is her father, figured as the dead person whom
the speaker must attend the way Whitman attended the Union casualties: “You bathe the
forehead, you bathe the lip, the cock / as I touch my father, as if the language were a form
of life.”

Olds’ poetry is the poetry of a great healer, albeit a self-healer primarily, and this
is so thematically, beyond any concern with the boundary between signatories and
speakers within texts. Freud’s interminable talking cure is translated into a writing cure.
The fetish logic in “Nurse Whitman,” which espouses the relation between healing and
composition by way of the two proper names “Sharon Olds” and “Walt Whitman,”
unfolds across two scenes: Whitman nursing the wounded and the dying during the Civil
War; the poet attending her dead and locating her poetic contact with language in this
event. These two scenes are wound together like two halves of a DNA strand, each three
line stanza effecting a transference between the two scenes by elliptically crossing
between them and confusing them, as if each scene is immanent within the other—as if
the two scenes are simultaneously present in the text. This effect could have its place in
the proper name Olds; a connection across time, like an umbilical cord between the poet
and Whitman, her poetic elder, whose wisdom is that of an old poet. In the first three
stanzas the shift occurs through substitution in the subject position, from “You” to “I” in
each stanza: “You move ... / the way I move”; “You bathe ... / as I touch”; “You write ... I
take the dictation.” In the last two stanzas this split between second and first person
pronoun cases is resolved in first person plural: “We bend,” “We lean,” “we conceive,”
“we bring.” Thus, grammatically, the two scenes, if not the two subject positions, are
resolved into one. But rhetorically and oedipally the substitution isn’t symmetrical. The man with whom the speaker conceives is her father, substituting herself for her mother on one corner of the oedipal triangle. The men with whom Whitman conceives are the Union soldiers.

In this poem, Whitman is held over against the father as a mother’s breast is suspended over a child. Whereas the father is positioned as the dead, Whitman is positioned as a conceiver on the same order as the speaker, a giver of language and life, and he is given breasts. The W’s of his name may even be read in the word used to describe the breasts of Whitman and the speaker: “We lean down, our pointed breasts / heavy as plummets with fresh spermy milk.” “Plummets” has two substantive denotations, one the plumb bob, the other an oppressive burden. The letter W is shaped like two plumb bobs stuck together. The doubleness and the intimacy of breasts are observed in the way the name “Walt” is deployed. The poem begins by addressing Walt in the second person, the first three stanzas beginning with “You,” then in the third person plural (“we”) and by first name twice in the last two stanzas; two Walts hanging at the bottom of the lyric like two plumb bobs, two breasts, two scenes and a thematic of doubling, all under the auspices of the letter W.

Why is “Nurse Whitman” inserted between two poems, both of which are ambivalent in their dianoia or thought concerning the mother? Obviously this poem celebrates the image of mothering in a less skeptical way than the outer poems, “Quake Theory” (which concerns the fault between mother and daughter) and “Tricks” (as performed by a surrealist mother-magician who can make her daughter’s ovaries disappear, in addition to being “the tops, the best / magician”). The speaker of “Nurse
Whitman,” in contrast to the mother celebrated in the outer poems, promotes an image of herself as poet/mother, a mannish mother tending her dead father in the manner of her femme-y poet father, whom she metaphorically mothers, changing Walt Whitman into a nursing, fruiting, partially-feminine alter ego. This metamorphosis of Walt Whitman folds the parental corners of the oedipal triangle, superimposing maternal and paternal functions (and, to some extent, anatomy) or corners upon each other, displacing the “dead” father and the actual mother, who is, indeed, seemingly absent from the poem.

On an emotional vector opposite that of birthing, the text genders mourning in a strangely bisexual way, the pun on nursing making the scene of death and dying also a scene of “spermy milk” issuing from “plummets” figuring both breasts and phalloi. Mourning is a feedback loop with the past, with the old. And the form of logocentrism preserves itself by having structured mourning around itself. We will not free ourselves of it until we stop mourning. And yet, mourning is integral with healing. Mourning is the event that roots out the past and the passed, reducing their affects but preserving them at the same time. Some science fiction conceits concerned with immortality investigate this problematic: what healing capacity would be sacrificed were immortality to be achieved? In the human temporality, the temporality of death, this problematic concerns an imaginary scene. And the other scene, the imaginary scene of immortality, constitutes a fetish logic in its erection, a scene precisely opposite and apposite to thanatology. The two logics of dying and living unfold and infold each other in the question of what happens between these two scenes. Does either tableau not retain the other in its range or domain somewhere? Both Whitman’s and the author’s signatures are made to live in the text of Olds’ poem, her last name—indelibly a name of mourning—operating on and
through the figure of her father and through the concept of the elder.

Poems About Mothering

Mothers and mothering return as a theme, usually set off in its own section, in all of Olds’ books except The Father. This thematic foregrounds the double vision of fetish logic. Often, the speaker’s desire splits, devising two or more scenes which conflict in the psychic economy of the speaker. The conflict may oppose one scene of the speaker-as-mother to another one of the speaker-before-giving-birth. At other times the split involves two mother-daughter scenes: the scene of the speaker with her mother and the scene of the speaker with her daughter. In other instances the split under examination is between the mother and daughter. In “Young Mothers II” the two scenes of mother-daughter relation oppose the scene of the daughterless couple before birth. In each case a persona resists an older persona. Taken together, these various images comprise a model and exploration of the mother complex.

A notable moment in this exploration involves various uses of the birth scene that include the motif of salt. We have already seen salt/birthing imagery in two poems discussed above. In “Nurse Whitman,” the milk that the speaker and Whitman produce is “spermy,” suggesting the saltiness of sexual fluids. Another prevalent image condenses water, blood, and milk (fluids of reproduction) with seawater as we have seen in the poem “The Rising Daughter,” where the speaker sways in the womb like milk swaying in her mother’s breast, later (after birth?) taking into her body Japanese frogmen from “the heavy Pacific” as she draws sustenance from her mother’s body. Another exemplary instance of this salt-birth association appears in the third section of Satan Says, the
section entitled simply “Mother.” The trauma of birthing amplifies the division of the mother into two separate subjects until the event takes on Old Testament dimensions. The following comes from the poem “Young Mothers I”:

She has pressed out
the child in her. It lies, separate, 
opening and closing its mouth, its hands 
wrinkled with long immersion in salt water.

Now the mother is the other one, 
breasts hard bags of rock salt, 
the bluish milk seeping out, her soul 
there in the small carriage, the child in her 
risen to the top, like cream 
and skimmed off.

Although not quite biblical pillars, the salt in this poem would prevent nursing if we took the image literally, desiccating the breasts, de-oxygenating the milk, making it bluish as if it would suffocate the suckling child. The more literal tenor of the metaphor might be that the mother, “the other one” like her mother before her, does not receive milk from the hard breasts, that pleasurable experience now reversed by the giving of her own breast, a painfully sensuous experience, a kind of salt in the wound of birthing.

The schema of the poem incorporates a dream logic, a Freudian confusion of death and birth, in its representation of a paranoid anxiety dream condensing the fear for the life of the child with fear of the loss of self. The escape from this logic, which coincides with the reversal of thinking which ends the poem, consists in waking from the dream:

She dreams of death by fire, death 
by falling, death by disembowelling, 
dead by drowning, death by removal 
of the head. Someone starts to scream 
it wakes her up, the hungry baby 
wakes and saves her.
Not until the last line is it clear that fear for the child has traced its sources in the mother’s unconscious fear for her own life. The words “saves her” refer to the mother saved by the child. Waking and escaping the dream logic, the speaker only reverts back to the logic of birthing, itself a fetish logic, resolving the fear-of-death dream on a conscious level but leaving the dream logic latent in the birthing logic. The speaker’s wakening returns her to the aftermath of the real scene of self-division, part of the self leaving, splitting off, becoming unknown to the mother: “She has pushed, lying alone on a bed, / sweating, isolated by pain, / splitting slowly.” This poem theorizes the mother-child as the exemplary split subject, the literal splitting iterating itself as it enters memory and the unconscious, dividing the imagination against itself. Birthing is represented as a sort of inverse mirror stage, the parent misrecognizing herself in the child, herself as the specular other, which has indeed arisen from herself but is now separate and no longer knowable to herself, as “the child in her / risen to the top, like cream / and skimmed off.” At the same moment she is aware of the child’s awareness of her: “Now the mother is the other one.” The recognition of her own pre-oedipal memory in the child’s situation separates and differentiates her from the child which cannot yet know the further pain of separation and interiorizing violence it must undergo in order to grow and mature. A mother is faced with responsibility for that post-natal violence that all newborns must undergo. In other words she is faced with the task of creating a subject.

In the poem “The Possessive,” this theory of the maternal split subject is explored in the mother-daughter split. As the daughter ages and matures, the fear harbored in the imagination of the mother and in the unconscious (the unconscious without pre-position) is modulated, displaced by a return to the thematic of the enemy and war, the war
machine that hums in the Olds conceptual matrix, the thematic which runs through

“Nurse Whitman” and “The Rising Daughter.” Speaking of her daughter, the speaker says,

Distant fires can be
glimpsed in the resin lights of her eyes:

the watch fires of an enemy, a while before
the war starts.

And a similar war will be fought against the old self, the self that preceded the speaker’s mother-identity. In “Young Mothers II,” this old self is made the object of desire in one scene of a split-scene logic that explores the unconscious of the mother by looking back to a scene now illicit for the mother, a scene bracketed temporally by the speaker’s two mother-daughter scenes—a daughterless scene. In the aftermath of birth there is mourning for an old self:

They have torn her soul out of her body and said
the child is the other one.

Always a new baby to take her place,
and now she’s a lady-in-waiting again
to a queen. Out of her mother’s house
she has fallen into her daughter’s.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
she stands outside a window and watches a childless couple
fucking in the resinous light of a fire
without interruption.

The childless couple figures a scene of pre-conception, a daughterless scene. Within this figure, the circuit of desire is heterosexual and “without interruption.” This preconceptual and het circuit of desire is bracketed by the two scenes of mothering that inscribe her body and memory: “Out of her mother’s house she has fallen into her daughter’s” as if she has passed from one subject position in the mother complex to another. The het
circuit of desire may figure a wish to escape the mother complex altogether. This longing for the freedom of the old self, the self in the daughterless house, is a taboo desire, a desire implying the wish to not have the child or to be without the child, and a desire to return to an old paradigm, a middle stage between periods of subjection within the mother complex.
Chapter 3

“The Lifting” and the Superego

“The Lifting”

In the poem “The Lifting,” the subject matter is nested in the deathbed scene of the father. This poem is of special interest for a signature reading, for it has everything to do with the return of the name or, what is the same thing, its placement in the abyss. As with many of the poems in The Father, which chronicles the death by cancer of the poet’s father, the event the poem depicts takes place in the hospital room; the speaker’s father lifts his “nightie” (near the end of the poem it will be called his “cotton gown”), and the metaphorical trajectory of this lifting extends right to a classical, Book of Revelations moment, for the last two lines characterize the lifting as a revelation: “the way we were promised at death it would rise, / the veils would fall from our eyes, we would know everything.” What the speaker literally sees is the body of her father, dying and “gaunt,” beyond taboo, beyond oedipal pre- and dis-positioning, beyond her astonished disbelief: “I would not have believed it,” she says.

The entrance to this body is through the name. When the father lifts his nightie and unveils his body, the speaker turns away as if violating the taboo of his body. She is forced to turn back when he calls her by her nickname:

Suddenly my father lifted up his nightie, I turned my head away but he cried out Shar!, my nickname, so I turned and looked.
Much of this poem’s structure results from a joining of names: the intimate and abbreviated nickname becomes enfolded with the surname, through an exploration of the old taboo body—and it begins with Shar!, not “shâr” (like “air” or “care”) apparently, but “shar.” This nicknaming performs an apocalyptic syncope of the proper name Sharon.

How is Shar pronounced? The father’s pronunciation is buried, encrypted by this graphic representation of the nickname. Thus, the nickname becomes unknown at the moment of its representation and, in the chronology of the poem, within the father’s command that his daughter view his unveiled body.

At the same time, in the same textual event, the second name of the signature encrypts “The Lifting.” The orientation and setting of the poem’s thought is clearly one of Old Testament intertextuality. A Old Testament undertone can be heard in the “nick” of “nickname.” Old Nick is a moniker for Satan. As I’ve pointed out in the reading of “Satan Says” above, there is a hypogrammatic possibility that Sharon and Satan share, both words beginning with S and ending with n. That coincidence aligns perfectly with the thematic struggle of that poem: the speaker against her Satan. In “The Lifting” we are dealing with syncope, a different kind of deformation, suggesting a partial object.

The scene of the child viewing the naked father constitutes one of the primal moments in the Old Testament, a psychological scene of the originary moment of taboo inception. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, after the flood narrative, the taboo of nakedness is articulated in a homofamilial scene. Ham sees his father, Noah, drunk and naked (and passed out?) in Noah’s tent. Ham reports what he has seen to his two brothers, Shem and Jephath, then God curses him, or at least his son Canaan (there is some
confusion in the patchwork of narratives).\textsuperscript{6} Olds' poem is an elegant, feminist (mis)reading of this homotextual event, re-centering it around the subject position of a daughter. The poem follows the biblical trajectory of the motif of veiling, carrying it through to the idea of proper and final unveiling, the revelation, and the asymptotic and promissory omniscience of the Book of Revelations. But the poem first opens the scene of taboo and curse.

The various encryptions of the poem, including this encryption of revelation through taboo, reside in and consist of the description of a crisscross of gazes and signature effects.\textsuperscript{7} The command, \textit{Shar!}, is elicited by an initial refusal of the gaze: “I / turned my head away but he cried out / \textit{Shar!”} Thus, the first sentence introduces a deformation of the name “Sharon.” A similar syncope forms an antonomasia, perhaps the most obvious type of counter-signature, “Olds” reduced to an adjectival “old,” delimiting the particular crypting of this poem: “he / shows me his old body.” The first and last names form an echo chamber in which the poem resounds with the two names. Between these names there is mourning for the once “solid ruddy stomach,” and the pelvis is compared to “a chambered whelk shell hollowed out.” The word “solid” expands the word “olds” by adding an “i” after moving the “s” to the front of the word. In a similar fashion, the word “hollowed” expands “old.” The word “shell” sounds the “sh” phoneme. The once solid stomach has lost its solidity, now old and loose.

Two crypts, the stomach and the pelvis: the stomach, or the skin of it, has fallen

\textsuperscript{6} As an iteration of the prohibition against nudity, the story of Ham and Noah reiterates the story of the first veiling in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve ingest the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and become ashamed of their nakedness. Upon this realization, the couple fashions the first veil, an apron of fig leaves sewn together. These events are described in the third chapter of Genesis.

\textsuperscript{7} For a rigorous theoretical reading of the gaze and the abject body in \textit{The Father}, see Laura E. Tanner’s article “Death-Watch: Terminal Illness and the Gaze in Sharon Olds’ \textit{The Father}.”
folded down “at the base of the abdomen,” which is the mouth or opening of the pelvis. The stomach, a fleshy sack (a bag of tissue forming a crypt for digestion, a crypt of consumption like the mouth, which is also a crypt of ingestion), collapses into the bony crypt of the pelvis, a crypt that may survive the death of the body for some time, thus, a crypt associated with corpses and one which while living houses the sacs of the lower organs, such as the ovaries and various alimentary organs. The poem roots down into the body of the father. The two names, Sharon and Olds, are also crypts that the poem explores.

Subtly, as the speaker is forced to make a decision about viewing the taboo nakedness of her father, the gaze of the reader also enters decision space. How does the father pronounce the forename-nickname? Would he say “sharr” or “share” or “cher”? These pronunciations conduct various meanings into the poem. The syncope, leaving out the “on” of Sharon, forces the reader into the signature space of the author, into the question of how her name functions in relation to her identity. No matter how her father pronounces the nickname (both ways? and/or possibly some other way or ways? not to mention the possible by-play between various nicknames that may affect the speaker), the promise of the name prominently accents the crossed identities of the daughter and the father. They share identity. Which one is charred, burnt? Which gaze burns and consumes the other? The question of the pronunciation is immediately complicated in the next sentence by “to show,” a synonym for sharing: “He was sitting in the high cranked up bed with the / gown up, to show me the weight he had lost.” His cancer has burnt the weight off his body; what is revealed by the gaze, what is shown? Identity reduced to its oedipal ashes? The gaze of the poem passes through cancer, his body, his chances, and
through memory. The weight has been lost, and to be shown it has to be shown in memory. This is one part of the chance operation of the gaze; another part of the chance operation is that it passes through the proper name. The “sh” of “to show”: the denotations of showing and sharing overlap within the concept of the gaze, and the “sh” disseminates the opening phoneme of Shar by means of a synonym of share. This dissemination also capitalizes obliquely on the shared pronunciation, which sounds the Old French cher, meaning dear, from the Latin carus. Because she cares, she looks:

I looked
where his solid ruddy stomach had been
and I saw the skin fallen into loose
soft hairy rippled folds
lying in a pool of folds

She looks, and she sees one set of folds nested within another. The repetition of the word “folds” reproduces the same sort of invagination that appears in the nickname Shar, although the mechanism is idiosyncratic with each word. To fold—the word has great conceptual and theoretical range: invagination, la brisure, le pli, the pleat, the manifold of mathematics, etc. Deleuze says that “when an organism dies, it does not really vanish, but folds in upon itself, abruptly involuting into the again newly dormant seed by skipping all intermediate stages” (Fold 8), and this process might describe the transference between father and daughter of “The Lifting.” In this poem, the doubling of the word lets the meaning of the word act on itself: to fold is to double. In “Shar,” this doubling appears in the space between writing and sound, in the possibilities of pronunciation. In which case is desire more of a factor or chance more of a factor? In the syncope of the nickname, the desire of the father has been narrowed down to a precise dimension of the desire that he wishes to instill in the daughter, i.e., to the mastery of the
desire of the other. That much is graphed by the order word Shar! The gazes will be exchanged, and then, in a second movement of this precise desire, the father will look away as the daughter did in the second line of the poem: “I saw / his rueful smile, the cast-up eyes as he / shows me his old body . . . .” In the exchange of gazes, the desire of the daughter moves through the desire to eat the father at the same time that it moves through the name of the father: “I saw the folds of skin like something / poured, a thick batter, I saw / his rueful smile ... as he / shows me his old body.” “Folds, batter, shows, old”: these words diagram the desire at stake in the hinge of the names Shar and Olds. Sharing and sharking, signature iterations of Shar!, both channel the meaning of desire through the image of consuming the other; offering one’s self to be consumed, or force-feeding (by means of the order word) the other one’s own body, figures the desire to reproduce one’s own desire precisely within the other as a means of reterritorializing the identity of the other—as a means of jealousy.

To cook the batter of the other from the inside out: the poem constructs the subjectivity of both father and daughter by mirroring their desires in symmetry. He issues her nickname as an order word; the poem disseminates countersignatures of his name, Olds, folding the two names into a religion of this singular mirroring by reterritorializing the concept of revelation. From the old body (the name of the law of the father), Olds, comes the order word, Shar!, as if Olds were the origin and destination of Sharon, the teleology and eschatology of the obscene super-ego, the father that says no but then says yes, ordering the daughter to see his body as his desire would consume her desire, as death is consuming the old body. She struggles to find every way possible to redeem the law of the father as a means of transcending all the ways the law of the father (un)veils
and forecloses love. In other words, by turning the circuit of desire that originates in the oedipal moment inside out, she converts a scene of reterritorialization (of the child by the parent on the oedipal plane) into one of deterritorialization (on the religious plane, opening or contaminating revelation, here the coincidence of death and omniscience) by equating revelation with the desire of the obscene superego, thus contaminating or opening that desire. This kind of event also occurs in scenes of mourning; mourning as the occasion for otherwise unacceptable sadness and the delirium that points to problems in one’s existence.

Every breath is the entrance and exit of death: the empty chest, skin folded down, cadaver collapsed, then the body inflated like a balloon, the most basic extension of consciousness, the autonomic system’s embeddedness in the material and energetic textus or economy of the universe. This entrance and exit of death implies the body’s unconscious exploration and reterritorialization of the experience of death through breathing. Breath as a metonymy of life implies the metaphorical absence of life at the conclusion of exhalation: presence and absence of breath, presence and absence of life. This reterritorialization is further mapped by means of language when the breath is morcelized as speech, segmented influence networks that modulate representation in the formation of the linguistic ego, and further mapped by the inevitable folding back of consciousness into the absolute past and the present of the unconscious due to the memory structures language creates. This structure tends to unsuture the conceptual veiling of death and its lack, a process in which language’s peculiar delay modes play an important role. Olds’ poetry, like much good poetry, is an exploration of this zone of language and signature.
“The Ferryer,” another poem from *The Father*, explores this transitional space that folds together the edges of life and death in the mythic figure of Charon, the ferryman whose proper name forms a port into the proper name Sharon. The cadaverous body of the father becomes a gargoyle sitting in the prow of the ferryboat as a stone statue who in his rictus maintains a straight face with the speaker. She uses his hatefulness to sentence other people who annoy her to a deathlike disappearance from her consciousness. Her father’s death becomes a hidden erection of the name “Sharon” as the two, in the dianoia of “The Ferryer,” share a joke. The proper name Charon is never deployed, only its mythic and structural elements serving to metonymically outline the father’s figure. In the blank of that outline sits the gargoyle cadaver of the speaker’s father. And this is the joke that the two are having: he has taken on the persona of Charon, as acute and expert as he is at performing the deathlike disappearance of others from his consciousness. The poem is classically Freudian and structurally neat in its occlusion of the proper name Charon as a means of penetrating the abyss of the proper name Sharon. And for “The Lifting” this might augur a pronunciation of *Shar* that would coincide with her father’s pronunciation of Charon—whether or not her father ever pronounced the word Charon. The speaker’s inner ear hearing the word in her name (or refusing to) imputes to it the nickname her father gives her. Refusal or negation in language always implies a positivation of the negated condition at some other level of language, especially in the case of the proper name, forming striations and smooth space simultaneously around the phonemes of the morcelized name. The name occupies a most prominent position in the subject’s particular linguistic space, including the space of her alterity.
But which speaker has imputed this pronunciation of Sharon: the speaker of critical convention or the person who really heard her father’s pronunciation of her nickname? The graphism of “The Lifting” (Shar!) plays havoc with the masks we normally erect for the exercise of commentary. Or does Olds (or “Olds”) even give a damn how her father pronounced it, mispronounced it, un-, re-, or dispronounced it? And his having pronounced Shar—what would that pronunciation be now, he and the pronunciation having been folded back into time with his death? Is Charon pronounced shair'-әn or kair'-әn, (ʃɛәәn or ˈkɛәәn)? The OED gives ˈkɛәәn. Share-ron or Care-ron? Both offer moral imperatives. But some modern astronomers pronounce it shair'-әn, as in the name Charlene. James W. Christy, who discovered Pluto’s moon, named it Charon, which he pronounced after his wife’s name “Charlene” (nickname “Char”). Ch can be pronounced sh.

Olds folds her father’s skin neatly, as if it were a flag, and places it on his spine where his internal organs are empty sacs forming the floor into the crypt of the rib cage and the crypt of the pelvis. In this poem about opening the crypts of the body, the speaker figuratively puts her body and the body of her daughter in the crypt of her father’s body, as if they are crypts within his crypt. As such, if this poem is not about sharing, then that is precisely what it is not about: nothing of the body is shared except what is taboo—an epistemology of taboo. After the stomach and the torso, the next thing the poem sees in the body of the father is its genetic code graphed into the memory of the speaker via the image of the hip shape shared by father, daughter, and granddaughter, as though this code were wound into a whelk shell. But only that synecdoche of the body, the pelvis, carries forward through the speaker’s daughter. The shell of the image is “hollowed out,” as if
for the continuance of the development of the image, for the line following returns to the fleshy “folds of the skin like something poured, a thick batter.” The shell is emptied of its (edible?) marine snail, in order to make room for the batter of the father, displacement of one life by another, the batter falling into the area of the lowest chakras, the base of the spine, in the back of the bowl of the pelvis, as if the trait becomes the crypt for the flesh, as if the bodies of the female descendants become the tomb of the father, the new domain of the father, the origin and remains of his legacy in matter, as if his flesh will be baked by the sexual energy of the daughters. But the containment of the image, in a psychological sense, becomes confused: whose hips are contained and whose are container, and whose form is holding whose? As with the crisscross of gazes in this poem, the readability of the image involves a confusion of subject positions, a cycle of desire inscribed in time and in matter that folds the subjects into each other.

Signature effects of the poem (left column below) can be schematically arraigned against the sequence of images (right column) that accrete in the text, although technically the images and effects are immanent within each other, woven together and out of each other. This becomes apparent as soon as one begins to compose such lists:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shar!</th>
<th>nightie lifted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to show</td>
<td>gaze averted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rippled folds</td>
<td>father in cranked up bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pool of folds</td>
<td>lost weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pelvis shaped</td>
<td>ruddy stomach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shell</td>
<td>skin fallen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>folds of skin</td>
<td>gaunt torso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he shows</td>
<td>hips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>old body</td>
<td>skin like batter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he told me</td>
<td>rueful smile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>solid stomach</td>
<td>naked body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>glans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>penis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The right column suggests, in its sequence, the penetration into the taboo realm, with the sensational fall of the gaze down the body of the father, beginning with the “gown up, around the his neck,” then moving down to the stomach, down to the hips, back up to the face, then down again to the forbidden genitals before returning to the gown itself (a figure of the poem itself, a weave of text(ure)) and its attendant, apocalyptic thematic of veils which the poem exploits in its ending. What does the signature column suggest when it is juxtaposed to this penetration? By symmetry and by the hinge of the two proper names in the signature, it suggests the copulation of the two names of the signature in the implicate order of the text. On this level, the level of the letter, what does language know of taboo? The word shell suggests, in its appropriation of “ell” for its displacement of “-aron,” hell. Looking over Olds’ work, few readers would disagree that Olds’ obsession with her father willfully transgresses the boundaries of . . . decorum? Occasionally she explores the physical desire she feels for her father. But the question for a signature poetics concerns the joint, the hinge, the connection, the copulation between two names and what this dyadic relation produces. The two names veil, and unveil each other.

The end of “The Lifting” moves the dialogic of the two names, Sharon and Olds, into the abstract generality of the question of epistemological security, couching this move in a bold extension of the onto-theological intertextuality, elevating the stakes of the poem. What exactly does the absolute quality of the concept of omniscience have to

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8See for instance “Looking at My Father” in The Gold Cell.
do with the oedipal relation? The resistance of the “The Lifting” lies in its ambiguous slippage between the sensuous description of the abject body of the dying father and the bracketing biblical intertextuality, these brackets beginning the poem in the Old Testament mode of taboo violation, and ending it in the problem of the New Testament’s closure, the issue of Revelation—which amounts to the problem of the concept of omniscience. How can the concept (of omniscience) and the (dying) body be reconciled (in terms of Christian myth)?

The seemingly abstract philosophical structure of the poem poses the antithesis between the promise of omniscience and the problem of alterity which counterposes omniscience absolutely. Seen in this light, the poem suggests the destruction of alterity as a form of conceptual violence coincident with seeing through the death of the father. The abject alterity of the diseased body would somehow have lead to the erasure of alterity’s partition between the daughter and the father—if “we know everything.” For omniscience to resolve the tension of the poem, it would have to resolve the issue of taboo violation and the question of what is finally seen in the body of the father. Consider the concept of omniscience as a function of the poem, or as a function applied to the poem. Omniscient knowledge of the father would be a mapping from omniscience-in-general (the range of the function) back into the domain of the function, that knowledge coextensive with the subject matter or the gaze of the poem. This mapping reminds us that the concept of omniscience itself veils the potential and the possibility that it announces. It promises more than it delivers in any limited sense of time.

The end of the “The Lifting” stretches the veil of biblical intertextuality from Genesis, where the beginning of the poem positions itself, to Revelations, shrouding the
body of the father. At the end of the poem, this move to revelation diverts the gaze from the body of the father by shifting the range of the gaze from the material emphasis on the body to the conceptual problems of time, epistemology, and the ends of onto-theological thought. The transitional image from the taboo body of the father to the concept of the promise is again rooted in the gaze:

> But now I can still 
> see the tiny snowflakes, white and 
> night-blue, on the cotton of the gown as it 
> rises the way we were promised at death it would rise, 
> the veils would fall from our eyes, we would know everything.

At first glance, it appears that the play of phonemes disseminating from the signature has been suspended. But as the representation of the speaker’s gaze moves from the body to the gown and the analysis of the gown, then through memory to the association with the revelatory promise, succeeded by the placement of the gaze itself under erasure, if you will, which the concept of omniscience performs, as all this occurs in the text, the effects of the signature can still be surmised. With the rising and falling, the imagery has become cold, a strong and sensuous signature effect, first noted above in the reading of “Satan Says,” the first poem in the first of Olds’ books. And then the transition to the subjunctive mood of the last clause opens the problematic of temporality in its movements among tenses, as the condition of the promise is recounted: this transition traverses the old. And of course, the concept of omniscience raises the possibility of an absolute sharing, and in fact, even the end of the possibility of (not) sharing.

As “The Lifting” leaps from the concrete to the abstract in its close, it seems to invite a theoretical reading. We can pose oppositions and inversions among various concepts that the poem evokes: sharing vs. replacement, omniscience vs. alterity,
metaphor vs. irony, temporality vs. knowledge, the gaze of desire vs. desire of the gaze . . . Such a list provides a hunting ground for signature effects. For instance, consider oldness, age and aging as a form of alterity, of becoming-alter, becoming-other. If the poem is ironic, then it reads as a valorization of alterity, but if its metaphoricity overrides its irony, then the literal revelation of the event in the hospital room, the revealing of the body, unfurls into the positive possibility of absolute revelation. Such a metaphorical leap from the body to the conceptual suggests an omniscient erasure of alterity (an Hegelian Aufhebung on the plane of the subject). This celebrated poststructural opposition between metaphor and irony, when applied to “The Lifting,” suggests an American style deconstructive reading, one of undecidability between mutually exclusive meanings.

*The Golden Rose*

What is the hinge that joins the two names, Sharon and Olds? Does it help to think of it as metaphor or as ironic? There is a space between the names. The possibility of meaning, of metaphor or irony as such, requires a certain space of possibility. Any signature poetics must open and expand that space in terms of the signature at hand: spacing. The hinge must open.

In *The Dead and the Living*, at the beginning of the section labeled Private, six of the poems deal with three of the speaker’s grandparents, her father’s father and her two grandmothers, all of whom have died. These are poems addressed to dead elders. Through these poems the grandmothers are more or less accepted, but she writes against the grandfather. The fourth and fifth poems in this sequence address respectively the maternal grandmother and the paternal grandfather. These two poems lie on facing pages, heightening their thematic opposition. Like the other four poems addressing the dead
grandparents, these poems seem to be complex, cathartic exercises in anamnesia.

These two poems for the private dead single out two of her elders, and they then suggest a formation akin to Derrida’s anthonomasia. In “Birthday Poem for My Grandmother,” an antonomasia of Sharon, by way of “Rose of Sharon” and “Rose” taken as the common noun “rose,” constitutes a signature effect suggesting a form of identification between the speaker and the maternal grandmother. This poem orients the memory of the dead grandmother around the roses near the speaker’s porch and metaphorically describes the quality of her absence as the lack of color things have at night:

I thought of the new rose, and went out over the grey lawn— things really have no color at night. I descended the stone steps, as if to the place where one speaks to the dead. The rose stood half-uncurled, glowing white in the black air.

The absence of the grandmother draws out the memory of her failing body’s beauty, blind and in arthritic pain. This poem is about the wish to talk to and to feel the presence of the old who have died. Appropriately the poem associates her with roses, as it explores the memories that must suffice in her absence.

In contrast, “Of All the Dead That Have Come to Me, This Once” is a poem of rejection written on the occasion of the arrival of the paternal grandfather’s gold pocketwatch. It begins “I have never written against the dead.” This poem explicitly

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9Anthonomasia, a neologism which Derrida suggests in Glas to describe the character of Genet’s rhetoric of flowers, makes a portmanteau of the words “anther” (the pollen-bearing part of the stamen of a flower) or “antherect” and “antonomasia,” the trope of converting a proper noun into a common noun, or vice versa, and suggesting the term anthology, a collection of texts. Glas itself comprises an anthology of the texts of both Genet and Hegel. Thus, the pun performs the flowering of a rhetorical term, a genetian effect.
declares that the memory of the dead grandfather is too much present and must be forgotten:

“Let the fall he made...
.................
... be his last appearance here.

This explicit argument of the poem is implicitly and ironically supported by a strategy of color. Vivid and colorful, the poem chromatically analyzes the gold of the pocketwatch into the color of “the Rockies / over the dark yellow of the fields / and the black rivers,” then again refracts the gold into a “black room with the fire, the light of the flames / flashing in his glass eye,” and finally imperatively visualizes the death of grandfather in an image that further analyzes the text’s color value:

Let the fall he made through that glass roof, splintering, turning, the great shanks and slices of glass in the air, be his last appearance here.

“The great shanks and slices of glass in the air” suggests a prismatic splintering of the light in the grandfather’s glass eye and the dispersal of his memory as light is flashingly decomposed into its colors. The signature irony puts the signature effect of the grandfather’s name, Olds←→gold, to work writing against him. This irony contrasts markedly with the use of the rose in the facing poem to metaphorically figure the grandmother and the attraction and affection the speaker feels for her.

The gold pocketwatch also folds the image of the paternal grandmother into the paternal name: “Grandmother’s blank / face pressed against his name in the back.” The “blank face” suggests a loss of affect and the “face pressed ... in the back” suggests her suppression and/or repression by the grandfather and his name. In addition, the
juxtaposition with the poem on the facing page redoubles the displacement of the paternal grandmother by juxtaposing the maternal grandmother (and the white rose) with the gold pocketwatch. The name of the grandfather is not given explicitly, but I assume it is Olds. The two poems comprise a partial diagram of the two names, Sharon and Olds. What the speaker of “Birthday Poem for My Grandmother” has lost in her maternal grandmother, is the possibility of sharing one of the possibilities of Sharon, the possibility of roses: “You would have been ninety and getting / roses from me.” In contrast neither of the paternal grandparents receives this warm treatment. Olds writes against the grandfather in the facing poem, and on the following page “Farewell Poem,” with the dedication “(for M. M. O., 1880-1974),” is dominated by images of coldness, another relay of the paternal signature. “Farewell Poem” resigns the memory of the Grandmother Olds to an iceberg that will deliver her to a “cool white long room.”

“Fate” and Oil

The poem “Fate,” from “The Family” section of The Dead and the Living also develops a certain antagonism between effects issuing from the two names of the signature. From the image of the “greased, defeated face” of the speaker’s father, the “sh” returns repeatedly, forming a series: shining, shining, shined—“defeated face shining,” “whole world shining with the ecstasy of his grief,” and finally in the pronoun jumble, “I / myself, he, I, shined.” The last sentence of the poem roots this shining in the word “oiled,” a double epenthesis (the addition of a letter sound or syllable to the middle of a word) adding the letters “i” and “e” to the word “old,” planting extra vowels in it like

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10 The poem repeats imagery from “The Guild” which depicts the the “apprenticeship” of the speaker’s father with the grandfather, who is the “master in cruelty and oblivion.”
bulbs pushed down in the soil, and then the “s” of Sharon is grafted onto the word “oil” itself, to get “soil,” continuing the assonance of “oiled”:

I saw the whole world shining  
with the ecstasy of his grief, and I  
myself, he, I, shined,  
my oiled porous cheeks, glaucous  
as tulips, the rich smear of the petal,  
the bulb hidden in the dark soil,  
stuck, impacted, sure of its rightful place.

Her identity here seems the result of new vowels, “i” and “e” pushed into the old name. The epenthesis from “Olds” to “oiled” takes place frequently throughout Olds’ work, usually in the imagery of her father’s face. In this particular poem, the “greased defeated face” [my emphasis] that opens the imagery begins the process of palimpsesting the father’s body and the identity of the speaker and leading to the literal effacing and defacing of the speaker, then to the refiguration of the speaker in the simile “glaucous as tulips” and her disfiguration as a “bulb hidden in the dark soil, stuck, impacted.” The soil becomes a figure for the unconscious, reiterating the old, oiled, shared memory of the father-daughter, i.e., the “wet ground that / things you love have fallen onto / and been lost for good,” which “glistens” early in the poem. The dissonant oxymorons “shining defeat” and “ecstatic grief” gather together “greased,” “glistening,” “sour mash,” “oiled,” “porous,”—signature effects of the surname—and reform them into a flower, a tulip rather than a rose, which retains “the rich smear” of glaucous oil, unlike a rose. The tulip annually dies back, living on the food stored in its bulb, and renews itself from the ground up. This would explain the past tense construction of the poem; the winter of identity, the dying back into the realization that the inescapable overdetermination of

11 In The Living and the Dead see especially “Looking at My Father,” “Late Poem to My Father,” and “June 24.” Also cf. Anne Sexton, “A Woman Is Her Mother.”
oedipal identity springs from a seasonal temporality. Memories and structures of memory can die, resigned to an absolute past like soil which folds life forward through its decomposition, opening the possibilities of change through renewal. A subtext of the poem, in the abyss of the names, suggests, as Dylan Thomas would say, “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower;” the renewal of the flower, the re-composition out of the soil, and the blossoming of the flower of Sharon.

The play of light on oil, a prismatic and fluid effect, becomes the occasion of the memoriam to identity that accompanies the contemplation of one’s connection to others in the midst of alterity. The light/oil image suggests the boundary (of death) between self and other, if not (to diagram it) the singular vector that orients itself among the multiplicity of vectors comprising the Other. That relation to alterity forms the exterior and the abyss of the poem, the possibility of the poem, the Other toward whom she shines and with whom she shines. But that alterity, in its ineffable permeation of language and identity, cannot be clearly delimited. Yes, she becomes her father, and that is the becoming implicit in the title of the poem, “Fate.” But it is not the end of that becoming. To begin with she becomes her father “shining toward anyone I looked at”; his gaze overdetermines her gaze at the beginning of the poem, and this moment has to be accepted, examined, subjected to a temporally retrospective gaze, and passed over for the poem to work itself out, to gather its strength for the flowery transformation that arises out of the possibility beyond the surrender and capitulation that the first line of the poem announces: “Finally I just gave up and became my father.” This collapse of singularity and identity in oedipal confusion parallels the encryption of the names in the abyss.

An early poem, “The Unborn,” in *Satan Says*, similarly expands the surname into
an image that brings the boundary of alterity and death into view. Apparently addressing the speaker’s husband, the poem concerns “the children we could have.” The third stanza characterizes these possible children in this way: “Sometimes I see them lying like love letters / in the Dead Letter Office.” The acronym D. L. O. reverses the spelling of Old, and, reading the pun on “letters,” puts the signature in the crypt of the poem at the level of the letter. Although most of these imagined children never live, there is the specter of death that comes with the letter D, and its expansion into the word Dead, haunting them, including the ones that may be born. And this graft of the word “dead” onto the letter D reminds us of the proximity of the two words Old and Dead. For humans, old age inevitably leads to death. As Lucy McDiarmid says of The Wellspring, and her statement is generalizable across Olds’ poetry, the “bodies she writes about—her mother’s, father’s, lovers’, children’s, husband’s—exist with all their genetic histories and reproductive organs fully visible to the poet.” Including the ends of those singular genetic configurations, death, as well as the beginnings. The eggs that females are born with and which this poem contemplates, their potential children, reside in the crypt of the ovaries until they move out of the female body, to be released at ovulation, dispelled at menses, or born, or until they die with the body of the mother. Similarly, signature poetics could be theorized in terms of alterity. The letters of the signature could be conceived as sperm or eggs, folded into crypts of the proper name/body until released into texts to go their own way in the world.

Another poem that, like “Fate,” plays on both the “sh” phoneme of Sharon and the “old” phoneme also resides in “The Family” section of The Dead and the Living. In “The Takers” Olds compares her sister to Hitler as she describes an incident of sibling
terrorism, her sister coming into her room at night and peeing on her. After the “dark gold smell of the urine” permeates the room, and she has been charred with shame and her body “scorched” by the “boiling heat” of her sister’s urine, she feels her sister’s pleasure:

When the hissing stopped, when the hole had been scorched in my body, I lay crisp and charred with shame and felt her skin glitter in the air, her dark gold pleasure unfold as [Hitler] stood over Napoleon’s tomb and murmured This is the finest moment of my life.

As with the oil/shining relation in “Fate,” the “old” phoneme in “gold” and “unfold” stands in an emotional contrast to the “sh” phoneme in “shame.” The signature effects lock the two names in a death grip similar to the death or sex grip of the portmanteau “shoulder.” Note also here the crypt imagery, the hole in her body compared to Napoleon’s tomb, a stunning image of interiorizing violence, within which the signature effects refer to various affects.

In the same section of The Dead and the Living, the poem “The Derelict” also uses gold and urine in its imagery. This poem compares a derelict to the speaker’s brother, but in this case the causality of the familial tragedy is placed on the speaker, the effect on the brother. The derelict and the brother both have blond beards, and the “nerveless” hands of the derelict are imagined as the crushed hands of a violinist—this image of hands becomes a metaphor for the life of the brother:

I smell the waste of his piss, I see the ingot of his beard, and think of my younger brother, his beauty, coinage and voltage of his beard, his life he is not using, like a violinist whose

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12See the reading of “Love Fossil” above for a reading of the signature effect in the word “shoulder.”
hands have been crushed so he cannot play—
I who was there at the crushing of his hands
and helped to crush them.

The word “gold” does not appear, but the derelict’s “blond beard” evokes for the speaker the “ingot” of her brother’s beard, as well as its “coinage”—blond, ingot, and coinage together suggesting gold. In addition, the word “voltage” is also evoked by gold due to its excellent conductivity and the similar ways in which gold and electricity respectively reflect and produce light. The signature effect is further developed by the text through the word “beauty,” a quality that makes gold a prized possession. These golden associations work a stark contrast with the golden characteristics of the derelict, the “waste of piss” and the “skin polished [as if golden] with grime.” The “blond beard” of the derelict is also “like a sign of beauty and power.” What is the power of gold, what is its potenz?
That would be one of the leading questions of the investigation of this signature. In this poem the golden properties are weighted about equally between positive and negative affects, with tragedy canceling potential at an originary moment of the text.

Anticipation

Situated at the end of Part One, the poem “When” functions as a transition between the first two sections in Olds’ third book of poems, The Gold Cell. This is a slight poem, with a minimalist presentation consisting of not much more than the elaboration of a single image. It seems brief and undeveloped for an Olds lyric, only 15 lines long. Most of the poems in this book run to 30 lines or more, which is typical of her style. In its position, strategy, and brevity the poem resides in the “margin” of the volume. But there is gold here, as if the book’s poetic drives insist upon the resonance of
the word gold.

Skimming down through the poem, the phoneme “old” stands out in two key details of the image. The image consists of a woman out in her yard, holding her daughter in her arms as a gold ball lifts over the horizon. Here is the poem in its entirety:

When

I wonder now only when it will happen, when the young mother will hear the noise like somebody’s pressure cooker down the block, going off. She’ll go out in the yard holding her small daughter in her arms, and there, above the end of the street, in the air above the line of the trees, she will see it rising, lifting up over our horizon, the upper rim of the gold ball, large as a giant planet starting to lift up over ours. She will stand there in the yard holding her daughter, looking at it rise and glow and blossom and rise, and the child will open her arms to it, it will look so beautiful.

The poem’s repetitiousness prominently foregrounds the word “will.” The holding image lends itself to this repetitious effect, rhythmically spacing and dividing the poem into three parts. The holding also sets off the most puzzling feature of the poem, the gold ball, which comes into view in the middle third of the poem. The question of the gold ball, its symbolic value, stands in relation to the mother-daughter pair, and that relation begins to unfold as the poem ends. The three points of this relation constitute a triangle, gold ball-mother-daughter, connected by the holding: the mother holds the daughter, and the daughter opens her arms to the ball as if to hold it, and the attention of the mother is held by the ball. Of course, it is possible to read this triangle as an oedipal triangle with the corner of the father signified by the gold ball. Such a reading lends itself to the
interpretation of the signature as a scene of conflict. The names “Sharon” and “Olds” signify daughter and parents, Sharon locked in a struggle with the Olds.

The symbolic potential of the gold ball also suggests a struggle of mythic scope, a nuclear conflict erupting with a “noise like somebody’s pressure cooker / . . . going off,” then “rising,” “glowing,” and “blossoming” like a mushroom cloud “over our horizon.” The unexpected shift from third person pronouns, she and her, to first person plural possessive, our, also suggests some slippage on the part of the speaker, as if she has been speaking of herself in the third person, then lapses into first person plural as the gold ball ascends over “our horizon” and “our planet.” The first person plural expands the scope of the poem, amplifying the prophetic tone addressed to the reader or, more generally, “our” culture. But this Old Testament tone comes packaged in a parabolic form, and the parable centers on the triangle, mother-daughter-gold ball. So, arguably, the text has to be examined on an Oedipal level if not on the intrasubjective level of the speaker. The poem starts with the pronoun “I,” which makes the presence of the speaker somehow distinct from the mother and daughter yet integral with the details of the image and the event that the poem assigns to the future. The speaker is an observer of the triangle. The later pronoun shift to the plural reinforces this initial integrity and brings the speaker and the image into immediate proximity. The question that seems implicit here concerns the consequences of the poem’s final movement, the child’s welcoming of the gold ball, for the speaker.

In “When” there appears only the slightest of alphabetical effects from the name Sharon; the “sh” of the “she” used to refer to the young mother three times. Yet this minimal trace of the signature suggests a link between the desire of the mother (and the
child’s enjoyment) and the desire of the speaker. In a psychoanalytic reading following Lacan, the mother-child dyad would stand as a specular counterpart to the ego of the speaker. For Lacan such a specular image conveys a sense of wholeness, which the nascent ego aims for but can never achieve. So the drives circle around this flawed sense of wholeness which implies a missing element, the objet a. For Lacan, in so far as the drives go beyond the pleasure principle their object is one of jouissance which would complete or finish desire, and for this reason Lacan posits that all drives are composed in part of the death drive. In “When” the apocalyptic tone and the final movement of the child coalesce around the gold ball, strangely positioning it like an objet a that has come into view. The gold ball looms as something monstrous, something of absolute alterity. In terms of psychic temporality and in the temporality of the poem, the ball signifies that future which affects the present. In Lacan’s reading of Freud’s Nachträglichkeit, this structure of affect is referred to as “anticipation.” For instance, in the mirror stage the ego is constructed in anticipation of an imagined future wholeness as mentioned above. The gold ball in its roundness suggests the circular, which connotes wholeness, and in its gold color it suggests heaven and the attendant Judeo-Christian tenets of fulfillment and completion, which ameliorate the problems of death. Both the monstrous and the wondrous are condensed in the image. The theories of psychic temporality of Freud and Lacan emphasize the idea that psychic time can act in reverse, and Olds’ poem shows how the sense of apocalypse relates the future to the present and how, psychically,

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13 Laplanche and Pontalis define Nachträglichkeit as a “Term frequently used by Freud in connection with his view of psychical temporality and causality: experiences, impressions and memory-traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development. They may in that event be endowed not only with a new meaning but also with psychical effectiveness” (111). They go on to point out that this contravenes the stereotypical view that Freud’s theory reduces psychological causation to an infantile past (112).
wholeness is related to annihilation.

As with anticipation, this poem can also be read in terms of “retroaction” (après coup), which more closely corresponds to Nachträglichkeit, or “deferred action,” as English translators have termed it. The ego of the speaker then is already doubly dyadic in this image. And this is in keeping with the synchronic temporality of Nachträglichkeit. The psyche of the mother contains only memory of her own childhood enjoyment, and now (in the time of the poem) that memory is remolded by the presence of her child in her arms. The jouissance of the child (the unbridled desire of the child) stands enfolded with the desire of the mother in the moment of the poem. The diachronic diagram of the child’s jouissance and the mother’s desire forms a circle of (non)repression around the mother’s jouissance, a buried memory that synchronically anchors and spaces the mother’s identity within the mother-child dyad. Desire is castrated jouissance, the condition that arises when jouissance is repressed; but the child, being held by the mother as if still at the breast, remains uncastrated. The love of the mother therefore implies an affirmation of jouissance although within herself the jouissance has been repressed and castrated. This repression and castration forms the mold of desire. So the scene contains a readable diagram of Nachträglichkeit in its retroactive aspect. The child’s mother is able to “see” in her daughter her own libido or jouissance as it existed before her “loss of innocence.” But her understanding is not the thing itself. It is tempered by time, existing across the divide or gap of representation. In psychoanalytic terms, her past exists in the psyche only as memories, which are affected by and understood only through present experience.

“When” presents three subject positions in relation to the gold ball: the speaker’s,
the mother’s, and the child’s. In terms of Nachträglichkeit, the speaker’s persona represents anticipation, and the mother-daughter dyad represents retroaction. The poem functions like a portmanteau, folding together two diagrams of Nachträglichkeit: anticipation and retroaction function together in text.

What then is the relationship between the signature, jouissance, and Nachträglichkeit? This poem associates the temporality of Nachträglichkeit with the gold ball, and it does so as an introduction to Part Two of the book, which consists of poems dealing with the mother and father. The signature in its duration takes on the quality of a tableau or photograph, apparently a static record or marker attached to its bearer. While it functions over time diachronically, it maintains the kind of synchronic structure that Lacan emphasizes over the linear and diachronic “stage” models of development of some psychoanalytic school’s theories.

Beyond or before the veiling of identity that is inherent in the linguistic condition, there is (in this poem) the simple antithesis that emerges between the gold ball and what is “ours.” When will our horizon and our planet be replaced or overshadowed by something larger or something other, something “gold”? And in parallel on the intrasubjective level, when does what is introjected into the crypt of the ego (in particular, the signature and the proper name) give way to or lead to the Other of the unconscious, the alterity of interiority? What is the poetics of invention that has to extend itself out of the mirror stage and the other of specular wholeness that forms the representational basis of the ego? That introjection of the signature might be the figure of figures for Olds’ poetry, the figure for that invention that both preserves and escapes the specular other. The most comprehensive, severe and delirious intertextuality manifests itself in the
sustained and insistent iterations of the word “gold” that run through *The Gold Cell* and spin conspicuously in the other books as well. It is an alchemical transformation of her last name that reappears insistently in poems that deal directly with oedipal issues as well as among the poems that do not.

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What is it about the signature that constitutes *jouissance*? At what point does the pleasure of the signature become painful, become suffering? What makes a gold cell? What taboo can it violate? What prison, torture, or death does it emulate?14 What life force, what force of language does it manifest? Introjected into the ego, could the signature sponge up imagoes, contracting all the personas that constitute the complexes that dominate the subject? Olds’ puts her name in language as a way of stirring the gold, of stirring the yolk of these complexes. In the poem “What if God” we have two such personas. Not the mommapoppa of the strict oedipal paradigm, but the unrestricted obscene superego, the superego as it traverses the id and the ideal ego (the personal transcendental superego of the Other). Olds’ signature reaches through gold to god. The poem asks, “Is there a god in the house?” But there is a seemingly endless supply of imagoes that emerge in Olds’ work from the parental figures alone. And the complexes that are revealed (especially in the poems concerning her parents and sister, which endlessly unravel the imagoes woven into those familial complexes) run the emotional and affective gamut, as if there were a strict intertextuality between signature effects and the textual effects of *Nachträglichkeit*.

14 For poems addressing these loci in *The Gold Cell* see “In the Cell,” “The Food Thief,” and “The Girl” – all in Part One.
Consider the poem “35/10” from the last section of The Dead and the Living, at the end of Part Two: Poems for the Living. The section is labeled “The Children,” and this poem concerns her familial complexes only indirectly as it examines her relationship with her own daughter. Thirty-five would be the age of the poet, 10 the age of the child. As her daughter matures, the poet gains clarity concerning her own name and its history and movement across language. The “grey-gleaming,” “silver-haired servant” is becoming her name: Old(s). And what is the “fold in [her] neck,” but a signifier of age? A fold of skin like the dewlap of an elderly person? That would be a reading in anticipation of the speaker’s old age rather than of her “present” age in the poem. A corollary retroactive reading, looking back at her own youth, would be to see the fold as the musculature that an adult body begins to reveal as it loses the fat that a younger body would maintain. This retroactive reading would double the temporality of the fold in accordance with the dual temporality of Nachträglichkeit; the sharpening of features proceeds apace for both the mother and the daughter:

Why is it
just as we begin to go
they begin to arrive, the fold in my neck
clarifying as the fine bones of her
hips sharpen?

The anticipation of beginning and the retroaction of arrival are clarified for the speaker in the fold. And this clarification moves toward the name Sharon. It comes in an act of sharing: the poem begins, “Brushing out my daughter’s dark / silken hair before the mirror.” The “sh” of sharing disseminates into “hips sharpening,” and they share the process of sexual maturation which “hips sharpening” suggests, and which the rest of the
poem celebrates. This is the clarification of the fold—the fold “clarifies” as the hips of the 10-year-old child sharpen. And the speaker’s skin “shows” its dry pitting. This clarification is a gift that returns to the name as well as a clarity that comes with age. It is a counter-signature. The “showing” and “sharpening” of the poem produces a drying effect in the imagery of the daughter as well: “As my skin shows its dry pitting, she opens like a small pale flower on the tip of a cactus.” The pale flower might very well point toward some Desert Rose of the Plain of Sharon, a fertile but dry plain in today’s Israel. This drying effect characterizes the insight into the name, a gift that comes via the human condition and the feminine condition. A drying, preserving and sobering effect of the signature, then, which suddenly bursts and deflates itself, incurring the grandest kind of abstraction, a thesis or arche-narrative structure. The poem ends with this sentence: “It’s an old / story—the oldest we have on our planet— / the story of replacement.” And this pronouncement is introduced via images of eggs, both hers, her “last chances to bear a child,” and her daughter’s “full purse of eggs”:

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as my last chances to bear a child
are falling through my body, the duds among them,
her full purse of eggs, round and
firm as hard-boiled yolks, is about
to snap its clasp.
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The word “boiled,” like the word “oiled” in other poems, expands the word old. It does so within the context of the promise of a young girl’s eggs. The word yolk also reiterates the “ol” in Olds. It’s an Old(s) story, the most delirious of countersignatures. The irony of this poem may be that the signature has snapped its clasp. The poem performs the becoming-her-name of the speaker. Which is the acceptance of the counter-signature from language, a continuous acceptance over time, a sharing on.
“What if God”

An alchemical transformation then: at the level of the letter or on the level of the objet a, we have the addition of a letter, a way to fill the gap between the names Sharon and Olds. In *The Gold Cell*, gold is ubiquitous. This poetics turns on the addition of the letter g. The letter g fills the gap for Sharon Olds, especially in this book. For Lacan the unconscious consists of “a chain of signifiers that somewhere (on another stage, in another scene, [Freud] wrote) is repeated” (*Ecrits* 297). Whenever there is a gap or break in “normal,” rational, or everyday discourse, this chain of signifiers intervenes, inserting some part of itself, creating a link between some part of the unconscious and the otherwise unified discourse of meaning. This link makes sense in a different way, linking the circle or chain of conscious meaning to a different fantasy scene in the unconscious.

The poem “What if God” explores the possibility of such a link. Or rather it departs from normal or pious discourse concerning the name-of-the-father in order to explore the possibilities of “another stage, another scene.” When discourse has lost something, or the subject needs some “thing” that seems to be missing, the objet a appears in the place of the “thing.” And in this situation meaning travels back and forth, both backwards and forwards. This poem presents the unconscious analog for the question implicit in the title of the book. The gold cell of the book’s title takes many forms as the words “gold” and “cell” travel through the texts and scenes presented in the course of the book. The term “gold cell” comes to represent not some particular cell, but rather an effect (a signature effect), the insistent return of the two words through and with their various manifold associations. In the poem “What if God,” the answer to the question “What gold cell?”
involves the byplay between gold and God.

The \textit{objet a}, in this case “gold,” or more simply the letter “g” occupying the gap in the signature, forges a link with what would be the superego, that is, God, the ultimate figure for the superego. Constructing this signature relay becomes a simple matter of dropping the “l” and capitalizing the “g.” The vector for this effect is already present when the “g” is added to “old.” The poem asks, “Is there a God in the house?” as if the entire question of the formation of the superego is at stake. And this is, of course, a vexed topic among psychoanalytic feminists. Freud’s writings are clear with regard to the resolution of the oedipal complex and the concomitant formation of the superego for boys, but for girls Freud is obscure. Thus, we have many counter-formulations and speculations (such as that women have no unconscious, or Woman is the unconscious for men), for without the superego in its role as censor and agent of repression, there can be no unconscious. The boy identifies with his father (and later God, the Father), repressing his desire for the mother. This event inaugurates the mechanism of repression, forms the basis of the superego, and marks the inception of the unconscious. In reaction to the accounts of Freud and Lacan, we also have latter-day theories of the unconscious that attend to it as a reserve of signifiers or metonyms rooted in the body of the mother rather than founded on an identification with the paternal phallus. Olds’ poem, “What if God,” can be read as an exploration of this theoretical issue. It seems to personalize the topic, as might be expected, but it also critiques broader cultural formations and practices in its lyric trajectory. And it does it in terms of the girl, the mother, and God: the human father is a missing term in this poem’s account. However, the name of the parent father is repressed and reserved in the signature relay: Olds (the name of the father) $\longleftrightarrow$ gold
God. The father is the gap or break in the symbolic order of the poem, which is crossed by the signature relay. Once this process of substitution begins, it leads to the figure of the obscene superego.

The structure of the signature effect in “What if God” takes the form of a Bildungsroman, albeit a Bildungsroman distorted in an anamorphic way. The originary image of the Bildungsroman is centered on the word “gold”:

was He a squirrel, reaching down through the hole she broke in my shell, squirrel with His arm in the yolk of my soul up to the elbow, stirring, stirring the gold?"

The egg with the golden yolk metaphorically represents the speaker in these verses. This metaphor reaches back to the moment of conception and the sexual origin of her body, and the assonance of yolk/soul/elbow/gold roots her spiritual origin in the sexual as well. This moment of inception is then disseminated throughout the narrative of the poem by the word “God.” Chronologically, the issue at stake with this telos can only be resolved in the future beyond the speech act that the poem constitutes:

Is there a God in the house? Then reach down and take that woman off that child’s body, take that woman by the nape of the neck like a young cat and lift her up and deliver her over to me.

This passage in its anticipatory temporality envisions a release from the irresolution of a failed oedipus. That resolution would be the end of the Bildungsroman development. The word “God” appears four times in the poem, once in the title, once in the first line, and then twice in lines fourth and fifth from the end of the poem. Between the second and third instances of the word “God,” capitalized masculine pronouns appear 17 times. Every sentence in the poem except the last is a question. The questions do not address
God directly, for this interrogation never assumes His existence.

First and foremost, the thematic of this poem centers on the speaker’s mother and the sadness and grief that she impressed upon her daughter. The parental father figure is absent in the poem, completely displaced by the theological name of the father. The poem begins with the image of the mother’s grief being laid on the speaker as God watches voyeuristically:

And what if God had been watching when my mother came into my bed? What would He have done when her long adult body rolled on me like a tongue of lava from the top of the mountain and the tears jumped from her ducts like hot rocks and my bed shook with the tremors of the magma and the deep cracking of my nature across—

As the poem continues, both the mother and God are held accountable for the violence that is done to the girl. This opening image of the “cracking of her nature” is reiterated insistently to emphasize the traumatic violence that takes place at the oedipal moment when the superego would “normally” be formed. This cracking moves in feminist counterpoint to Freud’s boy-oriented resolution. Instead of sexual prohibition that the father would dictate to the boy, the mother turns to the daughter bodily, coming into her bed. The next image offers a possible reason for the mother’s turning away:

what was He? Was He a bison to lower his thundercloud head and suck His own sex while He watched us weep and prey to him . . .

The jouissance of this father figure, the association of the destructiveness and fearfulness of a thundercloud with the libidinal release of masturbation, is predicated upon the fear and grief of the mother and daughter. The following figuration of the God again has to do with the cracking of the girl: “was He a squirrel, reaching down through the hole she
broke in my shell . . .”.

If the father figure is the cause of the cracking, the mother is the agent, and this relationship is repeated in the next image of cracking or, more precisely, splitting in this case:

Or was He a kid in Biology, dissecting me while she held my split carapace apart so He could firk out my oblong eggs one by one, . . .

Rather than a “healthy” repression of the oedipus complex, the oedipal matter is figured as if the sexuality of the girl has been “firked out.” Instead of the healthy image of the sexuality that Lacan would find under the aegis of the Phallus, in this case the girl’s “authority figures” (whom the boy would identify with in the formation of the superego) are, on the maternal side, coming to her out of emotional dysfunction and sexual confusion, and on the paternal side deriving pleasure from violation of the incest taboo: “stirring the gold” of her yolk-soul, and “firking out her eggs.” Granted, this violation of the incest taboo may be read as the metaphorical vehicle giving expression to the cause of the mother’s dysfunction. Nevertheless, the entire poem makes God the tenor, in that He would be a transcendental signified for all the metaphorical signifiers.

In this poem it is clear that both parents affect the sexual formation of the girl. Instead of the Law of the Name of the Father constituting the primal repression of the desire for the mother, the issue of sexual access and authority runs constantly to images of perversion: the mother in bed with the daughter, the bison’s masturbation, the squirrel with its arm in the yolk of the girl’s soul, and the carapace held apart for firking out her eggs (which is immediately refigured as the question, “was He a / man entering me up to the hilt while she / pried my thighs wide in the starry dark”). The argument of the poem
could be put this way: God is a pervert, i.e., the (cultural or religious) superego is of the type that Lacan outlines in “The Freudian Thing.” This superego is both integrative and disintegrative. When there are gaps in the symbolic chain that constitutes the law, the superego arises out of the ensuing misunderstanding of the law. In Olds' poem the superego figure is silent, failing to utter any order word whatsoever. In such a linguistic gap, according to Lacan, the superego arises from the imaginary as an illegitimate substitute for the law, “that obscene, ferocious figure in which we must see the true signification of the superego” (Ecrits 143). Olds’ speaker appeals, at the end of the poem, to the (absent) God to lift the mother off her body—she does not call for the proper speech act on His part, although she does twice call out the question “Is there a God in the house?” There is no reply in the poem.

“Greed and Aggression”

Is there a superego for the gold cell? Or for the woman that arises from a gold cell or produces a gold cell? An excellent basis for speculation on these questions can be found in the poem “Greed and Aggression.” Although this poem appears in Part Three of The Gold Cell, a section of the book dealing with various experiences of sex and related matters rather than family memories, it makes an excellent companion piece to “What if God.” “Greed and Aggression” bears several striking similarities to “What if God,” but the theme and scene of the poem are not oedipal in any direct way. It does have to do with religion, sex, Gods, cats, and jouissance; most notably for a signature reading, it also incorporates the same signature relay between gold and God. The first line announces the religious vector of the poem:
Someone in Quaker meeting talks about greed and aggression
and I think of the way I lay the massive
weight of my body down on you
like a tiger lying down in gluttony and pleasure on the
elegant heavy body of the eland it eats,
the spiral horn pointing to the sky like heaven.

The structural similarity to the opening of “What if God” is striking. A religious scene is
linked to the image of a woman lying down on top of another person. But instead of a
speculative and interrogative accusation of a problematical God by means of a catalogue
of metaphorical descriptions, the poem introduces a more or less controlling metaphorical
vehicle, that of the tiger lying down to eat, for the tenor, sexual relation. In this dramatic
monologue, the sexuality of the speaker and her addressee stands as the tenor of this
metaphor. And the first religious issue to hand is not the existence of God but the
problems of greed and aggression; however, the second half of “Greed and Aggression”
does turn to the issue of characterizing a God. This poem’s opening plunges the reader
into the space of religion as if it stretched from American Quaker meetings to Africa to
Asia and then up to heaven. Elands comprise two species that live in Africa. Tigers are of
Asia. Their convergence in this poem suggests a geologically alternative time scale
stretching beyond the human. But in this alternative temporality (an alternative history?),
the question of a God’s existence is still the poem’s hinge, connecting the scene of the
lovers’ pleasure with the image of a totemic, tiger God—the God of tigers: “if they [the
tigers] had a God it would be striped, / burnt-gold and black.” Throughout the poem this
human/tiger comparison is relatively stable compared to the madness of metaphor in
“What if God.”

Of course “What if God” stands as an excuse for the madness of mixed metaphor:
af
none of which are able singly to express the rage, confusion, and violation which the
speaker wishes to express. This instance of Olds’ “lack of control,” for which many of
her critics fault her, can also be read as the refusal of castration, the refusal to accept the
dictates of an obscene father figure. This refusal manifests itself as the need to speak out
against this superego in refusal of the terms of oedipal severance, the terms that the
parents have dictated. In “Greed and Aggression,” a poem which again speculates on the
nature of a personal God, the speaker outlines the form of an ideal superego figure in a
much calmer and happier frame:

[If] I had a God it would renew itself the
way you live and live while I take you as if
consuming you while you take me as if
consuming me, it would be a God of
love as complete satiety,
greed and fullness, aggression and fullness, the
way we once drank at the body of an animal
until we were so happy we could only
faint, our mouths running, into sleep.

The tones of the two poems are bipolar. This suggests a theoretical analysis of the “split
subject” in terms of the superego. The superego is both integrative and disintegrative in
its affective function. On the one hand it is obscene-perverse as Lacan argues and as
“What if God” illustrates, exercising violence on the subject and requiring tremendous
cathartic force for the subject merely to make it manifest and begin to imagine a healing
process as per the end of “What if God.” On the other hand, “Greed and Aggression”
presents the possibility of an integrative superego which structures itself according to the
form of relation-with-an-Other, in this case a sexual partner.

In contrast with the scene of the lovers, we have within the vehicular space
of the poem, the scene of the tiger, something very like the kind of violence that informs
“What if God”:

Ecstasy has been given to the tiger,
forced into its nature the way the
forcemeat is cranked down the throat of the held goose

These lines open the question of the relationships among force, violence, and ecstasy. In spite of the violent use of force in the absence of any agent portrayed in this image, the emphasis is on ecstasy. Close readers of Olds’ books will recognize the shape of two childhood events condensed here that are more explicitly rendered elsewhere in her poems: the child being tied to a chair and the child being force-fed by her parents. This passage simply acknowledges the violence and foregoes (forecloses?) any accusation on the part of the speaker. As such it constitutes what Deleuze and Guattari call a “line out” of Oedipus: not an escape from Oedipus but a reconstruction that reconfigures the subject. For instance, this reconfiguration might consist in the exaggeration of some neurotic, perverse, or obscene tendency, such as greed or aggression, in a manner that avoids the normally self-destructive or other-destructive outcome of the tendency. And here is the danger. Such a move is speculative, the outcome is unknown, and the risk is real. Thinking beyond teleology runs the risk of doubling the violence and destruction inherent in teleology. The eland in this poem undergoes something of a *sparagmos*, the tearing apart of the sacrificial victim. Across the metaphorical hinge of the poem, this sacrificial economy organizes itself around self-sacrifice, the mutual self-sacrifice between lovers.

Both terms of the metaphor are about ecstasy. And this ecstasy is about violence in both aspects of the metaphor. For the end of the poem is beautifully ambivalent in the

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15 See “That Year” in *Satan Says* and “The Quest” in *The Gold Cell*. 

95
way it evokes two scenes: both the scene of the child suckling to satiety and the scene of
the tiger drinking the blood of the eland:

. . . the
way we once drank at the body of an animal
until we were so happy we could only
faint, our mouths running, into sleep.

The ending makes blood and milk metaphorically equivalent, as if to suggest a necessary
equivalence of violence and ecstasy. But the physical force of feeding has been reversed;
instead of forcemeat being phallically thrust into the throat, the food is drawn in. The
body of the other is drawn in, “invaginated” as Derrida would say, deploying a strategy
meant to re-inscribe and reshape phallocentrism. This would be the sexual ethic that
would turn the phallic and obscene superego of “What if God” inside out. “Greed and
Aggression,” by the shape of its argument, funnels the problems of force and violence
into the appetite of the nursing child as if the argument were a breast to be taken in the
mouth. But this is only the last of several images that represent phallicism and
“invagination” in various relations.

The first such image is the “tiger lying down in gluttony and pleasure on . . . the
eland it eats, / the spiral horn pointing to the sky like heaven.” The tiger takes the flesh
of the eland into its body, through its mouth. In this image the tiger is the feminine or
“invaginating” body, and the eland is the masculine body, replete with phallic “spiral
horn.” The confused syntax of the phrase “the spiral horn pointing to the sky like
heaven” may imply that the phallic horn merely “points” to “heaven.” The phallus
merely points. Or the end of the line, “like heaven,” may imply that the whole image of
the tiger eating the elegant eland is heavenlike, and by analogy the joining of the bodies
of the speaker and the lover is heavenlike. Compare the opening image from “What if
There the mother rolls her long body on top of the daughter. The phallus in “What if God” is fetishized as a sadistic tool of torture. The speaker of that poem, violated and fragmented beneath the destructive force of a Saturn-like superego that consumes its children, would be the eland in “Greed and Aggression.” The eland similarly is morselized and consumed, but it is not the offspring of the tiger, not other but Other. In “Greed and Aggression” the speaker lies down heavily on her or his masculine lover—we can posit the gender of the speaker’s lover is masculine by analogy with the eland that has the phallic horn. In this poem the speaker is on top and is identified with the tiger that consumes, incorporating the body of the other.

Because she is identified with the tiger, the metaphor implies that she too has had ecstasy “forced into her nature.” Although the metaphor is not explicitly extended in this way, the context supplied by other poems, which have to do with her father force-feeding her, suggests that an oedipal scene has been reinvested with an opposite affect. The scene has been invaginated, its affect reversed, turned inside out. The metaphorical rape that force-feeding symbolizes becomes transformed into the means of understanding the “hunger and the glory of / eating packed at the center of each tiger cell.” Force-feeding is transformed into “hunger and the glory of eating” thereafter. The ineffable force implied in the passive construction “Ecstasy has been forced” turns out to be something like a fertility god instilling ecstasy “for the life of the tiger and the / making of new tigers.”

It would be accurate to say that the phallic and patriarchal name Olds has been consumed, morselized, and used to mount a critique of the god in “What if God” and to counter pose a God that “would renew itself.” As the poem oscillates between forms of consumption, sexual and oral, the figure of invagination gives way to what Derrida calls
encryption, the chewing, morselizing and use of the proper name to generate new texts.
As the tiger uses the eland, burning its energy at “the center of each / tiger cell” for the
“making of new tigers,” the speaker burns the gold of the name Olds for the figuration of
a new God that would imply a refiguration of the superego. Instead of the nightmare of
“What if God” which ends in an appeal to an absent God, “Greed and Aggression” ends
in the sleep of satiety:

. . . the
way we once drank at the body of an animal
until we were so happy we could only
faint, our mouths running, into sleep.

This image satisfies the appeal of the speaker at the end of “What if God” to “take that
woman by the nape of the neck like a young cat and / lift her up and deliver her over to
me.” If the speaker’s appeal were granted, she could then inherit the structure of
mothering based on the transference of love. That structure is precisely imaged in the
close of “Greed and Aggression.” If jealousy begins at the breast as Freud holds, so do
enjoyment and love according to this poem.

The God that has been conjured in “Greed and Aggression” is a conditional God.
If the last six lines of the poem which figure this God are ironic, i.e., the argument is
especially that God doesn’t exist, then the speaker is free to substitute the God of “Greed
and Aggression” for the God of “What if God.” And in the close of “Greed and
Aggression” the memory qua retroaction is of falling asleep “our mouths running.” This
figure for suckling also figures speech and the morseling and speaking of the proper
name, the encryption of the other and the encryption of the signature.

Conclusion
Not a particular golden egg, nor a particular prison cell: the best way to think of
the gold cell may be to consider all the possible associations the term can muster, then to
let that consideration unfold over time. It would be a matrix in a certain corner of
language, an abstract structure producing meaning over time as it is contemplated by the
reader. The same is true for a signature poetics. The poetics can avail itself of Lacan’s
notion of logical time and its tripartite structure as a means of: 1) the instant of seeing, 2)
the time for understanding, 3) the moment of concluding. This structure has its most
obvious application to the dynamics of the oedipal experience, and there it functions
synchronously in order to describe the oedipal event and not diachronically. As a
function of memory, this temporal logic organizes the oedipal experience. Historically for
a woman in Olds’ cultural milieu, this temporal logic could be a good way of
understanding the possibilities of the signature.

The instant of seeing would correspond to the first recognition of the association
of the proper name and the body of the subject. It settles in simple recognition of the
name and the signature as one’s own, paradoxically as if it were inscribed on the body.

The time for understanding would correspond to the gradual acclimation to the
fact of the name and signature and the turning toward understanding of one’s position in
the family and the various other institutions that form the basis and frames of identity.
Anticipation, the inverse of Nachträglichkeit, would be the dominant psychic temporality
in this logical moment. Anticipation is oedipally structured on the belief, the particular
anticipation, of the child that when she grows up she will be like her parents. She will
continue to sign her name as her parents have signed their names.

The moment of concluding would correspond to the resolution of the oedipal
complex if the Lacanian model of logical time could be simply translated or bricoleured into an explanation of the signature. But like Freud’s explanation of the oedipus complex, there is a great difference between the way the signature has traditionally functioned for men and for women in the United States. Men continue to carry the parental signature if they get married; women generally give up the parental part of their name/signature. How would Nachträglichkeit delineate this logical moment in either case? Perhaps it is secondarily structured according to the memory of the belief that one will grow up to be like one’s parents, and for the signature, the memory of the anticipation that one will sign as the parents sign(ed).

Olds’ signature poetics dwells in the moment of concluding as it constantly works over the two prior logical moments. The obsession with gold, the sense of entrapment within the cell(ular), which posits its opposite sense in another moment of the psyche or of the text or in another poem, exemplifies the first parameter of logical time. The oedipal thematic returns in each book, always being re-membered, re-constructed in memory, re-worked from an older point of view. As such, it seems to oscillate between the second and third of the logical moments. Perhaps the idea of gold itself is the conclusion, gold connoting the alchemical transformation that metaphorically would represent the achievement of one’s goals through long labor and concentrated attention to the subtleties of the conditions of one’s existence. This kind of reconfiguration is the object of poems like “What if God” and “Greed and Aggression,” where the transformation of God, the subject, and the superego becomes the issue. Sharon Olds’ poetry illustrates the scope of access that the signature provides for entering, surveying, and intervening in the linguistic condition.
With Olds it appears that attention to the signature is intuitive and interior to her poetry and poetics. I would like to ask her if she has read *Signsponge* or *Glas*. But I do not doubt that her poetics were in place before ever hearing of Jacques Derrida. I have no doubt she understood that getting busy with her name was integral to building a home for herself in language. To read and hear her name fall into language and resurrect itself was going to be a survival from the start.

On the other hand, John Cage’s development as a signature thinker and poet takes place over the better part of a century and through his immersion in the arts.
Chapter 4

The Development of John Cage’s Signature Theory

“Get Out of Whatever Cage You Find Yourself In”

The cage is an architectural readymade. Over the course of his career Cage made more and more use of this fact. This study examines along the way several images from Cage’s writings that explore studios, soundproof rooms, walls, doors, and cages: cagespaces, places where he constructs a signature relation between silence and spacing. Cage also gives us direct discussions of signature theory on several occasions; he is in fact a signature thinker and a thinker of the signature. In this chapter I trace the development of his ideas concerning the signature over roughly twenty years. There are three key moments in this development: Cage’s critique of Varèse, his experimental writing for Rauschenberg, and his homage to Duchamp. In Cage’s early experimental writings, which culminate in his most important book, *Silence*, his use of the term “signature” is not a component of his poetics, but rather serves as a meta-critical tool. Only when he comes to Duchamp does he begin to view the signature as a compositional tool and an element of style to be developed. Thereafter, Cage’s mature style habitually places the proper names of other writers and artists in the abyss of his own texts. Before mapping out this development, I preface it with a reading of the *Lecture on Nothing*, Cage’s seminal text on poetics.

Christopher Shultis has argued that Cage’s text *Empty Words* marks the
achievement of Cage’s poetic vision. Cage’s poetics resembles Ponge’s in that he was focused on the object, the thing. But Cage roots his poetics in Thoreau, and so Shultis uses Emerson and Thoreau to explore Cage’s poetics. Shultis differentiates Cage’s thinking from Emersonian poetics via F. O. Mathiesson’s American Renaissance: “The Word One with the Thing,” a dualistic, organic unity, is not what Cage is about; rather, Cage moved “away from thought and toward the experience of the object in and of itself” (Shultis 116). That much could be considered Pongian. But for Cage this movement leads to noise. In an interview with Daniel Charles, Cage says, “I have not yet carried language to the point to which I have taken musical sounds. I have not yet made noise with it. I hope to make something other than language with it” (113). Shultis argues that Empty Words achieved Cage’s goal: the long poem subjects Thoreau’s Journals to, first, the elimination of sentences, then of phrases, leaving only letters, syllables, and very morcelized words (119-20). In this progression, Cage is extending a trend he noticed in Thoreau—an erasure of style:

You’re going to tell me that Thoreau has a definite style. He has his very own way of writing. But in a rather significant way, as his Journal continues, his words become simplified or shorter. The longest words . . . contain something of Thoreau in them. But not the shortest words. They are words from common language, everyday words. So, as the words become shorter, Thoreau’s own experiences become more and more transparent. They are no longer his own experiences. It is experience. And his work improves to the extent that he disappears. . . . Subjectivity no longer comes into it. And there is no artifice in this effort. (Charles 234)

Taking “Thoreau” a step farther, Cage produced a completely digested form of Thoreau’s text, which would be free of intentional meaning—that would be the fourth section of Empty Words. Which is of course preceded by the first three sections, so that the overall
text produces a progression toward non-intention rather than simple non-intention itself. A poetics of elimination.

I tend to agree with Shultis’ assessment, but I’m more drawn to Cage’s series of texts that write through *Finnegans Wake*, three of which he published in his books. These texts appeal to me as a kind of séance or ventriloquism; like *Empty Words*, which is constructed strictly from Thoreau’s *Journals*, they are limit cases of intertextuality, constructed wholly out of their pre-text, *Finnegans Wake*. But because they are constructed by using Joyce’s name itself, key signature issues are more starkly foregrounded in the poems on the *Wake*.

Taken together, the *Wake* poems recapitulate the series of textual variations in *Empty Words* in that their trajectory carries over into a legible illegibility. But the first two of the three *Wake* pieces that Cage collected in his books are constructed mesostically. Mesostics are Cage’s invented form, like acrostics, only spelling words down the middle of the poem, the spine of the poem, rather than the left edge. This gives the first two *Wake* poems a sculptural feel entirely different from *Empty Words*. The third *Wake* piece, *Muoyce (Writing for the Fifth Time Through Finnegans Wake)*, forgoes the mesostic mode; Cage intended it to converge formally with *Empty Words* (*X* 173). In the early *Wake* poems, the fact that Joyce’s proper name is used to abstractly machine Joyce’s own text overdetermines signature issues so thoroughly that these texts seem to me to be Cage’s most valuable for exploring issues of the signature. Cage is unstinting in his praise of Joyce. But whereas Joyce created language and discourse worlds, Cage’s project was to take language across those borders of silence and aesthetic perception he had already explored musically. Cage wrote many mesostic series on the names of artists.
who influenced him. Besides the series on *Finnegans Wake* he used Joyce’s name mesostically in the long lecture *James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet* (X 53-101) and in the long work *Themes and Variations* included in *Composition in Retrospect*. The biggest technical difference between these works and the mesostics on the *Wake* is syntactical: unlike the other poems using Joyce’s name, the poems on the *Wake* are meant to be freed of syntax.

The mesostic form, when the spine spells a proper name, is definitively Cagean. His own name is effaced by the proper names of others. The signature of the other occupies the center of the poem. And yet the mesostic is the most recognizable idiom of the Cage’s style, in the sense of Derrida’s second modality of the signature. Maybe two thirds of his poetry takes this form. On the third level of the signature, the mesostic presents some very Derridean possibilities. By placing the proper names of others in the center of the mesostic, down the middle of the page, Cage erects the abyss of their signatures. Of the poems on the *Wake*, Cage says they are constructed to show the relation between Joyce’s name and his text (X 136). Whereas Derrida is very invested in exploring “Hegel,” “Genet,” “Ponge,” etc. and putting their signatures to work in the abyss of his own texts, Cage’s mesostic form means to allow interpenetration and non-interference between signatures. Derrida’s calls his columnar writing (on steles, styles, and signatures) “Colossal” writing:

. . . . when the denominator . . . institutes or erects himself in his own proper signature.

Colossal habitat: the masterpiece.

He bands erect in his *seing*, but also occupies it like a sarcophagus.

The form of the name—a place of solitary confinement—eats the body and holds it upright. (*Glas* 11bi)

This happens to describe the way Cage’s text erects Joyce’s name within the masterpiece.
(see Figure 1). Clearly, the poems are memorials and decompositions of “JAMES JOYCE” and the *Wake*.

For purposes of getting at the psychoanalytic aspects of Cage’s signature poetics, the *Wake* mesostics seem to me the royal road. Besides the *Wake* itself being written in nightlanguage, as Joyce said, Cage’s elimination of syntax raises the stakes: what kind of poetic economy remains from a pre-text that already plays so freely with language at the borders of meaning and senselessness? Another way of putting this question would be to ask if Cage’s text is readable, and, if so, how? What kind of discipline and devotion did Cage expect his text to require? What could he have intended for a text that has largely been freed of intention? I will take up these questions in the Chapter 5 reading of *Writing for the Second Time Through Finnegans Wake*. Cage’s aesthetic essays also give us plenty of grist for these questions, often in terms of his own signature theory.

*The Empty Cage: Space of Difference*

John Cage’s development, in a biographical sense, can be read as a genealogy of his poetics. The first decision tree he finds himself in is the oedipal space: male or female. His father opens into the way of being we can call “inventor/invention.” His mother opens into “musician/music.” But Cage’s difference is somewhere between these two horizons. He doesn’t really imprint to either position. He plays with paper cutout dolls. He performs an invention of the other, i.e., the female behavior of playing with dolls. His parents frowned upon his behavior. Perhaps the Lacanian No(m) of the Father was elicited from both the matri- and patriarchal areas of the Cage matrix.

As a college student and into his twenties he knows he has talent, and he
considers various branch paths among the arts: painting, writing, music, and architecture. He moves centrifugally (“I am a duchamp unto myself”), spreading his horizons into the arts and into Europe, escaping from the American university, Pomona College, after one year of interest followed by a year of uninterest or anti-interest.

The next stage of development reversed the centrifugal movement: Arnold Schoenberg. In the mid-30s, Cage commits to music in the act of haggling with Schoenberg, promising that if Schoenberg will take him on as a student, then he will commit his life to music. For the next 15 or 20 years this commitment forms the trunk of his genealogy. However, all of his earlier artistic interests remain close to hand as he writes a great deal of music for dance. But musical composition is his first pursuit and focus of development. By the advent of the 60s he has begun to move centrifugally again, starting to de-emphasize music a little, while turning more to writing, poetry, painting, and social critique.

The 40s saw his psycho-spiritual horizons increase exponentially as he began to explore non-western thought. Chance, especially the I Ching’s understanding of it, acts as a catalyst for his centrifugal development within the framework of his commitment to music. The vector of chance finally carries Cage beyond the musically superegoistic imprint of Schoenberg. Indian, Buddhist, Taoist, and Zen thinking help steer him around the institution of psychoanalysis (which he couldn’t afford anyway), and out of the institution of heterosexual marriage.16

So we read a series of Cagean primal moments: oedipal, school/college, Schoenberg, music delimited . . . . Does this series reach its limit with writing or poetics?

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16 This mini-biography is based on information taken mostly from David Revill’s biography of Cage and Thomas Hines biographical essay “Then Not Yet ‘Cage’: the Los Angeles Years.”
Cage’s autobiographical voice is a kind of Houdini, an escape artist with respect to these various scenes. Likewise, his poetics is devoted to escape, and, indeed, often seems to escape. This is a useful perspective when we face Cage’s seemingly illegible texts. Cage’s poetics, with his battle cry for freedom, perhaps his most American trait, is a textual machine more writerly than readerly. He takes off from any cage he finds.

Cage’s texts are built up out of certain remains of style; this stylistic tendency sometimes manifests as a trajectory toward the illegible. These texts bluntly and often imply the question, “What does reading require here?” Cage revels in the outrageousness of this position. He loves to tell stories of audience rebellion against his music, and this reaction from readers of his poetry and experimental writing he interprets as a sign that his composition has achieved part of its aims.  

How could something that seemingly conveys no sense convey style? This is precisely the signature obstacle Cage loved to sign for from the 50s onward. Cage’s texts always militate against a certain concept of style. It is a kind of extreme signature jealousy: he does not write to evoke other readable signatures or to identify himself with or among writers, poets, or composers, or to position himself stylistically. Such associations by a reader or listener would be like

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17 Consider this anecdote from the late 80s. Chögyam Trungpa, a Buddhist lineage holder, fled Tibet in 1959 and become one to the leading Buddhist teachers in the west. He founded Naropa University on Buddhist educational principles. Trungpa, artist and renowned conversationalist, was also, enigmatically and infamously, an alcoholic. He died at the age of 48. Cage tells this story:

I gave a performance of my piece called Empty Words Part IV for the students of Chögyam Trungpa at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. The piece goes on for two and a half hours and contains long silences of four or five minutes duration, and then out of that silence I just say a few letters of the alphabet following a score which was written through chance operations from the journal of Henry David Thoreau. Meanwhile there are these very faint images of Thoreau’s drawings being projected on a screen behind me. But they are very dim and hardly change at all—perhaps once every twenty minutes. I thought it was an ideal piece for a Buddhist audience, but they became absolutely furious and yelled at me and tried to get me to stop the performance. The next morning I had a meeting with Chögyam Trungpa, and he asked me to join the faculty at Naropa. (Nisker 14)

The section of Empty Words that Cage used for this performance is not legible in any ordinary sense. No doubt Cage successfully conveyed that particular illegibility in his performance.
confusing sounds with men. For Cage the confusion of names and music in the musical world, as in the case of Beethoven, is a category mistake: men are men and sounds are sounds, as Cage often says. His signature jealousy passes over into an animosity toward the concept of the signature itself, an animosity readable in many of his texts on other artists, whether in praise of an absent signature or in repudiation of an overbearing signature. The idea of the signature serves as a kind of spacing between himself and the artists he takes off from. Paradoxically, it is hard not to read also in these texts a metaphorical logic drawn from his own signature. And, as we shall see, it is style in the sense of idiom, Derrida’s second modality of the signature that Cage opposes. His own signature style militates against the concept of style, and this paradox governs many of his texts. Texts about nothing; texts devoted to silence; texts of chance; intertexts designed to elude their pre-texts; texts that disintegrate: whatever the context, this is perhaps the only remains of style—that each text is a singular event devoted to a certain escape—the opening of a cage.

*Poetics and Silence* (Lecture on Nothing)

To get right at the question of this hendyatic “and” between poetics and silence, I want to read Cage’s *Lecture on Nothing*. This text may be his most interesting single piece for approaching his poetics. It hinges between his music and his poetry. Part of the interest is temporal; the oral timing of the piece is metered. As with so many of his pieces, he composed it for performance; of course, it is a lecture, and he wrote it for oral presentation. This performative aspect is formalized by its layout on the page. Spacing indicates time in a graphic design emphasizing silence(s) during the space-time of
performance. This time of silence accrues for itself, as time, silence, and it accrues to the lecture a capital of silence. What comes into the piece through silence? What is gained in the silence over time? The piece interrogates, questions, and listens to silence. It subjects silence, producing subjective structural moments, forcing the listener to structure the silence. Cage had already been developing such techniques in his music compositions. It can be argued that Lecture on Nothing is the anchor piece in his most important book, Silence. It is the first piece discussed in his forward, and there he connects it directly with poetry. Its placement is roughly in the center of the 276-page book.

It can also be argued that the event, his actual first presentation of the lecture, (according to the preface in Silence, “about 1949 . . . at the Artists’ Club on Eighth Street in New York City” (ix)) marked the beginning of a transition in American aesthetic history, the turn from Abstract Expressionism, the Jackson Pollock school of painting, to the “cool,” anti-expressionist aesthetic of Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, which opened the way for the minimalist and conceptual developments of the Sixties.

But strictly in terms of poetics, the Lecture on Nothing presents a radical opening that has been for the most part ignored by the academy, although Cage does have a few apologists and his texts sometimes appear in places like the Norton Anthology of Postmodern Poetry. The difficulty of his later works, when he turned his attention more to poetic composition, hasn’t helped to get a better hearing for his poetic works. His mesostic techniques and his works of alphabetic disintegration (Empty Words for instance) often seem to defy conventional ideas of poetry. For instance, Ezra Pound’s imagist prescriptions seem irrelevant: in many cases the image, the melopoia, and/or the
logopoia don’t seem to be the point of the texts at all. Some texts even seem designed to get rid of such qualities. The *Lecture on Nothing* gives a pretty good indication of Cage’s starting points for this departure.

Cage’s lectures of the 50s mark the turning of his attention to poetics. In his late teens, twenty years earlier, his initial major influence seems to have been Gertrude Stein. In the preface to *Silence* he writes, “As I look back, I realize that a concern with poetry was early with me. At Pomona College, in response to questions about the Lake poets, I wrote in the manner of Gertrude Stein, irrerelevantly and repetitiously. I got an A. The second time I did it I was failed” (x). The next sentence of the preface concerns the *Lecture on Nothing* and a question of genre implicit in this prosaic hinge. The lecture does not appear to be “poetry”; poetry is certainly one of its subjects, as a quick perusal will show, but how could a lecture be a poem? The next sentence reads, “Since the *Lecture on Nothing* there have been more than a dozen pieces that were unconventionally written, including some that were done by means of chance operations and one that was largely a series of questions left unanswered” (x). Still, to say that the *Lecture* is unconventionally written does not clarify its genre status. Genre may well have been a moot issue for Cage, implying as it does a set of expectations anchored in taste, memory, and values that need escaping.

It’s more likely that he meant to escape the genre of poetry, and that the *Lecture* is such an expansion. In the following paragraph of the preface, he differentiates poetry and

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18 Concerning the image, Pound’s imagist prescription was “direct presentation of the ‘thing,’” whether subjective or objective, and he also defined the image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” Logopoia has to do with the play between words, contexts, and ideas: irony for example. Melopoia charges words musically, amplifying meaning. Marjorie Perloff has found in Cage examples of poems that do satisfy these prescriptions, especially melopoia (“Music”).
19 See the discussion of Duchamp below for more on chance operations and Cage’s relations to the Surrealists.
prose. His prose, in its direct, unadorned precision, may seem a bit unfocused at first, but
it’s clear on second reading that the lectures are the subject of his remarks on poetry, and
that the Lecture on Nothing is exemplary of this distinction between poetry and prose:
“As I see it, poetry is not prose simply because poetry is in one way or another
formalized. It is not poetry by reason of its content or ambiguity but by reason of its
allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words”
(Silence x). The Lecture on Nothing makes this introduction in the most literal, methodic,
intentionally structured way. The headnote at the text of the lecture is almost
indistinguishable from the headnotes to almost all of Cage’s musical scores from the 50s:

There are four measures in each line and twelve lines in each unit of the
rhythmic structure. There are forty-eight such units, each having forty-eight measures. The whole is divided into five large parts, in the
proportion 7, 6, 14, 14, 7. The forty-eight measures of each unit are
likewise so divided. The text is printed in four columns to facilitate a
rhythmic reading. Each line is to be read across the page from left to right,
not down the columns in sequence. This should not be done in an artificial
manner (which might result from an attempt to be too strictly faithful to
the position of the words on the page), but with the rubato which one uses
in everyday speech. (Silence 109)

This wholesale importation of the genre discourse of musical composition (as if he were
giving musicians instructions for performance) and Cagean rhythmical structure
introduces exactly the musical elements, time and sound, which he claims distinguish
prose from poetry. But this introduction is anti-melopoeiac, against the imagist
prescription of melopoeia—Cage is not talking about musical phrasing, but discontinuity
of sound. “Rhythmic reading” and “rubato” are matters of time. The sound introduced
into the lecture is the sound of silence. Only a few lines of the text are without spacing to
signify pauses in the delivery of the words, silent pauses pregnant with the ambient sound
of the lecture space.
In Cage’s early musical thinking, silence is equated with the absence of sound and functions to delimit duration. Cage reports that Arnold Schoenberg realized a harmonic cage for him:

[W]hen Schoenberg asked me whether I would devote my life to music, I said, “Of course.” After I had been studying with him for two years, Schoenberg said, “In order to write music, you must have a feeling for harmony.” I explained to him that I had no feeling for harmony. He then said that I would always encounter an obstacle, that it would be as though I came to a wall through which I could not pass. I said, “In that case I will devote my life to beating my head against that wall.” (Silence 261)

Rather than (or as a means of) beating his head against the harmonic walls of music, Cage chose to privilege duration over the other three fundamental elements of music: pitch, timbre, and loudness. Much of his early successful composition is, thus, based on rhythmic structures that are applied at both micro- and macro-levels of a musical piece rather than on harmonic necessity and exploration. By the mid-forties, he had visited an anechoic chamber at Harvard where the sounds of his own body made him realize that practically all earthly silence consists of sound, usually audible even if at very low levels. By the time Cage gives the Lecture on Nothing, this recognition informs his thinking on silence along with the Buddhist attention to interpenetration with one’s environment. Through silence he introduces environmental sound into the Lecture. Cage’s development of duration lead to temporal suspensions of the other musical elements in his compositions. The aesthetic object, the thing, is no longer constituted by its own pitch, timbre, and loudness. This allows interpenetration between the inside and outside of his musical compositions. Cage’s poetics translates this principle of interpenetration into both spoken and written forms. In the next chapter, I’ll discuss how this takes place on the level of the signature. The Lecture on Nothing becomes a frame for silence,
imminent in the figure of an empty cage.

In this talk on the subject of nothing (not on the concept of nothingness), Cage scatters many pronouncements on poetry. This poetry is not poetry in general or the institution of poetry. When Cage remarks to M. C. Richards that he gives his lectures “out of a need for poetry” (*Silence* x), he is not talking about the work of other poets or about what poetry throughout its history has supplied to people, that is, the needs that poetry is traditionally thought to fulfill. From the beginning of the text, there is a paradoxical playfulness at work between the terms “nothing” and “silence.” The first sentence reads, “I am here and there is nothing to say,” and it is spread out across the four columns something like this:

I am here , and there is nothing to say.

The “nothing” clause is bracketed between two brief silences (109). The third sentence announces that, “What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking.” And a few lines down, following the longest linear pause thus far in the text, we have what may well be Cage’s most famous aphorism: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it” (109), again followed by a linear pause longer than the width of the page. Usually this sentence is quoted in abbreviated form, leaving out the final clause, “and that is poetry as I need it.”

This final clause is a pointer. It directs us to Cage’s poetics. Within this sentence it is difficult to find much more than the pointer beyond which or before which lies a koan, which in turn seems to be a variation of the previous paradoxical ideas that silence requires the speaker to continue talking and “words make [,] help make the silences” (109). The spacing forms a memorial; it allows each phrase to echo, to double itself in the
silent space that follows: time stretches forward (protention) as the duration of phrase is doubled. Cage is using space to figure time, a generic concern of poetry. But this could be the rhythm of the abyss, the step and stop of Cage, a signature cadence.

Like all good paradoxes, there are many ways to read the aphorism “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.” Perhaps first and most obviously, the line carries the force of law, as if Cage is announcing the new law, the Cagean law of poetics. It seems a direct response to Abstract Expressionism specifically and the developments of American poetics circa 1900-50 generally. Neither the modernist nostalgia re Tradition (as theorized by T. S. Eliot) nor the agonism of the avant-garde (Jackson Pollock, et. al.) is pertinent “now,” i.e., in Cage’s moment as a function of meditative awareness of the present.

Beneath this aesthetic polemic, there are also some buried contextual relays, i.e., there are other cultural connections in the unconscious of this sentence and the essay. A psychoanalytic reading might try to isolate some latent meaning that would not necessarily rule out other latent readings but would nevertheless open up the text in powerful ways. Cage had much else at stake.

Cage gave this talk around 1949. At that time, as Cage scholars such as Moira Roth and Jonathon D. Katz are beginning to point out, it was dangerous to publicly declare one’s homosexuality. The country was sinking into McCarthyism, the politics of fear, and the attendant homophobia. And yet it is out of this socio-cultural moment that Cage bursts to prominence, arguably as the leading thinker of the U. S. avant-garde. An obvious reading presents itself. “Silence,” no matter the term’s conceptual roots in musical thinking and in the Zen ideas which Cage was gleaning from D. T. Suzuki, also
conveys the political, cultural, and day-to-day reality of enforced silence on matters of 
sexual identity lived by homosexuals at that point in our history. To speak publicly of 
homosexual aspects of one’s identity at that time was an invitation to violence.

“I have nothing to say” submits to this reality. But “I am saying it” refuses to 
submit. Another way to write it would be “I am gay and I am (not) saying it.” By this 
time “gay” was an American slang term, so it’s possible that the assonance of Cage’s 
aphorism may have appealed to him for its semblance to that of “gay.” But this is only 
speculation, as is my entire “psychoanalytic” reading, for the possibility of a strong 
reading, that seems to reveal some unconscious aspect of a text, doesn’t bring me up to 
any truth latent in Cage’s text. The manifest subject of the Lecture is nothing. And the 
poetics that the text promotes is also based on nothing.

I delay my placement of “Cage” in the abyss. Nothing becomes a screen for the 
abyss. But I’ll say it anyway. The cage of homosexuality he carried with him rests in the 
abyss of his text, opening and closing according to some law of duration based on chance 
operations. Cage’s proximity to, say, Jean Genet, or William Burroughs, or Allan 
Ginsberg, is formal rather that contentual. He has nothing to say (about homosexuality), 
and yet he is saying it. His texts open and close, by chance, in lieu of placing his sexual 
signature in the idiom of the text.

A page later in the Lecture on Nothing, we have this sentence: “Our poetry now is 
the realization that we possess nothing.” At first this may sound like a manifesto against 
materialism and bourgeois consumerism, but Cage quickly turns this claim to the 
temporal issues of retention and protention:

Our poetry now is the realization that we possess nothing. Anything 
therefore is a delight (since we do not possess it) and thus need not fear its
loss. We need not destroy the past: it is gone; at any moment, it might reappear and seem to be and be the present. Would it be a repetition? Only if we thought we owned it, but since we don’t, it is free and so are we. Most anybody knows about the future and how uncertain it is. (Silence 110-11)

What would a poetics based on this “realization” do differently? This Cagean move on poetry repeats his move on the history of music: Cage’s concern with attention to the present moment generalizes from the case of musical composition to poetic composition. Here, “nothing” refers most essentially to the past, even though Cage was living in the middle of the bloodiest century thus far in human history. Closer to hand, even though Cage was living through McCarthyism, it seems he was able to escape its traumatic effects, emerging relatively unscathed. Certainly his art flourished. Cage’s temporal scheme forces the consideration of McCarthyism into a (non)consideration of the dialectical derailment. History, both U.S. and European, does not have to be repeated. Instead of the negation-synthesis movement of time and history toward the absolute, instead of a “progress” that finds us happily floating upward toward Disneyland, Cage posits a near absolute past.

This past can be forgotten absolutely: in fact, it’s a past something like Freud’s traumatic kernel out of which Nachträglichkeit differs and defers itself. It cannot be reconditioned or interpreted so that it may be accepted, dealt with, or “possessed.” The nature of the trauma may be such that it would destroy the continuity of the mind if it were properly held in consciousness. So it must be repressed, held in the unconscious for safekeeping. Thus it becomes improper and not the property of the conscious.

As Derrida might say, it is the reste, or the remainder that cannot be made proper through negation. In this sense, it is “past,” a traumatic mental event which is temporally
insulated from the functioning of the conscious. From the unconscious it may continue to act, to return, but in ways that differ from the original traumatic effect. The step of change, movement away, extension, and difference is met disinterestedly by Cage, as would be the return. It’s a step out of the cage, for example, of McCarthyism. Even before it had passed, Cage could relegate McCarthyism to a past that is gone, even though it might reappear seemingly at random, like a telephone ringing or an “airplane come down in a vacant lot” that interrupts experience (111). The past need not be saved as if it were necessary for the future. Time need not be collapsed into an absolute present, some spearhead of God-consciousness; as Cage says, “We need not destroy the past.” We needn’t destroy it by taking it up into the present through ownership. For the present, such events may be passed over, perhaps only to rear their heads in the advent of terrorism before sheer chance again confronts the subject with catastrophe. “Most anybody knows a-bout the future and how un-certain it is” (111).

Cage’s poetics here resonates with the economy of loss that Bataille and Derrida oppose to Hegel’s restricted economy. Not all meanings are purposeful or necessary or serve the dialectic. If we possess nothing, any meaning can be a delight, since its loss does not alter us. “Anything therefore is a delight (since we do not possess it) and thus need not fear its loss” (111).

*Open Cage, Open Form*

Disinterest should temper desire. Cage begins to define a principle that he calls “poetry” in opposition to the formal characteristics of the common practice period in music, roughly 1600-1900. He begins with a series of substitutions:
What I am calling poetry is often called content. I myself have called it form. It is the continuity of a piece of music. Continuity today, when it is necessary, is a demonstration of disinterestedness. (111)

Short form: poetry is (a demonstration of) disinterestedness. This aesthetic axiom goes a long way back toward the paradoxical aphorism, “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.” The speech act is disinterested. Furthermore, this moment of disinterest structures the entire poetic. If James Joyce’s project in *Finnegans Wake* is to lever reality into a new configuration by stepping language away from itself or creating a night language, Cage is no less ambitious. For poetics, the practice of disinterest prepares the way for interpenetration. Content, form, continuity, poetry: this chain of substitutions, like Nietzsche’s “army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms,” seems to imply a general or a commanding term (de Man 242), but “disinterest” decapitates such a configuration. The poet leads away from himself, and this is the paradoxical situation of the Cagean signature: it allows for interpenetration and freedom of the poet and reader.

There is risk: cages can be dangerous, even open, empty cages. But the disinterested gesture of leaving the cage unlocked and as empty as possible suggests a line of flight and freedom.

Continuity today, when it is necessary, is a demonstration of disinterestedness. That is, it is a proof that our delight lies in not possessing anything. Each moment presents what happens. How different this form sense is from that which is bound up with memory: themes and secondary themes; their struggle; their development; the climax; the recapitulation (which is the belief that one may own one’s own home). But actually, unlike the snail, we carry our homes within us, which enables us to fly or to stay,—to enjoy each. But beware of that which is breathtakingly beautiful, for at any moment the telephone may ring or the airplane come down in a vacant lot. (*Silence* 111)

Sonata form, or sonnet form, will return, but its form sense limits flight. The dialectical struggle leaves one saddled with history. But actually, we carry our cages within us, and
we can move on. We don’t have to listen to the tape of the past; it’s better to be open in form. That way we can accept the call or the crash with awareness and acceptance.

*Cage and the Cage: the Rebus Signature*

In *X*, and in other texts such as *For the Birds*, Cage relates this series of answers to interviewers:

Received letter from journalist: put your philosophy in a nutshell. Replied: get out of whatever cage you find yourself in. Asked to supply catchy title for conversation with Daniel Charles, suggested For the Birds. TV interview: if you were asked to describe yourself in three words, what'd you say? An open cage. Satie was right: experience is a form of paralysis. (*X* 159-60)

The passage gives us the rebus signature wrapped up neatly in an antonomasia, the proper name falling into the abyss of Cage’s style as a common noun. The cluster of images makes a wonderful rebus for Cage’s abyss: an open cage with birds flying up out of it. As we shall see, these birds will sign like the spirit of JC arising from a sarcophagus. How does this signature troping actually model the poetics of Cage’s texts? During the ‘50s Cage began to broaden his focus from musical composition to the production of written texts to be read and, often, gathered into book form. Before this transition, during this transition, and for the rest of his life, Cage maintained a constant strategy of applying chance operations to any compositional process he was engaged in. As the last sentence in the quotation above implies, this enables the composer to escape the past, experience, and memory, although it is not without some irony that Cage refers to Satie, who might be considered part of the tradition of music. Intention can be limited in ways that enable a writer or composer to escape the history of genre and genres. In the Foreword to *X* (and in many other places), Cage gives his logic for this practice:
The title of this book, like that of *M*, was found by subjecting the alphabet to chance operations. It signifies the unknown place where poetry lives, tomorrow, I hope, as it does today, where what you see, framed or unframed, is art (cf. photography), where what you hear on or off the record is music.

Years ago in a review of *Silence* Alfred Frankenstein wrote that my writings were the story of how a change of mind came about. . . . so I have more and more written my texts in the same way I write my music, and make my prints, through the use of chance operations and by taking the asking of questions rather than the making of choices as my personal responsibility. Or you might say that I am devoted to freeing my writing from my intentions. (ix)

In other words, intentions tend to form a cage, and this cage needs escaping. This anti-intentional desire sets Cage in resistance to the intentional structure of the signature in general and especially of course his own. Throughout Cage’s work this signature resistance is everywhere in evidence. It is what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as a line-out. One is never off the line, the escape is never final, there are always cages in various stages of becoming, and the metaphoric totalization of this process is the subject circumscribed by cages.

So Cage has a penchant for suturing over the artist, himself, and letting the viewer, listener, or reader move about altogether freely in the field of the artwork. When he signs with the rebus signature, as “an open cage,” Cage announces his directions for reading or hearing his texts: interpenetration (you are free to enter) and non-interference (you are free to leave). This signature troping appeared late in Cage’s career. But Cage’s attitude toward the second modality of the signature, the recognizable idiom of the composer, is in place from early in his critical writing.

*Cagean Signature Theory, Stage I: Resistance to Idiom*

Early on in his published texts Cage uses the concept of the signature as a critical
device. For instance, in Varèse’s music Cage hears the recognizable signature style as a fault. In Cage’s view, Varèse’s signature style is overbearing in his compositions, lessening the distance between the composition, its performance, and its audition, rendering all three moments too close to the personality of Varèse. In this instance, the signature, because of its proximity to the ego of the artist, reduces Varèse’s style to a musical trap, that is, it reduces Varèse’s work in scope at the moment when it should, through a kind of absence, open up the range of the music’s affect. This has to do with noise, letting sounds be sounds. For Cage, Varèse uses noise to exercise his imagination, so that instead of opening up to noise as noise, Varèse manages to make his compositions all sound trademarked, a return of the same rather than an exploration of difference. Varèse’s use of noise isn’t about noise; it’s about Varèse (Silence 69, 83-4). In Derridean-Pongian terms, the second modality of the signature conveys nothing but the fact of its idiomaticity.

Strangely enough, Cage’s contentiousness with Varèse plays out the cage metaphor that his texts often circle about and to which he is always returning. It is an enactment of Cage’s own signature style, not within a musical composition but rather as theory of composition. We are on the way to this extreme: composition = no composition. While encaging Varèse implies a great deal about Cage’s own compositional goals, it locks Varèse up in a cage of Varèse’s own making, which Cage reads or hears in Varèse’s compositions. In this special case, Cage would open Varèse’s cage. In the general theoretical case, Cage’s goal would be to open the cage of music, letting in the remaining range of sound, letting sound reterritorialize music. Hence the aphorism, MUSIC = NO MUSIC (Composition 62). Cage’s own compositional cages
should leave their doors open to the remainder of sound where Varèse’s do not, a kind of musical (ar)rest or release. An empty cage may be the best metaphorical vehicle for Cage’s tenor/signature. And Cage specifies that this is a problem of the signature:

What is unnecessary in Varèse . . . are all his mannerisms, of which two stand out as signatures (the repeated note resembling a telegraphic transmission and the cadence of a tone held through a crescendo to maximum amplitude). These mannerisms do not establish sounds in their own right. They make it quite difficult to hear the sounds just as they are, for they draw attention to Varèse and his imagination. (Silence 69)

Instead of an empty, open cage, Varèse’s listener is forced to deal with the musical image of Varèse. The problem with Varèse lies in the proximity between his mannerisms and his signature, a proximity that frames Varèse, rather than sound or music. The signature can be territorialized by the imagination, or mannerisms, which seem productive of the artist/composer, and for Cage this is a dead end. Yet Varèse is extremely important for Cage in terms of musical roots. Cage considers Varèse to have fathered noise into the history of music: consider this patriarchal genealogy:

“Sound come into its own.” What does that mean? For one thing: it means that noises are as useful to new music as so-called musical tones, for the simple reason that they are sounds. This decision alters the view of history, so that one is no longer concerned with tonality or atonality, Schoenberg or Stravinsky (the twelve tones or the twelve expressed as seven plus five), nor with consonance and dissonance, but rather with Edgard Varèse who fathered forth noise into 20th century music. But it is clear that ways must be discovered that allow noises and tones to be just noises and tones, not exponents subservient to Varèse’s imagination.” (68-9)

For Cage, signature and imagination need to be disassociated. One reading of Cage’s gesture might be Eliotic, having to do with impersonality (or the appearance of such) while maintaining artistic control, somewhat like the ironic Joycean artist paring his fingernails invisibly beyond the villanelle. But it is as if “noises and tones,” indeed,
sound itself, as it is, without mannerism, should countersign for the signature once the
history of music has been gotten past—or at least that would be the proper Cagean
signature. This would take the signature of alterity, of all things exterior, and substitute it
for Cage’s signature, that is, open the cage. The difference between exteriority and
interiority presents the opportunity for a substitution: the presence of silence (ambient
noise) stands in the absence of the artist/composer and in the absence of the signature.
We could theorize this absence as a traumatic kernel within the signature. The listener is
in a crisis: she has to decide whether to sign for something the artist/composer has given
her but has not signed for himself.

A signature event creates a link between some subjective interiority and objective
exteriority: the signature of an artist or a writer puts the viewer’s or reader’s link at stake.
If the reader doesn’t sign for the writer, the writer’s worth goes down.

And this would be a way of transcending signature jealousy, the attraction and
repulsion that Cage feels toward Varèse for his move on the history of experimental
music. Calculating the exponential potential of “noises and tones” without the coefficient
of personality takes Varèse into account and sediments or stratifies his position within
that history of music. And yet this gesture is a kind of chance procedure, a calculation of
the odds that alterity will sign for Cage. The spirit of affirmation, of the Joycean “yes,
yes,” can be read here in Cage’s yes to alterity, to the other of music, whether it be
silence or noise or “no music.” By operating on Varèse’s signature, Cage is taking his
chances with his own signature.

Cage performs a variation on this signature theme in the short piece, “Edgard
Varèse” (Silence 83-4). Varèse leaves no musical space for countersignature: “for in
Deserts he attempts to make tape sound like the orchestra and vice versa, showing again a lack of interest in the natural differences of sounds, preferring to give them all his unifying signature” (83). A unified signature: what would that be? Or more apropos of the Cagean signature, what is absent or what has escaped from the signature? Cage has split, as it were. He has left the cage in lieu of his signature. And he has split the signature using the issue of the presence/absence of the composer in the composition, performance, and audition of the musical text, i.e., in the musical event. Readers of Glas will recognize a similar use of presence and absence in the case of Genet, the thief. One of his habits was to mark the event of his presence (or his passing) by the theft or absenting of some object.20 Rather than leave behind the mark of his imagination, Cage would leave an empty (musical) cage. At least in the case of the silent pieces like 4’ 33”.

Cage’s intertextuality, his predominate mode of poetic composition, enacts a similar kind of theft and, I will argue, counterfeiting. Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake clearly illustrates this.

Elsewhere Cage critiques the notion that art originates in the interiority of the Artist or genius:

‘Art should come from within; then it is profound.’ But it seems to me Art goes within, and I don’t see the need for ‘should’ or ‘then’ or ‘it’ or ‘profound.’ When Art comes from within, which is what it was for so long doing, it became a thing which seemed to elevate the man who made it above those who observed it or heard it and the artist was considered a genius or given a rating . . . so proudly he signs his work like a manufacturer. (Silence 129)

This denigration of signature interiority leaves the implication that the only good signature is countersignature originating outside the artist.

20 Derrida plays on this gesture as part of Genet’s signature style by means of the word vol, which means both theft and flight in French, suggesting a deconstruction of the eagle/Hegel.
Revill notes that Cage, coming to printmaking, “was anxious to avoid ‘gesture,’ by which he meant personal, habitual reactions (this had formed the basis of his criticisms of improvisation, of jazz and of surrealism)” (Revill 262). And Revill supports this assertion by quoting Cage from an interview by Robin White: “something connected with the knowing aspect of the person, as in a signature—when you sign your name, you just do it by habit (qtd. in Revill 262). In this instance Cage is identifying the signature not with interiority generally but with habit—a kind of unconscious interiority? or the most superficial level of conscious agency? In this paradigm, conscious interiority becomes stuffed with discursive trash. On this same question of interiority, poststructuralist psychoanalytic thought tends to posit a traumatic kernel of unconsciousness that must be repressed and sutured over with neurotic structure. In this view the production of interiority, or interiorization, is a scene of violence. In either case, if the signature is habitual, then it is reduced to a function of the discursive interiority, the “knowledge” as Cage would say, of the ego.

Grouped with the texts that mention Varèse in Silence, are texts on Satie and Robert Rauschenberg, two artists in whose works Cage finds the openness that Varèse lacks.

The text entitled “Erik Satie” comes between the two texts that mention Varèse, “History of Experimental Music in the United States” and “Edgard Varèse.” Positioning an imagined conversation with Satie between articles on Varèse suggests their similar importance for Cage. Cage signals his preference for Satie’s approach to sound-as-sound and personal sentiment:

21 For an exemplary reading of this type, see Avital Ronell’s interpretation of Madame Bovary in Crack Wars. There she notes that the reading of romance novels, a kind of textual discursive trash, constitutes the primal violent interiorization of Emma for the purpose of suturing over the loss of her (absent) mother.
To be interested in Satie one must be disinterested to begin with, accept that a sound is a sound and a man is a man, give up illusions about ideas of order, expressions of sentiment, and all the rest of our inherited aesthetic claptrap. (82)

“Claptrap” suggests an unpacking of the cage metaphor. A trap: “claptrap,” or noise, or bombast, in this case is not to be given our attention, in spite of the theorization of silence and attention to noise. The aesthetics of the past is bad noise. What we are given by tradition is a useful cage, but it limits us in our ability to think and sense beyond the ordering words and concepts of music. For Cage this quality of tradition automatically times it out. We need new music for a new world. Actually it is even more extreme than that. We need to let the world’s noise, rather than the noise of our egos, become music.

Cage quotes Satie: “Show me something new; I’ll begin all over again” (Cage’s italics) (80). Cage refers to this as “moving out from zero” (80). Also with Satie, Cage moves into temporal formations designed to allow unstructured sound to open within music, where previously sounds had not been let to be just sounds.

To repeat: a sound has four characteristics: frequency, amplitude, timbre and duration. Silence (ambient noise) has only duration. A zero musical structure must be just an empty time. (80)

Silence has only duration—from a musical point of view. If the window is open or if time structure is suspended, the ambient noise comes to us replete with frequencies, amplitudes, and timbres, as well as duration. Empty time structures are like empty cages that are ready to capture silence, ready for the claptrap that will belong strictly to the moment of performance and audition. The past does not overdetermine performance and the space of musical possibility is open to the present.
Robert Rauschenberg: A Silent Signature?

In the essay “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work” Cage loosens several formal constraints in an attempt to convey the sense of freedom and openness he feels in relation to Rauschenberg’s work. In the editorial note introducing the essay, Cage makes reference to his own signature piece and addends his own siglum to the statement. This gesture is set off typographically to emphasize its importance. The note appears roughly like this:

This article, completed in February of 1961, was published in Metro (Milan) in May. It may be read in whole or in part; any sections of it may be skipped, what remains may be read in any order. The style of printing here employed is not essential. Any of the sections may be printed directly over any of the others, and the spaces between paragraphs may be varied in any manner. The words in italics are either quotations from Rauschenberg or titles of his works.

To Whom It May Concern:
The white paintings came first; my silent piece came later.

—J. C.

Cage places his signature piece, “the silent piece,” in immediate proximity to Rauschenberg’s white paintings. He is signing for his artistic debt to Rauschenberg. The

22 The Guggenheim Museum gives this background on the White Paintings, including a narration of Cage’s response:

In the summer of 1951 Robert Rauschenberg created his revolutionary White Paintings at Black Mountain College, near Asheville, North Carolina. At a time when Abstract Expressionism was ascendant in New York, Rauschenberg’s uninflected all-white surfaces eliminated gesture and denied all possibility of narrative or external reference. In his radical reduction of content as well as in his conception of the works as a series of modular shaped geometric canvases, Rauschenberg can be seen as presaging Minimalism by a decade.

The White Paintings shocked the artistic community at Black Mountain, and word of the "scandal" spread to the New York art world long before they were first exhibited at the Stable Gallery in October 1953. While generally misunderstood at the time, the works were highly influential for Rauschenberg’s frequent collaborator, the composer John Cage. Under the sway of the Buddhist aesthetics of Zen, Cage interpreted the blank surfaces as "landing strips" or receptors for light and shadow, and was inspired to pursue the corresponding notion of silence and ambient sound in music. His response, 4’33” (1952), consisted of the pianist sitting quietly at the piano without touching the keys for four minutes and thirty-three seconds so that incidental sounds in the surrounding
circumstances of this gesture are worth noting. After using the siglum and his full name to sign respectively the foreword and the manifesto which together comprise the front matter, nowhere else in the editorial matter of the book does Cage use his siglum or proper name. Cage’s handwritten, full signature is reproduced on the spine, and his last name, enlarged and as it appears on the spine, is impressed into the front cover of the hardback edition. That is a lot of emphasis on the physical signature as a covering gesture. So the use of his siglum to introduce the Rauschenberg piece puts pretty strong emphasis on it as it relates to Cage’s own theorization of the signature.

In the second section of the Rauschenberg piece, Cage writes, “And the signature is nowhere to be seen” (*Silence* 98). This particular small section of Cage’s essay reads elliptically, giving the term “signature” broad scope:

> The Goat. No weeds. Virtuosity with ease. Does his head have a bed in it? Beauty. His hands and his feet, fingers and toes long-jointed, are astonishing. They certify his work. And the signature is nowhere to be seen. The paintings were thrown in the river after the exhibition. What is the nature of Art when it reaches the Sea? (98)

Some of Rauschenberg’s works are indeed unsigned. *The White Paintings* are apparently unsigned as is the *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. However, it’s doubtful that Cage is referring to the literal signature. More likely this sentence continues his earlier thinking on style. Cage would have artists and composers suppress all sign of signature style, in the sense of personal style. What’s more important is the counter-signature of the materials themselves—a goat for instance. Is Rauschenberg making his materials sign? In Cage’s estimation, it is not Rauschenberg’s personality that certifies his work, but the beauty of his digits. And then the materials themselves are thrown away. Literally, the

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environment—such as the wind in the trees outside or the whispering of audience members—determined the content of the piece. (*Singular*)

Cage took off from Rauschenberg.
works do not return to Rauschenberg himself.

Rauschenberg manages to evade certain strictures of a signature style. Rauschenberg’s work and his method find their ways into the perceptual apparatus of his friends as Cage notes: “Rauschenberg is continually being offered scraps of this and that, odds and ends his friends run across, since it strikes them: This is something he could use in a painting” (Silence 100). There is a remainder of idiom in play in Rauschenberg’s style, and he orients it at times by using his friend’s feedback as a field for discrimination: “Nine times out of ten he has no use for” the “odds and ends” (100). But early on, the question of personal expressivity was practically and ethically complex for Cage. The aesthetic that he reads in the work of Rauschenberg seems to match that of the direction that his work took as he was getting started as a composer.

Explaining how he was led to the exploration of structural rhythm, Cage remarks the dual nature of artistic expression: “I recognized that expression of two kinds, that arising from the personality of the composer and that arising from the nature and content of the materials, was inevitable, but I felt its emanation was stronger and more sensible when not consciously striven for, but simply allowed to arise naturally” (John Cage: Writer 34). This sentence concedes that there will be personal expression in a composition. What is personal expression that does not involve conscious striving? What role does that personal expression play in the signature style, and what role does the expression of materials play in the style? It seems that ethics and necessity played a role in Cage’s development at the point of this issue of expressivity. “I felt that an artist had an ethical responsibility to society to keep alive to the contemporary spiritual needs: I felt

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23Hereafter referred to as JC: W.
that if he did this, admittedly vague as it is a thing to do, his work would automatically carry with it a usefulness to others” (34). In typical Cagean fashion, societal ethics, indeed some form of spiritual ethics, must underwrite composition. And it is interesting that this statement takes on the air of confession: “I felt . . . I felt.” Indeed, the statement enacts personal expression. Nevertheless, the moment informs his negative attitude toward signature visibility in questions of style. On the level of necessity and chance, Cage adds, “Any latent longing that I might naturally have had to master expressivity in music was dissolved for me by my connection with the modern dance. For them I had continually to make suitable and expressive accompaniments” (34). There are two important moments to note here: Cage’s “vision” is rhythmically focused by the needs of the dance, “writing within the lengths of time prescribed for [him] by modern dancers” (34), and the ethical path before him was rhythmical, for there are other artists, the dancers, within this scene whose work requires it. This scene might be called a cage named “rhythmical structure.” Later in his career Cage will work with Cunningham to move out of this structural connection between the dance and the music for the dance. Describing the Cunningham style Cage says:

the continuity . . . no longer relies on linear elements, be they narrative or psychological, nor does it rely on a movement towards and away from climax. As in abstract painting, it is assumed that an element (a movement, a sound, a change of light) is in and of itself expressive: what it communicates is in large part determined by the observer himself. It is assumed that the dance supports itself and does not need support from the music. The two arts take place in a common place and time, but each art expresses this Space-time in its own way. The result is an activity of interpenetrations in time and space, not counterpoints, nor controlled relationships, but flexibilities as are known from the mobiles of Alexander Calder. (JC: W 91)

Over expressivity Cage valorizes a certain repressivity. But the limits of this repression
are situated along a border between the personal and the material (“the sounds and silences of a composition” (*Silence* 18)), and this material includes the space of societal ethics, as distinct from ego, memory, taste, and an aesthetic ideology valorizing the master composer. What kind of rhythmic structure allows Cage to work along this border? The short answer: chance-determined counting. The more interesting issue is what remains of signature style when “what it communicates is in large part determined by the observer himself.”

*Cagean Reception Theory*

Cage’s appreciation of Rauschenberg includes a moment of reception theory. This element of style becomes something like a carrot held out in front of the viewer/reader/auditor that moves away upon the approach—of either viewer or artist. Of the items brought to Rauschenberg, then rejected, Cage says, “Say it’s something close to something he once found useful, and so could be recognized as his. Well, then, as a matter of course, his poetry has moved without one’s knowing where it’s gone to” (*Silence* 100). The objects of attention that are dispersed throughout the field of the painting, combine, or assemblage do not become fetishized for qualities identifiable with the artist. Rauschenberg withdraws his stylistic sensibility. However, the “poetry” of Rauschenberg’s painting does retain continuity with the history of painting: “He changes what goes on, on a canvas, but he does not change how canvas is used for paintings—that is, stretched flat to make rectangular surfaces which may be hung on a wall” (100). The style, the signature style, is a process of change: “He changes what goes on.” Does this continuous variation take place inside or outside a stylistic cage? Or perhaps to reframe
this question, are we on a line out of the cage? If Rauschenberg’s work remains
“painting” by virtue of canvas and walls, there is flight or change within this process of
presentation. Any vocabulary of symbols or allegorical structure is constantly relieved.
This process of change or relief becomes an element of style. The mode of art remains
recognizably the same; a matter of canvases, walls, and seeing, and, thus, structurally it
remains painting. Cage’s characterization of the Rauschenberg aesthetic hinges on the
attention of the viewer, and this is where he places the trajectory of the term “freedom.”
From one cage to another, from one subject to another, from artist to viewer, from one
center to another center (to use the Buddhist terminology that informs Cage’s and
Cunningham’s thinking\(^{24}\)) we are perhaps on the line out of the cage, if not all the way
out at least on the way out. The rebus reads, “get out of whatever cage you are in.” Cage
attempts to place the artist and the viewer on the same plane. The way Rauschenberg
positions canvases on a wall leads Cage to this aesthetic leveling:

> These [canvases] he uses singly, joined together, or placed in a symmetry
so obvious as not to attract interest (nothing special). We know two ways
to unfocus attention: symmetry is one of them; the other is the over-all
where each small part is a sample of what you find elsewhere. In either
case, there is at least the possibility of looking anywhere, not just where
someone arranged you should. You are then free to deal with your
freedom just as the artist dealt with his, not in the same way but,
nevertheless, originally. (100)

As subjects, the artist and the viewer should be on the same plane of freedom, asking
themselves where attention is to be focused. What is given for reception is freedom, or
rather the return to freedom, as if it had been lost or surrendered to the artist in the

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\(^{24}\) Cunningham discusses this in the film *Cage and Cunningham*. Here are examples from Cage in *JCW*:
“This desire [to explore the unknown] has found expression in our culture in new materials, because our
culture has its faith not in the peaceful center of the spirit but in an ever-hopeful projection on to things of
our own desire for completion” (43). And “Nothing in life or art needs accompaniment, because each has
its own center (which is no center)” (63).
moment the viewer brings his attention to the canvas or the scene of painting. Where was attention prior to that moment? Cage says, “All it means is that, looking closely, we see as it was everything is in chaos still” (100). The chaotic syntax of this sentence points the way back and out of the cage one enters upon arriving at the field of the painting. The question of how the subject should order his attention should be returned to the subject. The (absent) presence of the artist should not totalize or reterritorialize the plane of perception or the space of the other.

In an interview with William Duckworth, Cage explains how he cultivates this mode of attention in his musical compositions:

D: How do you weaken taste and memory?
C: The Zen method is by sitting cross-legged.
D: But the majority of Western civilization doesn’t feel it can do that.
C: No. The way I have chosen to do that is to compose by means of asking questions rather than making choices, and to use chance operations to determine the answers.
D: And how should the listeners do that?
C: The listeners and the critics have a problem. And I would like to find out how to solve that or how to indicate where that is. I know that I may be able to answer it, because instead of hearing music in my head before I write, I write in such a way as to hear something that I have not yet heard. Therefore, I’m in the position that the listener is in, and the critic is in with respect to my music. How do I approach it? How do I hear it, is the answer. Not because I know anything that they don’t know, but because I haven’t heard it anymore than they’ve heard it. (Duckworth 31-2)

Cage composes in order to put himself in the same position, the same place (“where that is”), the listener is in. He composes in order to receive. It is not intention but protention he wishes to convey, not the directing of attention, but the freeing of attention. There is a sense of place here that has to do with reception, with making oneself a receptacle. This is not a way of knowing, but of placing oneself in a position of reception. It is a place where taste and memory weaken. Taste and memory tend to reduce experience to what
our ears, and our bodies by extension, have been organized to desire. Beyond that organization lies alterity. Of course, we cannot completely escape into alterity. We can get on the way to it though, on the way to an escape from taste and memory. Cage would put listener, critic, and composer in an empty cage and let them leave. Cage himself is not the solution to the problem facing his listeners and critics, the problem of finding this place. But he can put himself in that place. Cage figures himself as a general addressee, an ideal, capable of understanding everything crucial at stake in the experience of listening and therefore of receiving everything, and yet, at the same time, Cage disfigures this general addressee. The empty cage left behind should be forgotten, put away, distanced, along with taste and memory. Perhaps Cage does not assert both these opposite figurations, especially not the former, the musical \textit{sujet supposé savoir}, yet his signature might signify in this manner. “John Cage” as the history of music: he traps the listener, caging him or releasing her by writing music unidentifiable with the prior history of music. He attempts to exit the history of music and leave the door open. What that history, or what the music of the past, is not, depends on what it is. Hearing it depends on freedom from expectations from past experiences of music.

To come back to the Rauschenberg text and the two points that bear on this sense of place: “You are then free to deal with your freedom just as the artist dealt with his, not in the same way but, nevertheless, originally,” and “we see as it was everything is in chaos still” \textit{(Silence 100)}. The problem of space and place is partially taken up in the figures of the door and the room in the rest of Cage’s paragraphs on Rauschenberg.

“The door is never locked. Rauschenberg walks in. No one home. He paints a new painting over the old one” (101). This image that Cage gives us to contemplate presents
Rauschenberg as a graffito wandering into an abstract cage. Cages have doors, and artists may enter them. Another level of signature resistance manifests itself here. Cages are meant to be locked, but in this scene the door is never locked. Rauschenberg’s studio has been recast as an empty cage: “No one home.” There is no one to direct his attention. Subject positions cannot be locked in or locked out. The artist is in and out. As readers, listeners, or viewers we should be in the same place. Where are we? It would seem to be the artist’s studio, but how then is “no one home”? The syntax confuses or leaves open the relative subject positions of the speaker, Rauschenberg, and the reader of this passage. And this accords with the aim of placing the other in the same position with the same freedom (to exercise) as the artist. To end the paragraph, Cage writes, “It’s a joy in fact to begin over again. In preparation he erases the De Kooning” (101). “No one home”—it’s an empty cage, or an empty canvas, or an empty field. Erasure of De Kooning: preservation is not an issue. The naming of things can be resisted. But renaming goes on. “Were he [Rauschenberg] saying something in particular, he would have to focus the painting, as it is he simply focuses himself, and everything, a pair of socks, is appropriate, appropriate to poetry, a poetry of infinite possibilities” (103). “Focusing himself” means enacting the decisions to see and observe in particular ways. It’s a kind of appropriation. Rauschenberg takes his chances with his materials just as the other must take her/his chances in focusing on the painting. Where and how will the gaze fall? Could Cage’s text, or even his signature, serve as well as a pair of socks? To focus on the socks is to pass through an abstract cage. How can socks take us beyond? Well, there can’t be a beyond without a before or below, the mud out of which we stand and look up. “Is the door locked? No, it’s open as usual” (101). For the viewer, perception is
not through the other, the artist. Perception is to be let through the door, both in and out.
Perhaps a better formulation is that the exterior, with the artist lost in the alterity of exteriority, is to be allowed to flow into the interior, that is, the outside of the studio or the outside of the home allowed to come in. “No one home”: what is the economy of this “usually” open door? The space of interiority is not closed. The scene of painting is not a trap, and the other of the artist is not trapped. I am free to go in again and begin again.

Cage writes, “It’s a joy in fact to begin over again. In preparation [Rauschenberg] erases the De Kooning” (101). Cage is always ready to start out again from zero, as he says of Satie (80), to find and orient oneself on the lineout. What is interior must be let out, a venture outward into alterity, in balance with the inward flow. Speaking of plan-as-technique, Cage writes, “More important is to know exactly the size of the door and techniques for getting a canvas out of the studio. (Combines don’t roll up)” (104). In other words, the transpositional space of the painting is limited by the size of the door.

This crossing over of the object, from interior to exterior, is the initial event of a visual model for the transposition of the subject. The subject would enter the space of the artist, just as the canvas or objects in a painting enter the space, by the chance proximity of artist and object, with the one room of the scene suggesting interiority. The artist expects that the subject, the “divine stranger,” will also leave as the painting will leave, through the open door.

“There is in Rauschenberg, between him and what he picks up to use, the quality of encounter. For the first time. If, as happens, there is a series of paintings containing such and such a material, it is as though the encounter was extended into a visit on the part of the stranger (who is divine). . . . Shortly the stranger leaves, leaving the door open.” (103)
The alterity of the stranger is marked by the strangeness of the other, and the artist is also symmetrically granted the divine element of the strange. In this scene the artist’s strangeness dwells in the interiority of the studio, and the strangeness of the stranger is allowed to enter and then leave by the open door connecting interiority and exteriority. The painting is ejected from the interiority of the artist where it originated. The process of (ex)change with the other can remain open: Cage writes, “If you do not change your mind about something when you confront a picture you have not seen before, you are either a stubborn fool or the painting is not very good” (106). The painting should bring alterity, and the other should be open to alterity. He’s against caging out the other.

Of the white paintings, Cage remarks:

Into this, structure and all, anything goes. The structure was not the point. But it was practical: you could actually see that everything was happening without anything’s being done. Before such emptiness, you just wait to see what you will see. Is Rauschenberg’s mind then empty, the way the white canvases are? Does that mean whatever enters it has room? (In, of course, the gap between art and life.) And since his eyes are connected to his mind, he can see what he looks at because his head is clear, uncluttered? That must be the case, for only in a mind (twentieth) that had room for it could Dante (thirteenth-fourteenth) have come in and gone out” (107).

What comes in, should go out. Rather than possessing Dante, being stuck with him, or stuck on him, or stuck to him, it is a matter of “FLUENCY IN AND OUT,” as Cage puts it in one of his aphorisms (Composition 60). The temporal and cultural alterity of Dante flows easily in and out of the mind/room/cage of Rauschenberg. In the white paintings, “anything goes.” Signature resistance and signature reception come together to form a kind of becoming-cage-free which would cancel out the metaphoric of imprisonment, traps, punishment, cells, walled-in-ness, etc., but instead goes by way of indeterminacy and undecidability toward other undetermined and chance meanings. Negation of the first
metaphorics happens. But it doesn’t stop there. As with Varèse, the metaphorics of becoming-caged seems to elicit at the same time the metaphorics of becoming-free: “fluency in and out” applies as much to Varèse/Cage as it does to Dante/Rauschenberg.

In the oedipal register, the Cage signature allows the patriarchal to have its place, but then moves on to the next event without overdetermination. Cage says of his father, “he was very—I guess the word might be cagey. I was going to say ‘canny,’ but . . . (JCCA 72).

Signature, Order Words, Superego: From Rauschenberg to Duchamp

“And the signature is nowhere to be found.”

Throughout Cage’s meditation on Rauschenberg the architecture of space remains thematic. It is the means by which Cage presents Rauschenberg. The imagery of galleries, studios, walls, doors, etc., persists. Within Rauschenberg’s paintings and within these spaces that Cage draws, the reader may wander; we cannot hear Rauschenberg, who, Cage argues, has withdrawn from the spaces. The artist-as-superego, as moral father-figure, has been, at least, put under examination if not under erasure. The reader/viewer is given empty spaces on the pages, among Cage’s paragraphs. This time there are no instructions to the reader for interpreting the spaces, as there were in the Lecture on Nothing. The form of the text helps the reader enact or enter the decision space Cage is describing. Cage evokes a mood of quietness and contemplation, as if Rauschenberg is no longer present.

Yes, Cage is structuring an aesthetic intervention that is an ordering in itself, but the order or assemblage is designed to allow variation as are Rauschenberg’s paintings. Cage directs that his paragraphs be read or printed in any order. Responsibility for the
order of reading passes over to the printer-publisher and then to the reader as the order of viewing passes over to Rauschenberg’s viewer. Within the assemblage writer-text-reader (or painter-canvas-viewer) the onus of production (of meaning, affect, experience) can be redistributed. In effect, the reader is being asked to sign stylistically. Cage’s remark that “the signature is nowhere to be found” marks the withdrawal of the artist’s persona and its baggage. That withdrawal permits an economy of countersignature.

When Cage comes to Duchamp in the 60s, it is as if he is repeating the discovery of noise beyond silence. Everything has changed. Suddenly the aesthetics become an all out celebration of the signature. Duchamp’s signature is everywhere to be found. Cage adopts Duchamp as his aesthetic superego, even naming himself “a duchamp.” The aesthetic of withdrawal has been turned inside out, and Cage calls it centrifugal. This is because no one funnels more of the aesthetic process through the signature than Duchamp. But what differentiates this centrifugal movement from simple reterritorialization? One way to answer this question is to examine the relative approaches to the signature in terms of order words. Deleuze’s & Guattari’s theorization of the order word in *A Thousand Plateaus* can be read as an argument that the superego is a function of language rather than of the individual psyche.25 It is as if the order word has cycled over into its would-be antithesis, the password. The signature itself has become a tunnel through the order word structure of language. The signature pre-immanently exemplifies the order word, and can therefore deconstruct the order word. The password, Deleuze’s reversal of the order word, is an order word, albeit a reflexive and ironic intervention. What can be more reflexive, more self-reflexive than the signature? The

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25 See Chapter 4, “November 20, 1923—Postulates of Linguistics.”
order of identity encodes itself in the signature, which itself structures the symbolic order. To leave one’s mark is the original symbolic gesture.

Rauschenberg’s silent signature style is a way of silencing the superego. In fact, it challenges the entire symbolic order by foregrounding the image of silence. Duchamp’s registration of the symbolic order through the signature takes an entirely different approach, a more active than silent strategy. The signature, empty in itself, is trumpeted, but as a framing device.

Duchamp’s signature style makes a password out of his own signature. Duchamp presents a monstrous, alteristic, deployment of the signature. How does Cage begin to understand Duchamp? Duchamp is perhaps the greatest artist of the signature, the champion of the field, the winner. In French his name means the field, the place, the area. His name resonates with opening, clearing, the field of view. The crypt in the signature is empty, or perhaps the crypt is full in some absolute sense, fully open to everything. Duchamp says “yes” to his signature by leaving it places. He throws his signature away. He signs cigars, then smokes them. He disseminates his signature in order to purvey the found object. He sees his signature inscribed on the thing then he shows this inscription to us by signing the object. His signature event immediately challenges his appreciator. Will the viewer concede that the object countersigns for Duchamp?

Taking off again from the mark in Marcel, we see that his first name opens right on the structure of the signature also. Marcel makes his mark. Indeed, his signature is on the march, like a soldier in Nietzsche’s army of tropes: metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, . . . , duchamps. It frames and renames everything. As a machinic assemblage it seems capable of consuming and aesthetically repackaging any thing.
Implicit in this event is a release of the name to get rid of it, to throw it away, in order to have it come back countersigned. The name comes back countersigned by the object. Cage is hypersensitive to this play of the signature:

The works signed by Duchamp are centrifugal. The world around becomes indistinguishable. (X 53)

The check. The string he dropped. The Mona Lisa. The musical notes taken out of a hat. The glass. The toy shot-gun painting. The things he found. Therefore, everything seen—every object, that is, plus the process of looking at it—is a Duchamp. (AYFM 70)

It’s too much. As Cage says, “What's more boring than Marcel Duchamp? I ask you” (71). Perhaps a good joke shouldn’t be repeated. And Cage is aware of this also:

He [Duchamp] requires that we know that being an artist isn't child's play: equivalent in difficulty—surely—to playing chess. Furthermore a work of our art is not ours alone but belongs also to the opponent who’s there to the end. Anarchy? (71)

Yes, it is a joke, but it is more than that also. Neither Duchamp nor Cage is simply joking. Property, propriety, the proper name, ownership, order: all these are at stake. Who owns a way of looking? How could anyone sign for it, or take ownership of a process? Could the joke become a self-fulfilling prophecy? a true joke? What would its relation be to the unconscious? In his biography of Cage, David Revill suggests that Duchamp’s understanding of the unconscious and Cage’s understanding were different, particularly in relation to chance: “Their apparent shared interest in chance masked very different perspectives; “your chance is not the same as my chance” Duchamp warned (without addressing Cage specifically), for he saw chance as an expression of the subconscious personality” (214-15). Cage saw chance as an expression of nature and a way to escape “the subconscious personality.” Because their signatures are different, their chances are
different. If Duchamp’s signature chance is a form of automatic writing that
reterritorializes everything, Cage sees beyond Duchamp’s chance by looking at it through
his own signature. Or I might say Cage positions himself within Duchamp’s signature.

This event begins as a slur on Jackson Pollock:

Seems Pollock tried to do it—paint on glass. It was in a movie. There was an admission of failure. That wasn't the way to proceed. It's not a question of doing again what Duchamp already did. We must nowadays nevertheless at least be able to look through to what's beyond—as though we were in it looking out. (AYFM 71)

As though one were inside a cage looking out: Cage is inside what “Duchamp already did.”

Oddly, Cage repeats the gesture of painting on glass himself, in the act of
mourning for Duchamp. Following Duchamp’s death, Cage created with Calvin Sumison a plexiglass piece with random inscriptions randomly positioned on it and entitled it Not Wanting to Say Anything About Marcel. Looking at the piece, one gazes through several pieces of plexiglass. How does one read random inscriptions? But beyond the inscriptions, this memorial is a wall, a see-through wall—a glass wall, a glas wall, and a mourning wall. And now the wall separates Cage and Duchamp. Cage is writing for Duchamp, as if he understands Derrida’s calcul of the mother. In the Hegelian scheme of marriage, the wife or mother is the survivor who writes the name of the father/husband. No doubt there is a lot of Duchamp in the piece, even if it wants to say nothing about him. Duchamp’s last piece, the elaborate installation Étant Donnés, includes a landscape painting on glass. Competing signatures overdetermine the process of looking at it. The piece has “Marcel” in the title, so it has got half of Duchamp’s proper name accompanying it. It is done on plexiglass very like “what Duchamp already did.” But one
is also looking out to “what’s beyond” as though one were negotiating an inside/outside distinction. It says nothing in its broken, random language, which amounts to a kind of Cagean silence. Unlike Pollock, Cage is perfectly happy to meld his signature with Duchamp’s. The only anxiety of influence that Cage feels toward Duchamp arises only in the second modality of the signature event. Not wanting to repeat Duchamp’s gestures, the mourning of traumatic loss reverses the fluency: fluency in and out of the tomb. Perhaps Cage’s tears, broken language, falls on the plexiglass the way Pollock let the paint fall on the glass: after Duchamp in its deconstruction of vision by means of a glass cage, in spite of the chance operations Cage used to construct the piece.

“I became in my way a duchamp unto myself. I could find as he did for himself the space and time of my own experience” (X 53). Cage dramatically names himself “a duchamp.” This common noun is a function of Duchamp’s own singular signature aesthetic. Whether or not Cage coined the term, “a duchamp,” he gave it a prominent place in his texts. In 1962 or ’63, before his close association with Marcel and Teeny Duchamp of the mid-60s, he wrote the piece “26 Statements Re Duchamp,” and one of the statements is simply, “A duchamp”, unpunctuated. In this antonomasia, the proper noun “Duchamp” has become a common noun, a trope worthy of Duchamp himself. As Derrida would say, Duchamp loses his name in order to have it monumentalized, enshrined in language as its own term, applied not to Duchamp but to anything that countersigns for Duchamp. This event can be seen two ways. Has Duchamp reterritorialized “nature” or “reality” for himself or in his name, or has he somehow gotten “things” to deterritorialize his signature? If the case is both, then there’s a teleological trajectory here: Duchamp is the origin and the goal of this interaction
between things and language.

Cage takes a deferential attitude toward Duchamp. To name himself a duchamp implies that he has seen himself according to the perspective of Duchamp. But what is that perspective? “I could find as he did for himself the space and time of my own experience” (X 53). As we have seen in the Pollock quote, “It's not a question of doing again what Duchamp already did.” The movement is oedipal on a psychoanalytic plane. When he calls himself a duchamp, the patriarchal structure of the language of naming positions Cage as Duchamp’s son. The placement of Pollock in the margin repeats the stance Cage took toward Varèse. Both Pollock and Varèse function as failed aesthetic fathers, Duchamp’s evil doubles: Varèse, who fathered noise into 20th century music, and Pollock, head of the Abstract Expressionist school of painting. In the end Cage rejects both as phallic superegos, hyperhetero aesthetic fathers. But they function in the double structure of the superego. Duchamp is the good cop, Pollack and Varèse as bad cops. Both Pollock and Varèse are frozen in the second modality of the signature. There is no countersignature. Varèse’s “mannersms” are second mode signature, not counter-signature, because those sounds, as Cage says, are not “established in their own right” (*Silence* 69). Pollack’s mature style is also pure idiom. There is no outside in his work. The closure of idiom restricts the economy of the signature.

Duchamp’s signature economy is hyper-Pongian: any thing can come back signed, especially things that in their thingness exceed the signature. That is one of Ponge’s conditions for counter-signature: “the only texts that I can with dignity accept to sign (or counter-sign) are those that could be unsigned altogether” (*Signspunge* 130). These “texts,” (the subjects of his poems) are often objects from nature but not always:
Derrida writes, “He often describes the thing, which may be an animal, a human scene, an anthropomorphic form when he describes them as themselves scenes of writing or signature (Points 367). Duchamp’s signature technique elides the description of the thing as a scene of writing. As with Rauschenberg, there remains something of the second modality, the treatment of the thing having become an idiomatic mark, but the countersignature itself, especially Duchamp’s, has been subjected to “sacred parody,” (Geoffrey Hartman’s term for Derrida’s Glas-style).

Nevertheless, Cage takes off from Duchamp the way Derrida takes off from Ponge. Derrida’s focus on Ponge’s “The Swallows” bears an uncanny resemblance to Cage’s signature rebus, where he repeats the antonomasia of “duchamp”: I (Cage) am an open cage, “For the Birds.” Cage trumps “duchamp” with “cage,” then takes off. “Each swallow tirelessly hurls itself—infallibly exercises itself—in the signature, according to its species, of the skies” writes Ponge (qtd in Points 376).

Yet, like Derrida, Cage is careful to separate his enterprise from Duchamp’s, and the trace of his signature provides the line out for this departure, what Derrida calls “the take off”: Cage could find his own cage, “the space and time of his own experience” (X 53). Likewise, Derrida is careful to allow the artist, Ponge, his freedom:

I would say that I take off from Ponge’s proper name: that is why not everything comes back to it, that is why I would not want to lead one to believe that, by concerning myself with his legal proper name, I tried to deduce everything from it. Moreover, in this text I take precautions in this regard: it is not at all a matter of deducing everything from the patronymic proper name, or even of deducing everything from the signature of the proper name. Everything takes off from his proper name, that is, proceeds from it, and at the same time takes its distance from it, detaches itself from it. And it is this detachment that makes the work in some sense. (Points 368)

This is very close to Cage’s practice of interpenetration with noninterference. As with
Rauschenberg’s paintings, the issue is freedom, that is, confronting the other with the same freedom that the artist faced in the process of his work. The decision space must be left empty. For Cage this means freedom from the personality of the artist. The artist cannot absolutely divorce his personality from his work, but he can leave his work open so that it is up to another to decide when to come and go, or take off. Cage countersigns for Duchamp and Rauschenberg by taking off from their works.

* * *

Cage wrote repeatedly, subtly, and enthusiastically about the signature. He also constructed a poetics of signatures. This poetics doesn’t owe much to tradition. Whereas Sharon Olds draws heavily on 20th Century poetics, especially the confessional poetics, and makes no formal departures from short lyric, Cage diametrically opposes the confessional impulse. Not even impersonality, but the erasure of personality as an aspect of the text was his stated goal. And to do this, he made formal departures that require enormous leaps from readers of poetry. Cage and Olds inhabit opposite ends of the poetics universe, working over their own signatures.
Chapter 5

Cage Joins the Wake

It is the control of intention, and its denial of non-intention’s existence, that Cage wished to expel from the process of making. Control assumes a hierarchical relationship between nature and humanity that disallows the presence of what we do not intend. (Shultis 33)

Cage’s long poem Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake (hereafter W2FW) seems like a trojan horse meant to penetrate the walls of poetics. It looks like a poem on the page. But reading it is immediately more difficult than reading Finnegans Wake. At one time it might have been called a post-poem. By design, Cage wishes to alter the desire of reading and readers, i.e., Cage wanted to free the text from Joyce’s intentions, as well as his own (X x). His aim is not to become a reader of Joyce’s intentions or of Joyce’s intended meaning, but to make something else again out of Finnegans Wake. Reading through the first page of Cage’s poem, the poetic economy seems crippled by the lack of grammar (see Figure 1). The protocol seems to have been lost.

Protocol: Funeral Arrangements

First time readers will no doubt take quick recourse to Cage’s introduction to the poem in Empty Words, which is interesting but provides little help in reading the poem. Cage does clarify the poem’s construction—that it consists of a cutting or subset from Finnegans Wake, achieved by both a mechanical operation and operations based on taste.
For the mechanical operation, Cage follows the letters of Joyce’s name through the text. He takes those words which contain the letters: the first word with a “j,” the next word with an “a,” the next word with an “m,” and so on, each word anchoring a new verse. To complement this operation, by exercising taste, he usually picks some of the intermittent words from the *Wake* to be used as “wing words” of the mesostics: how much play can there be in this procedure? Finding the random distribution of the letters in the proper name “James Joyce” is a perfectly mechanical operation, so there is no play or looseness, other than that of error, in the procedure itself. The play of “chance” has occurred in the prior construction of the *Wake*, and the decision to apply the algorithm opposes the “intentions” of Joyce and Cage to the random distribution of the letters of Joyce’s name in the *Wake*. Through the operations based on taste, there is opportunity for subjective play in the procedure—this, of course, mixes Cage’s intentions in the process. Although limited, this opportunity allows Cage to exercise some traditional “poetics,” by which I mean considerations of sound, sense or image. Nevertheless, the overall procedure functions to greatly reduce intentional control of the text, both Joyce’s and Cage’s, creating a text that questions relations between intention and design throughout the intertextual space.

*Glasification of Mourners*

For readers of the *Wake*, this interrogation conditions the reading of *W2FW*. Undoubtedly a large percentage of Cage’s audience consists of serious *Wake* readers. For these readers, Cage’s poem can work like a table or an abyss on the text of the *Wake*, a miniature version of the *Wake*, skeletal perhaps but not key-like or explanatory. It is an abyss (in the heraldic sense of the term) in that it looks like a miniature version of the
novel that stands on or in front of the *Wake* but is not the *Wake* itself. *W2FW* also works
like a signature in that it refers to the *Wake* but has a much more accelerated, scribbled, seemingly illegible quality. Cage has signed the *Wake* in a peculiar way. While Cage’s poem may provide provocative readings and useful insights into the *Wake*, those readings are always accompanied by questions of proximity, raising the issues of mis-reading, parasitism, allegory, etc. Any desire to return to the pre-text for certainty or to measure the proximity of Cage’s poem to the *Wake* will ring through these questions. Cage’s stated aim is to move beyond the *Wake*, to move beyond Joyce’s intentions. However, readers armed with some understanding of the *Wake* will be hard pressed not to bring their understanding, and its assumptions concerning intentions, to bear on Cage’s poem. The text becomes un-locatable, and the scene of reading constantly shifts between the poem and the novel, as if one were looking for noon at two o’clock. On its face *W2FW* is a counterfeit and not a very good one. Maybe alarm bells should be pealing.

This coefficient of uncertainty is even greater for readers who know of the *Wake*, but don’t read it. Without some background, some grasp of the pre-text, the relation between the text and the pre-text remains unimproved by reading *W2FW*. Cage’s text is probably freest in this situation: the reader lacks the baggage of intentions that attaches to Joyce’s signature and the *Wake*. And yet Cage’s text is perhaps most haunted by the *Wake* under these conditions since the mystery of its intertextual relations is maximized. Cage’s poem is a form of the *Wake* that lacks the presence of the *Wake*. The “writing through” of Cage’s poem cannot be explored because the *Wake* itself, the immediate textual context of the poem, is, for nonreaders of the Wake, a lacuna. What’s left is a tracery of Joyce’s name: it’s like waiting for a funeral to pass at a stoplight, a funeral that
includes a train of banners repeating the name of the dead.

Scoring the Signature

Furthermore, Cage’s text is not faithfully reproducing the unintentional productions of the *Wake*: the violence of his procedures insures that unintentional as well as intentional effects and structures of the *Wake* are cut away. In part, reading becomes a question of the survival of any intended play of meaning, and the effects of this question also exist in complimentarity with whatever new effects and meanings accrue from Cage’s poem. This cutting and grafting of formal and contentual structures works to confuse the signature poetics at stake here, the poetics of the two signatures, Joyce’s and Cage’s.

How can any desired play of meaning survive this mapping from one text to another seemingly lesser, secondary, parasitical, even counterfeit text? Cage’s attempt to “save” the unintentional *Wake* amounts to a sacrificial economy. Three parts of the sacrifice stand out: 1) some large part of Joyce’s intentions, 2) the material integrity of the pre-text, 3) Joyce’s signature itself, the literal signature subscribing the text in Derrida’s first modality, now replaced by Cage’s. In return there is a monumentalization of Joyce’s name, its erection in the spines of the mesostics. After the sacrificial process, what’s left? Are we getting the right words, the good, or the goods, out of the *Wake*? What kind of meaning emerges on attempting to make sense of Cage’s poem? What is produced in this sacrificial economy?

For each of these sacrificial elements there are certain remains. Where Joyce’s syntax and the intention therein are lost, we have Cage’s anti-intention. This substitution is intentional on Cage’s part. It takes as its object the remains of Joyce’s intention: the
hand that grasps that object is Cage’s intentional anti-intention. Next, replacing the material integrity of the pre-text, we have the integrity of Cage’s text, again constructed or strung together out of remains of Joyce’s text. Third, replacing Joyce’s signature, there are its monumental remains mesostically organizing the poem with Cage’s own signature authorizing the monument. Cage uses Joyce’s letters to remove Joyce’s intention: it’s a double signature; as if Cage is holding Joyce’s hand and guiding another “James Joyce” over Joyce’s original signature and all the way through the pre-text, leaving a deep cut with the letters JAMES JOYCE furrowed into the text. Any strong reading of the poem would have to keep all these productions in mind.

How does a gift read? How does a monument to a writer offer itself to be read? Readers face a sacrificial economy; to whom are the sacrificial gifts, the sacrifices themselves, offered? But let me ignore these questions for a moment, and forge ahead as if I know how to read this poem on its own terms.

Reading Joyce Cagefree

Looking at the opening stanza, the first word is “wroth,” wrathful or angry. A reader’s frustrations with Cage over this text may verge on wrath. Is something of the grotesque at work here? The resistance to syntax which Cage has programmed into his methodology makes the opening verse seem freely dissociative in relation to the rest of the text—even on repeated rereading: “wroth with twone nathandJoe.” The rest of the stanza reads “A / Malt / jhEm / Shen.” “A malt” suggests alcohol. “[J]hEm” suggests Joyce’s nickname, Jim, and, thus, himself. “Shen” presents the same kind of difficulties “twone” presents. It looks like a portmanteau word combining “she” and “hen” just as
“twone” appears to combine “two” and “one.” “Shen” also happens to begin with a capital letter, as if it were a proper name or the beginning of a sentence. But this could be chance because a quick scan of the poem (or having read Cage’s remarks on mesostic rules) shows that only the letters in the mesostic strings get capitalized; therefore, the capitalization of Shen could be mere chance. (As it happens, it is capitalized in the Wake, as is Jhem.)

Setting aside “twone” and “Shen” with their lexical difficulties for the moment, the rest of the stanza seems to have to do with anger and drunkenness. Resupplying some syntax and tugging on the words a bit gives something like this:

Angry with Nathan and Joe, a drunken Jim . . . (Shen?).

How does the sense of it proceed? Is it merely noise, senselessness manifesting itself as such? Cage did say roughly ten years earlier that he had not yet produced noise out of language (as if there weren’t plenty there already), as a means of making something different out of language (Cage & Charles, 113). Yet, even if it can be thought of as noise, we seem to have the beginning of a sentence, which suggests that some sort of closure at the level of the sentence may lie ahead.

Proceeding on the assumption that the second stanza conceals or contains a continuation of this sentence, we have these words to work with: “pftJschute / sOlid man / that the humptYhillhead of humself / is at the knoCk out / in thE park.” The wonderful word “pftJschute” immediately supplies us with a predicate for the noun “Jim” of the previous stanza: Jim shoots. “[S]Olid man” looks like a squinting modifier, apposing either Jim or, ironically, the humpty dumpty knocked out in the park. A sentence seems
to be latent in the lines: Angry with Nathan and Joe, a drunken Jim shoots Humpty Dumpty, the solid man, in the park.

What has happened? If a reader wants sentence closure out of Cage’s poem, she doesn’t have to work too hard to get it. Cage took out Joyce’s syntax, but Cage’s readers can put syntax back into the poem. But who authorizes this reading? Only the reader? After all the cutting and pruning Cage’s poem carries out on the pre-text, the reader is left out on a limb. Returning sentence syntax to the text does not get back to the original meaning of the text. If the reader, for whatever reason, wishes to get back to Joyce’s intention, then Cage’s poem seems more like marketing: the full version is readily available in the handiest copy of the *Wake*. Staying with Cage’s poem, however, means separating oneself textually from Joyce but not completely. There is still plenty of Joyce’s signature to be had and plenty of Joyce’s intention with respect to the *Wake*. Plenty, but is it enough? Would intention form a limit of the signature? The boundary between Joyce’s signature and Cage’s becomes the hinge of reading.

*Joyce-Cage: the JC-effect*

In the introduction to his book *X*, Cage makes this remark concerning his poems constructed out of the *Wake*:

Years ago in a review of *Silence* Alfred Frankenstein wrote that my writings were the story of how a change of mind came about. From the beginning in the late ‘30s I have been more interested in exemplification than in explanation, and so I have more and more written my texts in the same way I write my music, and make my prints, through the use of chance operations and by taking the asking of questions rather than the making of choices as my personal responsibility. Or you might say that I am devoted to freeing my writing from my intentions, and so, in those cases like the writings through Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound included in this book in which chance plays no part, I
merely follow the rolling of a metal ball (the name of the author through his work) which serves to free me and the reader not only of my intentions but also of those of Joyce and Pound. I am confident, however, and some friends support this view, that Joyce would have been delighted by what happens when intention is removed from the *Wake*. . . . (x)

Cage’s last sentence here is unfortunate because it needs to be qualified. He hasn’t removed intention from the *Wake*; he *has* (intentionally) allowed nonintention to alter the text. This operation or economy does not necessarily do away with intention in the text even when it removes syntax entirely. It does allow intention and nonintention to interpenetrate. Furthermore, it is not quite true that “chance plays no part” in the composition of the poem. As I have implied above, the placement of the letters of Joyce’s name in the *Wake* was unintentional, and, hence, by chance. Actually Cage addresses this, speaking of a different poem of mesostics on Joyce’s name which he wrote, also cut from *Finnegans Wake*, entitled *7 out of 23*:

> In such a case my work was merely to show, by giving it a five-line structure, the relation of Joyce’s text to his name, a relationship that was surely in these instances not in his mind, though at many points, as Adaline Glasheen cheerfully lists, his name was in his mind, alone or in combination with another name, for example, “poorjoist” (page 113), and “joysis crisis” (page 395). (*Empty Words* 136)

> “Surely” in some sense Joyce wasn’t watching the letters of his name bubble up to the surface of his book. Perhaps his perception during the writing process did not form itself around the letters as they arrived at the letter of the text. Perhaps he did not identify himself with them nor seek refuge in them. But Cage’s qualification, “surely,” points to the problem of where to draw the line in this speculation on Joyce’s investment in his own name and his signature. The problem of limning this investment is Cage’s also. He’s putting his own name “in combination with” Joyce’s. The joist’s in Cage’s poem form a cage *out of* the James and the joyces; on every page the reader is peeping through the bars
of James and Joyces. How well built is this cage? “Joysis crisis” dovetails neatly with John Cage’s initials. And the artist-to-artist relation that Cage’s poem constructs clearly plays on the theme of resurrection and crucifixion. The *Wake* is an allegory of resurrection. Cage’s poem would sacrifice Joyce’s intentions and erect a monument out of the remains of the *Wake*. It’s an investment in a sacrificial economy.

That line of speculation is precisely the moment where Cage goes to work. Interpenetration is the key trait or seed that lies immanent in the image of the cage. An empty cage with an open door: the cage is there, the new text is there, but it doesn’t interfere with the access and egress of Joycean memory. Cage would escape his own signature, that is, the strictures inherent in a “personal style.” This image models for his intertextual signing practice, i.e., his signature intertextuality, especially the works that use earlier texts as compositional matter. In this case, his project releases Joyce’s signature from its text-cage—it frees Joyce’s text from his signature. This violent monumentality recombines Joyce’s text and aspects of his signature in an arbitrary way. While Joyce’s signature goes free, the text-cage that remains is constructed as if Joyce’s name were its joists. The text is returned to Joyce’s name, and excessively so, and yet this is an unauthorized return. How does this escape the implications of Cage’s Zen hendiadys, Interpenetration *and* Noninterference?

The return on this speculation could subsidize an analysis of the relative positions of the superegos of the two artists. What is the psychological structure of the intertexts in their relation to the superegos of the artists and the artist’s superego in general?

Monumentalization is both celebration and mourning, like a wake. The resurrection of the superego in the superegos of those who follow becomes an iteration of
the text in Cage’s poem. If we use the idea of the order word as a kind of metric for the superego, Cage’s text can produce interesting results for the superego. Deleuze and Guattari’s fondness for Cage’s work could probably be indexed by the lack of order words in many of Cage’s later works. Of course, that lack of syntactical order tends to redistribute the functions of the order word to every word in the text if there are words left in the text. This effect combines with Joyce’s own combinatorics to give us a kind of molecular reading of Joyce’s text. The word structures are relieved of their syntactical or molecular bonds. On the other hand the atomic forces within Joyce’s words, the molar forces if you will, the sameness of Joyce’s pun-etics, the adhesion within many of the words, becomes stronger.

The superego can be read, according to Lacan, distributed throughout the symbolic order. The Other is distributed throughout the order, in the sense that the unconscious is structured not only like a language, but by language wherever it congregates topologically. Joyce’s words tend to reseed the symbolic order with new order words and anti-order words, and Cage’s poem celebrates that moment making the protocols of reading more difficult to unconsciously exercise. This makes the superego of reading apparent in the difficulty of reading.

This interpenetration turns on the relation between syntax and intention. Syntax, in its interplay with grammar, may be the strongest way to exert authorial control over the meaning of a text—is it the primary vehicle of intention? Syntax certainly regulates the acceptable valences of a word. Syntax, as context of a word, privileges certain meanings over others. But with a text like the *Wake*, it would seem that reducing syntax would hardly eliminate intention, since the *Wake* invests so heavily at the level of the word, by
virtue of Joyce’s tactical punning. It might be more useful to think of the *Wake* as a scene of resistance between the word and the sentence rather than as a simple opening of the word while sentence closure is maintained: or narrative vs. the puncept. Cage’s poem redacts the whole scene by getting rid of the syntax. *Finnegans Wake* is the exemplary modernist writerly text, in Barthes’ sense of the term. Cage’s poem amplifies that writerliness of the *Wake*.

Yet, several key aspects of the *Wake* remain more or less intact in Cage’s redaction. Four signature elements of the *Wake* appear in the first two stanzas of Cage’s poem: detonation of the word, the bawdy, the Fall, and the riddle/mystery. The word “pftschute” pretty much entails these four themes: the six consecutive consonants in their sibilance sound out the death rattle, whether oral or anal, making a bawdy play on the death by falling (Humpty Dumpty) of “humself.” Who is humself? Joyce’s riddling remains present. The lack of syntax, although easily remedied, expands the scope of the riddle/Wish structure built into the dream style of the *Wake*, suturing over the syntax of the pre-text, producing an even more cryptic condensation of the *Wake*’s dreamwork.

Cage’s introduction to his poem also remarks a thematic complex: “The play of sex and church and food and drink in an all time all space world turned family was not only regaling: it Joyced me” (*Empty* 136). It was Joyce’s intention to Joyce his readers, and Cage’s poem doesn’t relieve the remains of Joyce’s text of this intention. As a reader of his own poem, Cage comes to it already Joyced, the process of composition having been another joycing. Likewise, readers of the *Wake* will recognize in *W2FW* Joyce’s wordwork, characterization and characters, plot structures, encyclopedic elements, etc. In short, they will recognize the *Wake*. On the other hand, those who don’t read the *Wake*
will understand that the *Wake* is the pre-text; they will find plenty of meaning effects to attribute to Joyce if they wish.

At the same time both subsets of readers will be adding a new element to that reading: Joyce’s proper name appears vertically roughly 300 times in Cage’s poem. This repetition works like a concrete poem. The visual repetition forces a double reading. While trying to read what’s left of the *Wake*, the reader also sees in the text the words “James Joyce” being repeated constantly. This visual effect is ‘heard’ in the background of the ‘standard’ reading. The effect is something like that of a mantra. It is the sound of Joyce’s signature. It is no longer Joyce’s signature, but rather Cage sounding the letters.

*Colossal Writing*

What role does this mantra-like concrete structure play in the poem’s economy of reading? Visually the presentation is not simply a mantra, but a mantra wrapped in cuttings from the pre-text. The name itself gets vertical billing while the terms it “selects” from the pre-text, along with the terms Cage elects, get horizontal presentation. This fetishization results from a substitution. Syntactical structures are largely removed, and instead we are given the “mesostic spine,” “J-A-M-E-S J-O-Y-C-E,” as if the burden of meaning, and the work of reading have begun to shift from the horizontal to the vertical structure of the text. Working in the absence of syntax, whether that leads to resupplying syntax or simply letting other structures of the text center the interpretation, the reader must decide how far to go with Cage’s movement from horizontal, sentence-structured text to the vertical, repetitive mantra structure. Without syntax and its attendant distractions, the reading of the *Wake* becomes much quieter. It takes a strong
determination to stay with Cage’s text, to stay focused on the sounding of the name and the adumbration of the *Wake*.

Of course, this is a fetishization of the proper name, “James Joyce.” Sacrifice, economy of loss, mourning for Joyce/father/superego. Cage has taken on the role of Joyce’s mother as per Derrida’s calcul. He is writing the name “James Joyce” on a stele erected by gluing up stones of language cut out of the *Wake*.

*Protocol: Forget It*

Thinking musically and according to the puncept of the signature, the letters of Joyce’s name have become a key signature, rendering the *Wake* along the scale j-a-m-e-s-j-o-y-c-e. The mantra is performed in this key. Every reader will be “Joyced,” if not in Cage’s sense of the term, at least graphically by Cage’s visual presentation of the term.

The economy of this concrete scale will involve readers both more and less familiar with the *Wake*. Cage has programmed the letters “James Joyce” to produce nonintentional effects from the *Wake*. This act is a kind of will-to-power, specifically a will-to-forget the original *intentions* of the *Wake*.

One of Derrida’s most interesting themes in *Given Time* is the problematic concept of forgetting. What is it that Heidegger is forgetting when he writes on the *es geben*? Indeed, it goes without saying in Derrida’s text that the antecedent of “*es,*” “*it,*” is forgotten. The problem of giving, the forgotten origin of “*it*” and of giving itself, lies at the core of the concept of the gift. Derrida anchors his deconstruction of the gift in the paradox of the commonsense understanding of it: a gift is free, with no expectation of return; otherwise it is not really a gift. But economy, financial, psychological, cultural or
otherwise, is always about return law. There is always an expectation of return attached to a gift. The other becomes the gifted. Gifts are exchanged. Even friendship or good feelings are a form of return. A gift is never completely free.

When Cage follows a monumental rolling ball through the *Wake*, there is a lot of machinic forgetting going on as if to emphasize the chiasmus of gift and sacrifice. First and foremost, much of the pretext is “forgotten,” lost as if part of the theater or eidos of the ur-text has vanished. JC’s text is only miming, by silencing the syntax, JJ’s text. This problem is already thematic in the *Wake*, built into the dream movement of the narrative, which forgets itself constantly as elements (words, names, events) are constantly displaced and condensed. For Derrida, the forgetting involved in the gift is both absolute and radical. Carrying out a structural analysis of the concept *gift*, he sifts through several models of both (un)consciousness and of the gift: the perception-consciousness of Phenomenology; Freud’s models of the Unconscious, particularly the economy of repression; Heidegger’s *given* as an essential knot in the problem of the gift; and anthropology’s theories of gift economies. What gives time and space? Derrida’s analysis of the gift takes on a decidedly temporal emphasis throughout, and especially when he comes to Heidegger. Derrida comes out of this curve or swerve in his narrative/analysis firmly grasping the opening he has found in the forgetting required by the concept of the gift (23). For the gift to exist it must be absolutely forgotten, flushed out of the symbolic aspects of the psyche, in order that no economy can attach to it. In this respect the concept of the gift functions like a wormhole with respect to the time-space of economy: for a gift to exist, it must escape any economy. The gift is quite impossible as Derrida
shows, and yet this relieves none of its necessity in our thinking. Who could give up the idea of the gift?

Where does the forgetting that is going on in Cage’s poem lie in relation to the forgetting Derrida is theorizing? Cage’s poetics is crafted in order to forget Joyce’s intention in the *Wake*. What would this sacrificial event gain us? This forgetting is quite impossible anyway, since so much of Joyce’s intention is programmed into the New (Joycean) Word. What issues of control are at stake in the antinomy between roots of meaning in the (New) Word and roots of meaning in the Sentence? It seems Cage wants to add a forgetting to the text of *Finnegans Wake*, in spite of the preservative or saving aspect of his project. Forget syntax: save the text. Or are we looking at a counterfeit? A countertext, which preserves much of the textuality of the pretext, especially that textuality that survives in the words themselves of *FW*. On one level the whole thing is simply a countersign or password by which Cage addresses other readers of the *Wake*.

In *Given Time* Derrida’s main strategy is to remember the forgetting inherent in the gift. But the impossible condition of the gift figures a symmetry with the counterfeit. This relationship governs the economy of intertextuality. It might look free, but there are always strings attached.

*Starting Out From Zero, Again*

The third and fourth stanzas and first verse of the fifth stanza of *W2FW* drive the reader back into the Old Testament as this crude gloss of six of the twelve words shows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jiccup</th>
<th>Jacob</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the fAther</td>
<td>Patriarchs, the fathers of Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hEaven</td>
<td>heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges</td>
<td>Judges, one of the books of the Prophets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

163
If the first two stanzas thematize the fall, the next two condense, in the sense of dreamwork, the Pentateuch, or “five scrolls,” that comprise the beginning of the Old Testament. Stanzas three, four, and five also look forward from the Pentateuch, to Judges, a little further into the Old Testament, to heaven, a New Testament idea, and to the concept of the future itself, in “watsCh / futurE” of the fourth stanza. This metonymic breadth reinforces the alltime-allspace characteristic of the *Wake* that joyces Cage. Readers of the *Wake* will also recognize in “Jiccup” one of the twins, HCE’s sons, who play their role in the “world turned family,” as Cage describes the *Wake* (136). The names “Jacob” and “Esau” occasionally recur in the Wake, stand-ins for Shem and Shaun. Cage’s first stanza already evokes this pair in “jhEm” and “Shen.” Thus, in the first four stanzas of Cage’s poem, Joycean structure and intention exerts itself in ways clearly recognizable to those familiar with the *Wake*. Readers unfamiliar with the *Wake* will remain free of that *Wakean* intertextual ballast. They are less likely to escape the Old Testament ballast.

Abrogation of syntax, Cage’s method, foregrounds issues of narrative. Who controls the narrative? Plenty remains of the narrating voice(s) from *Finnegans Wake*. Cage’s “voice” is heard in the absent syntax or the music of the *Wake* that remains after the scoring carried out in the poem. Nevertheless, the poem puts narrative under erasure, producing a barred form of the text. The narrative has spread out into three scenes: the original scene of the ur-text (characterized by Joyce’s syntax), the scene of the poem (which lacks syntax), and the scene of reading, wherein the reader may resupply syntax and narrative structure in order to read through the bars of Cage’s text. The structure of
desire inherent in reading is deconstructed. What is reading in the possible absence of narrative?

Space of the monstrous: Cage’s operation excises ease of narration. Syntax, “sintalks,” as Cage quotes Joyce, is the structural glue of narration. In order to say, “this happened, then this happened, then this happened,” syntax is required. To suppress syntax is monstrous. The monstrous absence of the storyline solicits the reader who must trust his own narrating identity alone to (re-)produce narrative. The distance in the gap between Joyce/Cage and the reader stretches to an infinity across this loss of connection. The story must be retold in the dissonant narrative space of signature jealousy: whose signature does the reader most naturally guard? This intertextual scene places three signatures most prominently at stake: Joyce’s, Cage’s, and the reader’s. The relative trajectories are all clinamens. They will swerve on their own. Joyce’s name comes erect in Cage’s poem. But it’s not the only such erection of that name. The monstrous nature of the signature also opens the possibility of the gift. That possibility opens like a cage. Cage has let Joyce’s text out of the cage of syntax.

Cage’s gift is the cage: it opens the aporetic space between the idea of gift and exchange-economy-return-term-time-metric-capital/etc. This abyss of speculation, into which we must plunge, engage, fall, struggle, acts as a cloud chamber of the superego. The trails of clouds, traits, traces, and marks record the chaos of movement. The shadow of the superego, its evil twin, its obscene discourse of power, is mapped in the Wake and in Cage’s poem. The Wake is of course very much an abyss and intertext on the Father figure, mapping its relation to and intersection with the artist, using popular culture and
history as pre-texts to be exceeded. Its excesses parody itself as a text first—as an attempt at history.

*The DoubleJoyned JJ*

Trying to read and reread the poem is reduced to searching for the abyss, the protocol for reading. For instance one begins to notice that the J words often resonate or play on “James Joyce.” One could read through the poem to list the J words with the idea of looking for words that Joyce would clearly have associated with or derived from his signature. Although Clive Hart’s concordance for the *Wake* would give us all the words beginning with J while the poem does not, the poem does single out some J words which have J for a noninitial letter. For examples, there “iJypt” (154) and “interJoked” (163). The poem also gives us “J. J.” from page 83 of the *Wake* (145), as does the concordance, but the poem goes a step farther than the concordance in this case, supplying the nearby signature pun, “gaY gay” (145). Scanning the J words, it quickly becomes apparent that there are more words with J as the initial letter than there are words with j as a noninitial letter. The ratio is something like two or three to one. Is that as true of (the) language as it is of the poem and, presumably, the novel? The poem also locates some words containing two J’s: Japijap (141), Jouejous (143), reJaneyjailey (144), ziJnzijn zienzijn (145), Juicejelly (152), Jigjagged (153), jimjams26 (154), Jogjoy (158), Jumbjubes (160). Because these words carry the double J, they would be important for a signature reading of JJ.

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26 Not a spine word, but hard to miss when scanning for JJ words: “black mass of Jigs and jimjams haunted by.”
But Cage has also joined his signature with Joyce’s. Or at least he found this joynt in the *Wake*, doubling and dublin’ down in the abyss.

**Syntax Return**

Rereading the long poem, it also becomes apparent that some of the mesostics seem to work better than others. While stanzas (mesostics) three, four, five and six (the remainder of poem’s opening page) all sound biblically rooted, and thus unified, all the preceding mesostics pale when compared with the first mesostic taken from page 27 of the *Wake*:

```
you were the doubleJoyned
  jAnitor
  the Morning
  thEy were delivered and you’ll be a grandfer
  when the ritehand Seizes what the lovearm knows
```

This is a syntactically well-made sentence. Is it a Joycean sentence that has survived the Cagean method? Cage chose eighteen of the twenty-three words, the ones not chosen by the letters in “James.” Hence, in this mesostic Cage chooses either to maintain or construct the syntax. (Read this endnote if you would like this ambiguity resolved now.)

For the sake of speculation, I withhold the resolution a short time.) Unlike most of the mesostics in Cage’s poem, the cadence of this stanza clearly implies sentence structure. Order words flow trippingly over the rhythm of the syntax. A narrator speaks directly to an addressee. But by the end of the stanza this border of identity is wrestling with itself, as the co-figuration of narrator/addresssee morphs into the image of copulative or masturbatory arm wrestling amid the usual *Wakean* welter of denotative references. The rhythm of Matthew 6: 3 stands out: when giving alms, “let not thy left hand know what
thy right hand doeth.” Cage’s/(Joyce’s?) parody loses the personal reference of the biblical phrase: “thy” hands have become “the” hands. In this movement from the personal to the general the subject of enunciation can be read into the subject of the statement: the narrator has become the “ritehand,” and the silent lovearm of the “doubleJoynted janitor” may actually belong to the narrator as well. The propriety of “rite”-ness (rites, rights, writes) stands in ironic yet complementary contradistinction to the bawdy impropriety of the “lovearm’s” private “knowledge.”

All of which precisely figures the duplicitous structure of the superego. In Freud’s late topology (id, ego, superego), the superego comes to be defined as a moral agency which judges and censures the ego, as if it were the conscience of the psyche. Ordinarily its inception occurs with the interiorization of parental authority. Lacan’s work on this heading exposes the darker aspects of this agency. His first major move is to identify the superego with the symbolic order as opposed to the imaginary order; it has to do with language and speech. In that it has to do with the Law, the superego should be identified with the symbolic order itself, since this is for Lacan (following Lévi-Strauss) the linguistic order wherein kinship rules and regulations are encoded. As such, the superego’s essential structure takes the form of an imperative: the Oedipal prohibition. Lacan emphasizes the tyrannical and senseless character of this force, which integrates and regulates subjectivity. Senseless: in the gaps of the subject’s knowledge it proceeds to command anyway, destructively misinterpreting the Law. The prohibition not to enjoy (the pleasure principle) gets inverted. The command of the obscene superego becomes “Enjoy!” –as Zizek is constantly pointing out. This command comes from the Other in that it comes from the symbolic order.
Cage’s doubleJoynted mesostic opens on these aspects of the symbolic order.

Roland McHugh’s *Annotations to Finnegans Wake* gives the pun “progenitor” for “janitor.”

Back on the signature edge of this issue is the question of the origin of this syntax; is it JJ or JC? And is it JC or JC? Obviously Cage approved it. And obviously it echoes the Sermon on the Mount. For the reader the question swerves through the issue to the pragmatics of reading. Should she read or at least desire to read Joyce? Or can she read without the knowledge of what the lovearm knows. Who is the janitor in this economy of delivery and temporal dislocation, moving from past tense to future tense? The censor function of the superego of the reader is very much in play and not indistinct from the free indirect discourse modeled by the poem as it skips and moves discontinuously along the already continuously variable restructuration of discourse within the *Wake*.

Surely Cage did not censor Joyce’s syntax in the final verse of the stanza. What a coincidence if the abstract machine of Cage’s rolling ball, in all its diagrammatic functionality, plops itself right back onto the tracks of Joyce’s syntax for the length of an entire mesostic. If this is the case, the name “JAMES” has spelled out the letter of Joyce’s syntax. The abstract machine has double bound Joyce’s intentions at both the level of syntax and at the level of the word. Both are saved, given back to the reader—with Cage’s approval, if not his own act of counterfeiting, in the performance space of the wing words.

The reproductive imagery of the stanza remains silent in the epistemological shroud of “what the lovearm knows” which is a password, an unexpected inversion of an orderword, to a bi-gendered reading for both hand and lovearm. “Grandfer” puns to grand
fur from grandfather—at least. Grandfer could also pass to grandmother by way of the genitalic imagery, the fetish fur that might double for the mother’s missing phallus. At the same time, staying within Cage’s text means not knowing whether the syntax of the stanza originates with Joyce. Let’s leave the cage; it is Joyce’s syntax. This mesostic is Joyce’s sentence, missing just two words. By chance.

Conclusion: Rolling Doubles

This doubleJoynted mesostic could be the abyss of Cage’s poem. He intentionally put it there. It combines the JJ and the JC-effects. Because it is concerned with progeny, cleaning (the toilet for the dead? funeral rites?), and grandfathering, it seems to proffer some kind of paternal calcul or clacking. Cage’s poem is JJ’s grandson. The ritehand and the lovearm could figure for Cage’s seizure of Joyce’s name to write the poem through Finnegans Wake. Because Jesus’ text is also in play, we could also read the open crypt, stone rolled away. All three signatures will have taken off, through a process of doubling after Cage has cleaned up the Joycean crypt.

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1 As it happens Cage is maintaining Joyce’s syntax almost perfectly. Here is Joyce’s sentence: “You were the doublejoynted janitor the morning they were delivered and you’ll be the grandfer yet entirely when the ritehand seizes what the lovearm knows” (Finnegans 27). Cage left out the words “yet entirely.”
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Appendix: Review of Criticism on Sharon Olds

The first general task that seems to have emerged for reviewers in response to Olds’ work was to position her vis-à-vis Sylvia Plath. Richard Tillinghast characterizes Olds’ style as “powerful documentary” in order to differentiate it from Plath’s genius-madness: “The father in Plath is essentially a fantasy, the creation of a mind hovering on the edge of madness. Olds is, one feels certain, recording an actual story” (362). G. E. Murray, reviewing Satan Says, categorizes Olds with Plath and Ai, for the intensity of her voice. William Logan places Olds in a category with Anne Sexton, arguing that her images are not reconcilable, especially the public-private comparisons, which he judges to be asymmetrical. In general, the violence and pain of Olds’ images produce too much dramatic extremity. This lack of image modulation keeps Sexton and Olds from achieving Plath’s level of artistry.

Carolyne Wright avoids the Plath comparison in her review of The Dead and the Living. She laud’s Olds’ directness, seeing other aspects of what Tillinghast calls the “documentary” quality of Olds’ style: “Olds’ confidence in the power of detail, and her concomitant refusal to show off verbally, to interpose a display of verbal or prosodic pyrotechnics between subject and reader, make for clarity, a style very much at the service of the subject” (160). Wright thinks Olds’ style succeeds when it becomes “invisible,” and weakens when the descriptive elements become wordy and excessive. Unlike Logan, Wright praises Olds’ public-private connection as an essential aim for American poetics.

Diane Wakoski gives a playful analysis of Olds’ “documentary” style in her review of The Gold Cell, by likening it to National Geographic with its lush photography
Appendix A (Continued)

and subject matter stretching from the esoteric to the quotidian. She adds, “Olds language of physical image and metaphor is never illusory (seldom allusive); it is the perfect self-contained language that the New Critics talked about” (6). However, beneath the *National Geographic* surface, she reads an obsession with destruction and creation, and especially the bestial aspects of sexuality. Wakoski assigns guilt as the force of this obsession: “In the most traditional sense, this is the poetry of guilt. Guilt for being white, for being alive in America, for being well-off, for being a parent, for being happily married, for being a successful poet” (6). This guilt includes the guilt for “animal hungers,” which manifests itself in the bestiality that runs through Olds’ imagery. “Watch out, readers, you may think you’re just opening the pages of a nice middle-class *National Geographic* in . . . the pediatrician’s . . . office when you crack this book, but unless you are a stupid or insensitive reader, you are going to come away with infanticide, incest, matricide, rapacious desires for power” (7). For Wakoski, this bestiality “covered over with a thick veneer of densely packed language and imagery” characterizes ‘the civilization we are, which has come so far and yet will probably will obliterate itself” (7). Wakoski’s reading seems fairly accurate to me. I would take it a step farther. There is an undefined proximity between the thematic of healing and adjustment and the “Greek tragedy of passions” beneath it. In my thesis on Olds, this proximity is governed by the fetish logic and its suspension in a *Nachträglichkeit* effect. Olds documents the primal scene: but its description and resolution are not the result. Action in the present is not governed by past event, but by a re-imagination of the past. The last line of the signature poem “Satan Says” injects the element of love, which was missing or weakened
Appendix A (Continued)

beyond recognition in the primal location of the poem and the dialogue with Satan that takes place there. Linda Lancione Moyer says something similar: “Her refusal to bargain with the devil, to take the easy way out, her willingness to see clearly yet stay with her ambivalence makes her work healing, though often painful to read” (453).

Terri Brown-Davidson pans Olds for being overwrought and tasteless in *The Gold Cell*. She sees Olds form as having settled into tired formula: Describing “I Go Back to May 1937” she writes, “This passage is pure Olds formula: the skinny but irregular column, the typical enjambment between article and noun, the overwrought similes which never quite work . . ., the relentless parallelism” (6). Olds has confused beautiful language (“she can wield a phrase with the best of them”(6); “insisting, at any cost, on . . . painterly language” (5)) and formulaic form with real awareness of craft. In addition, Olds’ subject matter is questionable, and she “presses far too hard on the image” (5). Olds often comes up for this kind of criticism, but it generally isn’t the main argument of the criticism. Carolyne Wright notes “a tendency in places to overwrite, to overdescribe or explain what would suffice,” and suggests “careful cutting.” William Logan argues that Olds’ violent imagery slips over into absurdity, and overdone sexual imagery becomes silly.

Echoing Brown-Davidson on Olds’ lack of taste, Logan also suggests Olds’ intent is undercut by “the accretion of aggressive metaphors” which just becomes embarrassing (212). Suzanne Matson sees Olds’ “prolific and unapologetic metaphors” as a means of story-telling that enables her “to leap across the distance of repressed memory and pain” (40). My reading of “What if God” tries to account for the excessive mixed metaphor of
Appendix A (Continued)

that poem. I can understand the desire for more craft, but I think there is room for some of the excess, which begins to approach the apocalyptic tone of Schreber. Calvin Bedient is less tolerant calling Olds’ fourth book, *The Father*, “85% rant and 15% wisdom” (170). He gives a bit of a Calvinist reading of Olds’ ragged style. He reads “The Lifting” as better left unlifted, “the religious sentiment of revelation absurdly out of proportion to the sight of a man’s penis—even a father’s” (174). But weak similes, sloppy syntax, and comma splices can be somewhat justified: “Olds hooks the reader by seeming to be a prose writer who has found herself on a verse treadmill that is racing out of control, one who finally pulls fearsome resources out of herself and ends with a bang” (173-4).

Margaret Diehl and Louise Glück both view Olds as repeating herself; Diehl seems to appreciate this, Glück does not. Diehl: “She picks up where Plath left off in “Daddy” and goes her one further: where Plath could manage only a few agonized, passionate poems, and then killed herself, Olds keeps saying the same thing over and over, seemingly without shame. Reading her work over the years has helped me to see my own traumas less heatedly, to see them as writable or readable, and so perhaps bearable” (8). Glück: “Olds uses her genius for observation to make, repeatedly, the same points, to reach the same epiphanies; the energy and diversity of detail play out as stasis” (54). On this heading Alicia Ostriker reads the excess of Olds’ style as “mimetic of the procreativity Olds identifies with eroticism” (246). Is it the same conception, the same epiphany each time? Glück notes the repeated image of the speaker with father in her womb, as if he is her child. Perhaps there is something of a calcul of the mother here. It would coincide with the actual revelation, this repeated showing of the epiphany. In my introduction
Appendix A (Continued)

and the chapters on Olds, I discuss this Sh-effect at length. Bedient, Logan, and Ostriker all seem to be noticing the rushed and accelerated quality of this showing.

Laura Tanner’s excellent article on *The Father* isolates this signature effect, the slide from Sharon to showing. Tanner’s study recenters the concept of the gaze, which has evolved from Laura Mulvey’s seminal article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey’s work theorizes the isolation of the viewing subject from the object of desire on the screen, pleasure deriving from voyeuristic objectification, usually of a woman. Tanner retheorizes the gaze, by placing emphasis more on the confrontation with terminal illness and less on the fetishistic structuration of sexual difference. In this context the possibilities of the gaze are shown to include very different distributions of power. Olds’ poetry of the death-watch models a gaze that actually brings viewing subject and object together in authentic connection (via the visceral realization of mortality) rather than separating them. Tanner uses Michel Foucault and Anatole Broyard to define the medical gaze that ignores the embodied subject in order to make disease plainly visible. She theorizes that the medical gaze tends to exaggerate the normal gaze when faced with terminal illness: a person with cancer for instance might begin to see himself or herself only as an “impending absence.” To describe the gaze of a healthy subject on engagement with a dying body, Tanner turns to Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject, with its threat of “death infecting the body.” Kristeva says eroticization of the abject is the attempt to stop death. But Tanner’s reading shows Olds doing something else: she allows the abject to emerge in the text, refusing Kristeva’s “empowerment of extrication.” She points out that Calvin Bedient misses this entirely in his reading of
Appendix A (Continued)

Olds’ erotics: the constant irruption of the father’s dying body, “swelling, oozing, sweating, and bleeding” in Olds’ poems. After documenting Olds’ seeing through to her father’s subjectivity, conditioned by his wasting body, Tanner can say, “The body Olds rearranges as text is one that she owns exactly because she has owned up to it, one in which she can locate her father because she has located herself in it.”

I’ve given more attention to Tanner’s reading because it seems to me the first piece on Olds that depends on and advances psychoanalytically-oriented theory. A critic who turns to Olds even more directly from psychoanalytic research, Kay Torney Souter presents a reading of “Waste Sonata,” the next to last poem in *The Father*. Her reading comes at the end of an article arguing for consideration of relational psychoanalytic models of selfhood because they are more in line with the epistemological assumptions of postmodern literary criticism: “The relational psychoanalytic theories operate in the same epistemological universe as postmodern literary criticism, congruent with the postmodern idea of truth as constructed and relational, and selfhood as shifting, contingent, and always-in-process” (347). Souter offers “countertransference” as the demarcation point between modern and postmodern psychoanalysis. In the old model analyst and analysand remained psychically separate, whereas the theory of countertransference “destabilized the idea of the bounded subjectivity for psychoanalysis” (347).

Rather than “intraself,” “interself” is the new password for Souter. Lacanian theory in particular has become a cul-de-sac: “It has been argued that Lacanian theory does not have a meaningful grasp of post-Chomsky linguistics; it tends to come by way of second-hand and often tendentious interpretations, and ([she] would argue) it does not
have a workable theory of early infancy or of the maternal, except as absence” (350). Wilfred Bion, among relational psychoanalysts, offers the workable theory needed, according to Souter. Formation of mind is modeled on the idea of links. A child’s “normal projective identification” (which Klein mentioned that she found but did not theorize (Souter 352)) needs to result in creative exchange with the parent. Otherwise the child succumbs to dread of its own rages and terrors. Creative links would return these projections in modified “less toxic form” (351). In the absence of such creative links, stunted links of cruelty result in “perverse, cruel, and sterile” mental processes (352). This inter-relational theory sounds made to order for reading Olds.

Reading “Waste Sonata,” Souter begins by noting the movement between “civilized comment and the voice of pop culture” that “enacts the boundarylessness of the postmodern” (354). I would have remarked this quality as modernist “stream of consciousness”: but Souter has allowed herself this flexibility by arguing that postmodern psychoanalysis remains in dialogue with modernist versions of itself (348). Playing on the “voice of pop culture,” she compares Olds’ father to Homer Simpson, and, accurately I think, holds that the poem is usefully compared to The Simpsons for “the depthlessness of suburban life, the clichés and resentments which order relationships, and so on” (354). The rest of her reading does an admirable job of applying the interpersonal psychology to the poem, showing the speaker suspended between the cruel mother and the father, absent-by-alcohol. Souter matches up the projective links with the voices of the “warring parts of the self”: the opening sentence of the poem projects both careful adult (“I think at some point”) and “the witheringly mimetic vindictiveness of the adolescent (‘He’s full of
Appendix A (Continued)

shit’”) (355). Souter’s next move is remarkable to me for the way it illustrates the countertransference that she earlier argued differentiates postmodern from modern psychoanalysis. Souter, like many other critics begins to channel Oldsian signature effects: “The poem returns to a muted sense of sanity when the protagonist miraculously moves to consider her own cruelty and shitiness, her own involvement in the family interactions” (my emphasis) (355). Olds uses some form of the word “shit” seven times in the poem, and the effect spreads via “waste,” “coprofy,” and “white stink.” All the relational links Souter reads are traced by the word. And the passage where she reads sanity arising in the voice of the speaker is doubly remarkable:

Well it’s fun talking about this,
I love the terms of foulness. I have learned
to get pleasure from speaking of pain.
But to die like this. To grow old and die
a child, lying to herself.

Olds writes reflexively here about the term of foulness that runs throughout this poem. It is an Sh-effect. In this passage it combines with an antonomasia—Olds/old. Souter ties the passage to Shakespeare: “When the poem drops into “But to die,” with its echoes of Measure for Measure (Claudio, III i, “Aye, but to die, and go we know not where . . .”), she has rescued an identity which is made of more than projected parental parts” (356). Olds also does this on the level of the Sh-effect. The last sh-word in the poem is “shapely”—the poem ends this way:

I almost love those shits that move through him,
shapely, those waste foetuses,
my mother, my sister, my brother, and me
in that purgatory. (The Father 77)

Souter quotes the last two lines to buttress her argument that the speaker has moved
Appendix A (Continued)

“from mindless reactive splitting to something like a Kleinian depressive position” (356). Olds has her signature working overtime in this poem; it seems apparent that it is the glue that holds her poetics together against the “mindless reactive splitting.”

To finish her article, Souter quotes Peter Fonagy to bring the aims of psychoanalysis and literary studies into line: “An analysis of ‘Waste Sonata’ shows the protagonist (and maybe the reader too) that ‘gradual transformation of a non-reflective mode of experiencing the internal world’ and the text” (357). I think something similar can be said in terms of the signature and the relations it draws between the text and the proper name. Olds is a writer who has become very reflective in the way she connects her poetics to her name. In *The New York Times Book Review* she gives this quote to justify her choice of Stanly Kunitz’s book *Next-To-Last-Things* as the most important book of poetry to her personally over the last 25 years:

. . . The way I look
at it, I’m passing through a phase:
gradually I’m changing to a word.
Whatever you choose to claim
of me is always yours:
nothing is truly mine
except my name. I only
borrowed this dust. (“Poetry” 15)

To close this review of Olds’ criticism, I want to very quickly mark a few more instances of Olds’ signature effects coming through in the works of her readers. William Logan, as I’ve discussed above, argues that Olds’ imagery is too violent. About *Satan Says* he remarks its bloodiness:

Like any pure fiancée, Olds has passed the blood test (“mask of blood,” “streaked with blood,” “blood bond,” “blood-spattered,” “blood-red,” blood bomb,” “language of blood,” “blood culture,” “raised on
Appendix A (Continued)

blood,” “glaze of blood,” “hard blood”) . . . . (213).

Olds’ later volumes continue this frequent deployment of “blood” with its hypogram of “old.” Brian Dillon traces the image of her father coming home wearing a mask of blood through her first 3 books. Although never explained, it recurs as an image that haunts Olds’ speakers. He also notes that “The Departure” (in The Dead and the Living) compares the father to the Shah of Iran. The quote Dillon uses is very telling of the signature: “Did you forget / the way you had had me tied to a chair, as / he forgot the ones strapped to the grille / in his name? (my emphasis) (Dillon 112). Olds reinforces this Sh-effect, the Shah, in another poem from The Dead and the Living, “Aesthetics of the Shah.” The poem is about a showing as the title note indicates: “(The poster, up all over town, shows / dissidents about to be executed in Iran)” (12). Carolyne Wright’s reading of this poem turns on the photographic quality of Olds’ showing, justifying her use of the political—“her attitude emerges from and is justified by the patent horror or pathos of what she shows us” (159).

Calvin Bedient, perhaps unknowingly, remarks a play on the Oldsmobile. Beginning his reading of The Father he describes Olds as “a cannibal who will eat [her father’s] ashes (‘There are people who will swallow whole / cars, piece by piece’—‘The Urn’)” (169). Carolyne Wright likens the first half of The Dead and the Living to “a gallery of Old Master family portraits darkening with age” (152). I suspect this is tongue-in-cheek. Effects similar to these seem to pop up quite often in the criticism. Whether this is a result of Olds having programmed them into her writing or whether a given critic is intentionally playing with her name is often hard to tell. Maybe this indicates something
Appendix A (Continued)

about the power of the name and the degree to which Olds has managed to harness that power.
About the Author

Walter Lewallen received a Bachelor’s Degree in Philosophy with Honors from Pembroke State University (now the University of North Carolina at Pembroke) in 1978. He obtained a Teaching Certificate in High School Mathematics from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1985 and taught Mathematics at Lee County High School in Sanford, North Carolina from 1985 to 1987. In 1990 he entered the Graduate Program in English at the University of South Florida. While obtaining his Master’s Degree and completing course requirements for Ph.D. candidacy, he served as President of the USF chapter of Graduate Assistants United of Florida. He has served as Adjunct Instructor in English at Hillsborough Community College, the University of Tampa, and the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.