

Poetry and the Experience  
of Experience  
(1993)

It used to be a truism that in the wake of romanticism poetry bore an essential relation, however vexed and problematic, to individual experience. If this is no longer quite the truism it once was, it is in part because of a general distaste for essentialism and in part because the idea that works of art are constituted by their creation has been replaced, at least in some quarters, by the idea that they are constituted by the social processes governing their reception and recognition. Yet even if one is sympathetic to this outlook, it seems to me to remain obviously true that subjective experience plays a central and irreducible role in how poems come into existence and in what they are taken to be. Just why this "obvious" truth should be so important is a question that deserves attention, and I shall turn to it later. But the more immediate problem, I think, is that the conception of experience employed by many of those who take it as dogma that poetry aims at its presentation—as well as by many who regard this as simply another version of "the naive vision of the individual creator"<sup>1</sup>—is such an attenuated and impoverished one that it is hardly surprising that it tends to be either sentimentally embraced or knowingly dismissed.

Another late truism is that poetry aims at a *representation* of experience. While some of the skepticism that this claim now

---

Also appears in *Where Theory Works: Essays on the Experience of Literature*, ed. Mary Kinzie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming). I am grateful to Mary Kinzie, Douglas Crase, and the 1993–94 Fellows of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee for invaluable suggestions and discussions.

evokes stems from the anxiety that has come to surround the very idea of representation, mimetic conceptions of art have always occasioned a certain unease. Johnson's famous pronouncement, in the *Preface to Shakespeare*, that poetry ought to furnish "just representations of general nature" is followed shortly by his admission that Shakespeare's "adherence to general nature has exposed him to the censure of critics who form their judgements upon narrower principles"; and he goes on to mention Voltaire and several others as examples of critics who fault his depiction of royal subjects for incorporating elements of the comic and the vulgar.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that one's attitude towards the claim that the representation of experience, or "general nature," is central to the poetic enterprise depends, to a great extent, on what one takes representation and experience to be. And here again, I think that much of the current distrust of this claim derives from narrow and simplistic conceptions of both.

There isn't a single explanation for the impoverished notion of experience that informs so much contemporary poetics and theory and no single form that its attenuation takes. Poetry, in its current state, is itself inhospitable to the discursive and the reflective, in part because of the widespread acceptance of what Mary Kinzie calls "the rhapsodic fallacy"—the assumption, which stems from certain strands in romanticism (though I think only *certain* strands), that poetry aims at "an ecstatic and unmediated self-consumption in the moment of perception and feeling."<sup>3</sup> Neopragmatism is another and more theoretical source of bias against the abstract and reflective aspects of subjective consciousness, since in its aversion to anything that hints at the transcendental it tends to discount the dimensions of experience that encourage certain traditional conceptions of representation and objectivity. Of course there are many more theoretical tendencies working *against* notions of subjectivity that emphasize its phenomenological or qualitative aspects—for not only are these difficult to fit into even the most plausible functionalist or structuralist accounts of mentality and agency; worse, ways of thinking about art that treat such aspects as central are often regarded as naive or ideologically suspect (though whether this is because of the theoretical

recalcitrance of the phenomenological or because of the social significance these views actually have is something usually left unclear). And the culminative effect of these conflicting assumptions, allegiances, and suspicions is to foster the idea—an idea that is seldom made explicit—that many of the most familiar elements of human experience are unimportant or illusory or unreal.

What *does* experience actually encompass, and why should its representation matter? I shall try next to describe what I take to be the range of the subjective and what I think are some of the motives behind the many forms of its denial. I shall then indulge in some speculation about its importance and value and about the importance and value of its depiction. And I'll end by proposing that one way poetry seeks to capture it is through the enactment of a version of the Kantian experience of the sublime.

### The Scope of Experience

Early in the *Second Meditation* Descartes frames the question "What then am I?" and he immediately answers, "A conscious being . . . that doubts, understands, asserts, denies, is willing, is unwilling; [and] has sense and imagination." The experience enjoyed by such a being is the awareness of what the seventeenth century called "ideas," which Locke characterized as "whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding."<sup>4</sup> One doesn't have to follow Descartes in separating the experiencing subject from the body, or follow the theory of ideas in reifying the contents of consciousness, in order to equate experience with subjective awareness and to identify its range with whatever that awareness can include.

Its range includes sensation and emotion. While part of my reason for surveying it is to combat the appeal of the rhapsodic fallacy of reducing experience to perception and feeling, one can hardly deny the vividness with which these can occupy and even dominate the field of consciousness or the defining links they bear to such other modes of experience as



desire, belief, and intention. Vivid as they are, though, neither sensations nor emotions are subjectively simple. Perception used to be thought of as a passive process, unadulterated by conceptualization or inference, in which a variety of "sensible qualities" were made directly available to the mind.<sup>5</sup> But with the demise of this "myth of the given," or "myth of presence," the relation between perception and the more abstract or reflective forms of cognition has become increasingly problematic. And since there is also a complementary tendency to locate sensation in its relation to the satisfaction of desire, it is important to remember as well the disinterested forms of perception involved in what Kant called judgments of taste, or in the invasion of sensation by memory—the perception of an "autumnal" slant of light, or the experience of Proustian recollection, when a current sensation awakens the bodily traces of an earlier one and brings about an awareness of the gulf of time that separates them.

Affective experience too is less tidy than it was once taken to be. Descartes thought of emotions as passive and took these "passions" to be a species of perception—namely, the soul's perception of certain "commotions" taking place in the body.<sup>6</sup> Yet as with perception, it has become commonplace to ascribe a cognitive dimension to the emotions and to see the distinction between them and nonaffective states like belief and imagination as less crisp than it once appeared. And while there is still a tendency to link emotions to thoughts about the kinds of concrete situations that impinge more or less directly on our appetites and desires, Eliot's suggestion "that what is often held to be a capacity for abstract thought, in a poet, is a capacity for abstract feeling" is one I have long found intriguing, and I want to come back to later.<sup>7</sup>

Since visceral emotions such as excitement and fear are often associated with the gratification or frustration of desire by sensation, or the experience of bodily pleasure or pain, it is salutary to remember that the range of desire extends well beyond those satisfiable by sensation, or perceptions of the passive sort, to include desires concerning virtually every aspect of experience—the wish that idle curiosity be satisfied or that inquiry broaden the scope and coherence of one's beliefs

about the natural order or that various designs involving oneself and others be realized. Even more general are desires occasioned by the Socratic question "How should I live?"—desires that one's life go a certain way or that one's experience as a whole have a certain character. These desires are informed by self-awareness and a conception of oneself as a person, and among the most important of them are those higher-order desires—which Harry Frankfurt has done so much to illuminate—about our own wants and preferences: for instance, that they be different than they are or that they become ineffective or that they maintain themselves and shape our conduct.<sup>8</sup> I think that Frankfurt is right to suggest that that most central and puzzling aspect of experience—the conception and experience of oneself as a "free" agent—has less to do with a belief in one's exemption from the natural order than with a delicate equilibrium between the higher-order desires about the kind of person one would like to be and the desires one would like to have, on the one hand, and the wants and preferences that actually prompt one to act, on the other.

Desires prompt actions in conjunction with beliefs, and beliefs and the concepts they involve are parts of subjective experience too. Crude empiricist models tie beliefs tightly to perception—for Hume, for example, a belief is a particularly vivid idea, an idea that itself is just the trace of an earlier sense-impression—and tend to treat as illusory beliefs and concepts that can't be easily retraced to perception. Yet although beliefs produced and sustained by the experience of the senses have an obvious force, and while the concepts they embody are ones of which our grasp often seems especially sure, it seems undeniable that the scope of our opinions and of our ability to form concepts ranges far beyond them. I am thinking here not just of beliefs about the unobservable and the abstract but also, as in the case of desire, of higher-order thoughts that take beliefs and concepts themselves as objects of experience and reflection. For we don't merely *have* sensations, thoughts, and the other forms of experience; we have also the capacity for an awareness or experience *of* them and for conceiving of them as constituting a single field of awareness. Hume, in a

well-known passage, confessed that "when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure"; but that "I can never catch *myself*."<sup>9</sup> He concluded that the notion of the self was in some sense illusory. But I think that Hume was misguided in searching for the self among the objects of experience and that Kant was more nearly correct in tracing the notion to the awareness of the unity of experience, to "the representation of that to which all thinking stands in relation."<sup>10</sup> For somehow we *do* manage to form a conception of a self comprising a single field of awareness and to think of it as standing in some sort of relation, however problematic, to a larger context—to the "world" if you like—which includes but isn't exhausted by the experiences through which that field of awareness is constituted.

It is this sort of self-consciousness that gives rise, I believe, to notions like representation, truth, and objectivity. For it is our awareness of our sensations, thoughts, and desires, together with our capacity to conceive of them as aspects of a self embedded in some broader context, that allows us to frame the question of their relation to that world. And to try to situate experience in this way is to start to think of it as, in a very broad sense, representational—as leading us to form conceptions of its surrounding context that can be accurate or inaccurate, or as satisfied or frustrated, by that context. It is sometimes suggested that representational conceptions of thought are merely a stage in the development of a Western philosophical tradition that has pretty much exhausted its usefulness. It is true that most attempts to systematically articulate exactly what the representation of the world involves have turned out to be artifacts of particular intellectual moments—Wittgenstein's "picture theory" of the *Tractatus* being one of the more notorious examples. But it strikes me as just perverse to suppose that the roots of the idea that thought can be about the world, and is capable of representing it with varying degrees of accuracy, are to be found in the philosophy section of the local university library, rather than in that conception of subjective experience as embedded in a larger context to which our capacity for self-awareness gives rise.

It is also this conception that allows us to think of ourselves and our experiences in two different and perhaps irreconcilable ways—from what Thomas Nagel calls a "subjective" or "internal" perspective and from an "external" or "objective" one (even though *thinking* of experience in either of these ways is itself part of subjective experience).<sup>11</sup> To think of experience subjectively is to be aware of its "qualitative" aspect—"what it's like" to *have* a sensation, to *experience* a strong emotion or desire, or to engage in conscious reflection about the range of thought. Calling this perspective internal suggests that it's available only to those whose experiences they are. Yet given that we can form a conception of ourselves and our experience as part of a larger context whose nature is independent of experience and thought, we can also attempt to think of these in the way we seem able to think of other aspects of that world—as they are in themselves, apart from how they are presented to our awareness. Of course we can't actually *adopt* this "view from Nowhere"—for to think of the world at all is to think of it from whatever position we happen to occupy. Talk of a view from Nowhere is simply a vivid way of describing the fact that it is part of our experience itself that we can form an imaginative conception of a world whose nature is independent of our thought and to which we belong. And the expansion of our knowledge of the world has been basically a matter of filling in the details of this conception.

Yet when we try to think of *ourselves* in this way, the effort seems to remain incomplete. The qualitative dimensions of experience that appear so vivid from an internal perspective, and the importance and significance with which we invest our feelings and desires, seem to evaporate when we try to think of ourselves objectively, as part of the natural order. This appearance of incompleteness could of course be illusory, and we could become convinced that the intuition that certain important aspects of experience defy inclusion in an objective conception of the world is simply mistaken. Or it may be, as Nagel thinks, that the subjective and objective conceptions of ourselves and the world are both necessary and necessarily partial. I'm inclined to believe that Nagel is right, though I have no idea how to argue the point. In either case, though, it does



seem a feature of subjective experience as presently constituted that it allows us to form compelling but radically different conceptions of its character and significance.

This survey is partial. The notion of experience that informs contemporary poetry seems so hostile to abstraction that I've concentrated on its conceptual (as opposed to what might be called its Dionysian) aspects. But I want to turn now to some of the impulses that encourage restricted notions of experience in literary and philosophical studies generally.

The survey I have given consists of characterizations of various varieties of conscious thought. There is a widespread tendency to treat descriptions like these as parts of a *theory*, a theory subject to interpretation, revision, or outright rejection. In literary studies this usually means regarding the concepts such descriptions involve—concepts like belief, desire, emotion, the self, and representation—as historically conditioned social constructions or as manifestations of underlying psychoanalytic structures and mechanisms. In cognitive studies it amounts to regarding them as hypotheses—parts of “folk psychology,” or what Daniel Dennett calls “heterophenomenology”<sup>12</sup>—to be accepted to the extent that they can be instantiated by neurophysiological processes and states that mirror their causal structure. Yet all this is to transform the field of awareness into a kind of *text* and to treat one's relation to experience on the model of reading, or of having certain propositional attitudes. And it seems to me that none of these approaches is able to accommodate what makes conscious experience interesting in the first place—its qualitative character, or the fact that there is something that it's *like* to have it. This, of course, is a matter of ongoing controversy and isn't going to be resolved soon. But I think that one of the motives for downplaying certain aspects of subjective experience is a commitment to theoretical models of mentality that, to my mind at least, remain largely speculative.

The impulses combined in certain forms of neopragmatism—particularly the form articulated by Richard Rorty—supply another motive for circumscribing the domain of experience.<sup>13</sup> Pragmatists urge us to think of the formation and revision of our beliefs, concepts, and values not as a matter of

assessing them with regard to a priori standards of rationality but, rather, as an ongoing effort to adapt them to our interests and experience broadly construed; and to discard as idle those concepts and distinctions that play no role in this effort. Now surely there is something right about this. “Coherence with experience,” broadly construed, *must* be our ultimate standard of assessment, since it is our *only* standard of assessment—for to think about anything at all is to think about it from whatever position we happen to occupy as subjects of experience. Yet Rorty combines pragmatism in this broad sense with an antipathy to philosophical traditions that incorporate certain conceptions of knowledge, representation, truth, and objectivity, or a sharp distinction between the world and our representations of it. I suggested earlier that these notions themselves arise from our experience of self-consciousness and from our ability to form an imaginative idea of ourselves and of our experience as parts of a world that is independent of them. But if so, a sweeping dismissal of these notions is bound to lead to a denigration of those aspects of subjective experience that give rise to them—in particular, the experience of forming a self-image that incorporates the idea of a view from Nowhere. This is not, of course, the rhapsodic fallacy's simple-minded self-extinction in a swoon of sensation. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Rorty's pragmatic allegiance to experience, combined with his hostility to a certain theoretical stance, encourages a conception of experience that works to validate that antipathy.

Rorty's considered view is more subtle. It isn't that the familiar concepts and questions of philosophy have no roots at all in subjective experience—for how could they fail to?—but that we'd be *better off* without them or if our experience were somehow reshaped to eliminate them.<sup>14</sup> Better off in what way, though? Well, less fretful or less anxious or less prone to waste our intellectual and emotional resources on “fruitless, irresolvable disagreements on dead-end issues”—or, in a word, happier. Yet what an odd conception of happiness! Whatever it is, happiness surely has more to do with a view of one's life as a whole, and the development and exercise of the capacities one has in the course of that life—what Aristotle called *eudaimonia*,

or "flourishing"—than with a mere absence of anxiety and the restriction of one's desires and interests to the most readily satisfied. If the capacity for reflective self-awareness leads us to think of ourselves in irreconcilable ways, why are we better off for ceasing to exercise it? This is the question of the value of experience and its representation, to which I now turn.

### Why It Matters What It's Like

Why is subjective experience so important? Perhaps the peculiarity of the question is mitigated by the reflection that the subjective has assumed the mantle of contemporary theory's Other, a specter to be exorcised as "a mere residuum alongside the desiring machines," or as a by-product of "the opposition of the forces of attraction and repulsion."<sup>15</sup> The merits of these structuralist deflations, and their functionalist counterparts, strike me as less important than their place in that vast cloud of anxiety and allegiance that has come to surround the whole notion of subjectivity. And this raises the question of why it should have seemed to matter so much in the first place—matter in its own right, or as an object of representation generally, or as an object of poetic representation.

I think the answer lies in its connection with moral value. Attempts to distinguish the loose set of judgments, injunctions, and prohibitions that constitute the domain of the ethical from mere customs and patterns of behavior invariably connect it in one way or another with the subjective. The significance of this connection depends, of course, on one's attitude towards the moral. And just as there are deflationary attitudes towards subjectivity, there are strains of thought that are dismissive of moral notions too. Yet just as with subjectivity—perhaps even more so—tendencies like these strike me as theoretical fantasies, fantasies in which one tries to float free of one's actual experience and behavior. For I think that the whole idea of importance, or "mattering," is finally a moral one, central to our self-image, that rests on the notion of a subjective life.

Different conceptions of the moral appeal to subjectivity in different ways. The crudest forms of utilitarianism take ethical

injunctions and prohibitions to rest on the relation of conduct to sensations like pleasure and pain. Subtler forms take moral conduct to aim at the promotion of welfare, or the satisfaction of interests—where interests are something like considered desires that one identifies as one's own. Hume thought that morality rested on the experience of sympathy for the experience of others, while Kantian conceptions are based on a respect for persons as intrinsically valuable and an idea of reciprocity—for since each person is worthy of respect, to act morally is to act in ways that would be acceptable from the other's point of view. Here the appeal to subjectivity lies in the thought that people *have* points of view—subjective ones—from which courses of conduct can be appraised. But all these conceptions assume that human conduct impinges on people's experience and that it makes a difference to what life is like *for* them. Without this assumption, the idea that people *have* interests—let alone the idea of considering the world from another person's viewpoint—makes no more sense than the notion of ascribing interests to a fire hydrant or of considering the world from its particular perspective. This isn't to say that all that matters morally is subjective experience, since people have interests ranging well beyond it. But without subjective viewpoints, could there even be interests at all? Could a desiring machine's desires actually matter, if they made no difference from anyone's perspective? A landscape can't have interests, though it can be an interest of *mine*. But this is only because it can matter to me.

So far I've been speaking of the subjective too ingenuously, for it is, I think, problematic in ways that lead to the issue of its representation. Representation is a notion that lends itself to caricature, and I want to caution against models that limit it to description or resemblance while leaving open for now the question of how poetry might accomplish a representation of experience. What seems so problematic about subjectivity is its *tenuous* character—or, since that way of putting it sounds oxymoronic, its *lack* of an objective nature. Sometimes this lack is emblemized by its evanescence—certainly one of its arresting characteristics and one that leads to a complementary view of art as an attempt to preserve the ephemeral. Yet the deeper



aspect of its tenuousness isn't the perishability it shares with wildflowers and mayflies but what might be called its "view-point dependence."

I said earlier that experience includes the ability to form an objective conception of the world and of one's place in it—where *objective* here means something like "as it really is, apart from how it appears to us or how we conceive of it." The development of natural science can be seen as the elaboration of this conception; and what Nagel has made so vivid is the difficulty—even, one begins to suspect, the impossibility—of incorporating the subjective within it. For while it seems easy to speculate about the nature of regions of time and space remote from our experience, it seems hard, if not impossible, to make sense of wondering what the "nature" of one's experience might actually be—what it really is, apart from how it strikes one or apart from one's apprehension of it. The conspicuous features of interiority are difficult to locate in the landscape of the objective, and if we equate that landscape with the real, we might be tempted to say that such aspects don't literally exist; or be tempted by the "false objectification" of simply expanding our inventory of the world's furniture to include the recalcitrant features of consciousness.<sup>16</sup> I think the right course, though, is to resist both of these temptations and to try to think of the "reality" of the subjective as something constituted by its apprehension, or by its status as a focus of awareness. And since to speak about apprehension or awareness is to speak, in a very broad way, about representation, the point could also be put by saying that subjective experience only exists insofar as it can be represented; or that, apart from our representations of it, this central aspect of our self-image isn't real at all.

Allen Grossman, whom I think of as poetry's most fertile current theoretician, has described poetry's central function as "the keeping of the image of persons as precious in the world" and has characterized poetic speech as a "portrait of the inner and invisible (intuitional) person." While I'm not entirely comfortable with the categorical tone, I believe that the substantive view of the relation between poetry and experience contained in these remarks is basically the same as the one I am

trying to develop here. What Grossman means by *person* is a Kantian subject of experience and a rational will, a "being whose existence in itself is an end"; and it seems to me that to say that experience, in the sense I have tried to capture, matters is simply to say that persons—whom Grossman also describes as art's "underlying term or value"—matter. Where I have spoken of the importance of poetry's representation of experience, he locates its value in the preservation of the human image, in its ability to present a portrait of the "inner and invisible," and in its "ontological affirmation . . . : Here is a person." But the question now is how poetry might manage to accomplish this.<sup>17</sup>

### Revisiting the Sublime

Representation is a broad and unruly notion, tied in various ways to such other notions as reference, resemblance, causation, simulation, expression, metaphor, metonymy, evocation, depiction, and performance. One of our century's important philosophical lessons, I believe, is the negative one that questions about the essential nature of representation are misconceived—which is one reason why discussions of cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical issues that turn on critiques of representation so often seem to attack a series of straw men. Attempts to delimit the scope of genuine representation almost invariably wind up acknowledging a complementary domain that undercuts the "real" one, as with Wittgenstein's distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown; or the logical positivists' distinction between language that is cognitively meaningful and that which is merely emotive or expressive; or New Criticism's distinction between the semantic properties intrinsic to a literary text and those that are irrelevant interpolations into it.

All this is by way of disavowing anything resembling a systematic theory of the poetic representation of experience. Reading a poem (and here I use *reading* advisedly, since the dimension of poetry I am trying to characterize emerges more clearly in reading poems than in hearing them) is itself an

experience; and to speak of poetry's "representation" of experience, in the broad sense I have in mind, is to speak of an experience of a certain sort that can be induced by reading a poem. The particular sort of experience I mean is a higher-order one involving the thought or awareness—the experience, if you like—of the range of subjectivity as such, and of its precarious relation to the world in which it is situated, which it nevertheless manages to reflect.

In the third *Critique* Kant introduces the notion of what he calls the "dynamical sublime" to describe a particular train of thought or experience that occurs in the presence of natural phenomena of gigantic scale or magnitude. Confronted with a vast physical presence—in the eighteenth century the experience was associated with the Alps, tours of which had recently become fashionable; though something like the Grand Canyon or the St. Louis Arch would do as well—one first feels overwhelmed at the thought of the disparity between one's own physical stature and the natural immensity before one. Yet this very thought of a *vast* magnitude, by comparison with which one seems limited to the point of insignificance, leads to the thought of an *unbounded* or *infinite* magnitude. And "since in contrast to this standard everything in nature is small"—including the overpowering Alp—the mind is led to an awareness of its "superiority over nature itself in its immensity."<sup>18</sup> For the ability to form a conception of an unbounded magnitude, which isn't to be found in nature, enables us to think of all of nature as "small" and to conceive of ourselves, the subjects of that conception, as distinct from and "above" it. Kant is quick to remark that on the surface "this principle seems far-fetched and the result of some subtle reasoning"; nevertheless, he thinks that "even the commonest judging can be based on [it], even though we are not always conscious of it." Moreover, I think that the oscillations of thought and self-awareness that he describes in characterizing the dynamical sublime can be abstracted from his overt concern with physical immensity and the mind's superiority to nature to characterize the kind of experience involved in the poetic representation of subjectivity.

In an early essay Nagel tried to characterize the sense in which human life might be thought to be "absurd" along the

following lines.<sup>19</sup> Each of us has a "personal" perspective on his or her own life, from which we can't help but regard that life and its interests and concerns with tremendous seriousness; and which invests them with an importance informing almost every aspect of our deliberation and practical reasoning. Yet each of us is also capable of self-awareness and of mentally "stepping back" and regarding that life and its concerns from an impersonal perspective, *sub specie aeternitatis*—a perspective from which those concerns seem to have no real importance or significance at all. And since this is true no matter what our interests may be, there is a ridiculous but inescapable discrepancy between the importance with which we invest our lives and our projects and the importance we realize them to actually possess. One possible response—a response Nagel associates with Camus and dismisses as romantic—would be the affirmative one of adopting an attitude of defiance towards a world one knows to be indifferent to one's life. Nagel's own response, which strikes me as equally romantic and redemptive (though none the worse for that), is to think of our appreciation of life's absurdity as a manifestation of our most "advanced and interesting characteristic," "the capacity to transcend ourselves in thought."<sup>20</sup>

Leaving aside the issues of superiority, affirmation, and redemption, the important thing to notice is the structural similarity between Kant's characterization of the experience of the sublime and Nagel's description of the apprehension of the absurd. Both share a characteristic trajectory of experience, which starts with an unreflective conception of oneself and attitude towards one's experience; followed by an awareness of something inhuman or impersonal (a vast physical presence, a conception of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*), by contrast with which the self and its experiences are rendered problematic and radically diminished; followed finally by the higher-order reflection that this whole chain of apprehension and realization is itself part of the range of subjectivity. There is of course a difference between Kant's optimistic attitude towards this trajectory and Nagel's pessimistic one. But what strikes me as significant isn't so much the outcome of the sequence of shifts between viewpoints—from the subjective to



the impersonal and back to the subjective again—as the oscillation itself, “the rhythm of the series of repeated jumps” (in John Ashbery’s words from “The Skaters”),<sup>21</sup> “from abstract into positive and back to a slightly less diluted abstract.”

For what seems most characteristic of subjectivity—and what allows for the possibility of its poetic representation—isn’t the content of any particular state of awareness but, rather, the transitions from instant to instant between perspectives, from an awareness of the objects of thought to an awareness of thought itself, in an unbounded sequence of reflexive movements. The poetry of subjectivity is sometimes associated with privileged conditions of consciousness, simple or elevated. Yet both the rhapsodic fallacy’s unselfconscious phenomenology as well as the Kantian sublime’s transcendent perception of nature as “small” (which coincides, incidentally, with what Wittgenstein termed “the mystical”—“feeling the world as a limited whole”)<sup>22</sup> are just as much theoretical fantasies as the deflationary attitudes towards subjectivity and morality I touched on earlier. What isn’t a fantasy, however, is something poetry is especially suited to engender in a heightened way—the vacillation in viewpoints from moment to moment, along with the larger movement between a personal perspective on the objects of one’s attention and an objective view of oneself as part of an impersonal natural world.

Poetry has the resources (which it doesn’t always draw on) to enact these oscillations: the imagistic and metaphoric potential to evoke perception and sensation; the discursive capacity of language to express states of propositional awareness and reflexive consciousness; the rhythmic ability to simulate the movement of thought across time; and a lyric density that can tolerate abrupt shifts in perspective and tone without losing coherence. This certainly isn’t to say that poetry is *uniquely* capable of accomplishing this sort of enactment. Yet music, for instance, while it possesses the dynamical resources to follow the ebb and flow of subjectivity, lacks the discursive capacity to capture its content. Reflexivity and shifts in viewpoint are harder to achieve in painting, though not impossible. And while prose is also a medium well suited for the representation

of the subjective, the movements and transitions characteristic of the conventional prose narrative are more gradual and extended than those of poetry, producing less an awareness of the shifts in perspective themselves than of how the novel’s world appears from those different vantage points.

The arc of experience of the Kantian sublime comes to rest in the mind’s realization of its transcendence of nature; while in Nagel’s apprehension of the absurd it falters at the level of the impersonal surround. Yet another model that informs many poems defers the apotheosis, prolonging the oscillation between the subjective and the transcendent indefinitely. The trajectory of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, for example, is close to the Kantian one.<sup>23</sup> Early in book 2 the self becomes objectified in the recognition of

The vacancy between me and those days  
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,  
That, sometimes, when I think of it, I seem  
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself  
And of some other Being.

In book 7 the self is dispersed by its immersion in the urban spectacle of London and Bartholomew Fair, culminating in the confrontation with the Blind Beggar, whose life is externalized in a written label pinned to his chest:

and it seemed  
To me that in this Label was a type,  
Or emblem, of the utmost that we know,  
Both of ourselves and of the universe;  
And, on the shape of the unmoving man,  
His fixed face and sightless eyes, I look’d  
As if admonished from another world.

Yet the soul is recoverable, for the self’s dispersal “is not wholly so to him who looks / In steadiness”; and the poem presses confidently on towards its closure in the soul’s transcendence of nature through its perception of the world as a totality:

The universal spectacle throughout  
 Was shaped for admiration and delight,  
 Grand in itself alone, but in that breach  
 Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,  
 That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged  
 The soul, the imagination of the whole.

Contrast the trajectory of Wordsworth's poem with that of John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror."<sup>24</sup> Here the self's confrontation with its externalization consists of a series of approaches and withdrawals taking place in the urban context of New York, "a logarithm / Of other cities." But the movement towards identification is never completed, and at the poem's end the image of the self's double falls back and flattens into inertness, leaving it stranded in the city—"the gibbous / Mirrored eye of an insect"—with the movement remaining only as a never-to-be-realized possibility, a "diagram still sketched on the wind."

Or contrast Stevens's "Auroras of Autumn" with "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." "Auroras of Autumn" is our century's great poem of the completed Kantian sublime, moving from a series of domestic interiors to an encounter with nature on the scale of the northern lights, to an apotheosis in

This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres,  
 Contriving balance to contrive a whole,  
 The vital, the never-failing genius,  
 Fulfilling his meditations great and small.

How different the cosmic stability of this resolution seems from the endless vacillations of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (the last of Stevens's major long poems), as the mind roams back and forth between "The eye's plain version" and "A recent imagining of reality," the "second giant [that] kills the first." In canto 9 the attention shifts from what is seen to the seeing "eye made clear of uncertainty," in an effort to incorporate "Everything, the spirit's alchemicana / Included." But the effort remains problematic, and one of the poem's final celebrations is of the movement of subjectivity itself, "a

visibility of thought / In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once."

There are endless variations on this trajectory. Its completion can take a self-referentially aesthetic form, as in Marianne Moore's "An Octopus." Or the deflation of the familiar can be abrupt, as in the sudden and disorienting realization, in Elizabeth Bishop's "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," of "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and' "; or it can take the form of a gradual withdrawal from the particularities of the individual life, as in Robert Pinsky's "At Pleasure Bay." But I find that the enactment of such movements takes place most convincingly in poems of a certain scale, which is one reason I associate it with, say, Ashbery's longer works—the prose of *Three Poems* or the lineated "Self-Portrait" and "Flow Chart"—and poems of James Schuyler's like "Hymn to Life" and "The Morning of the Poem," rather than with poems of a relatively brief round.

Yet the question still lingers of why one should care so much about poetry constructed on this model. A complaint often heard about contemporary verse is that it is excessively diffuse and subjective; and certainly there is something right about this complaint as it applies to the almost generic poem (usually short) distinguished by a vapid and unreflective self-absorption. Of course the subjectivity I have been concerned with here is richer and more complex; but one may reasonably wonder why poems embodying it should be more interesting on that account.

I said earlier that the importance of subjectivity and its poetic representation lies in its link with moral value. I still think that this answer is ultimately the right one, yet in a way it seems too remote from the experience of poetry to explain why certain poems seem engaging and moving. What is needed is an explanation at the affective level, and I want to return finally to that intriguing remark of Eliot's I mentioned a while ago—"that what is often held to be a capacity for abstract thought, in a poet, is a capacity for abstract feeling." What in the world could an "abstract feeling" be? For while I've always found the phrase an apt way of characterizing



something about certain poems that draws me towards them, this isn't the same as understanding what that feature is.

The most widespread current model of feeling is a cognitive one that assimilates emotions to propositional attitudes. I suppose that on such a model an abstract emotion would simply be an emotion whose content was appropriately "abstract"—like, for instance, feeling elation at the proof of Fermat's Last Theorem. But I think that what Eliot had in mind was an "abstractness" intrinsic to the feeling itself and not merely to whatever it happened to be about; and here I find Descartes's picture of the passions, for all its shortcomings, more suggestive. Descartes thought of emotions as *internal* perceptions, as the awareness of various bodily "commotions"—the flow of "animal spirits" through the nerves, the constriction of the vessels about the heart, a tightening of the muscles—occasioned by external situations that have been found to give rise to such upheavals. Perhaps we can think of abstract feelings in much the same way—as the awareness of the subjective commotions of the reflexive movements of experience and of thought's oscillations between viewpoints, occasioned by situations that are themselves partially subjective. Surely this more nearly captures the experience of the Kantian sublime, which actually feels not so much like a metaphysical apprehension of the self's independence from the natural order, as like an affective transformation of the world. Or if one thinks, as I do, that our notions of freedom and autonomy ultimately derive from our capacity for higher-order reflection, one might call it *both* a metaphysical intuition and an affective transport. In any case, I think that what draws us to poetry that enacts the kind of representation of experience I have tried to describe is its ability to engender those powerful yet abstract feelings of which Eliot spoke; or, better, that this sort of poetry, like the experience on which it draws and which it helps sustain, matters because it moves.

## NOTES

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press), 34.

2. Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765), in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Brady and W. K. Wimsatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 301, 303.

3. Mary Kinzie, *The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), bk. 2, chap. 8, sec. 8.

5. George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), First Dialogue.

6. Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649).

7. T. S. Eliot, a talk on "Tradition and the Practice of Poetry" (1936), *Southern Review*, ed. A. Walton Litz, 21, no. 4 (Oct. 1985): 883.

8. Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

9. David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739), bk. 1, pt. 4, sec. 6.

10. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), pt. 3, sec. 46.

11. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

12. Paul Churchland, *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991).

13. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

14. Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *Journal of Philosophy* 90, no. 9 (Sept. 1993): 457.

15. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 17, 19.

16. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 86. But Nagel is ambivalent with regard to "property dualism," which merely adds qualitative properties to the world's real properties.

17. The quotations in this paragraph are from Allen Grossman, *The Sighted Singer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 6, 306. The third quotation is Grossman's own citation from Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), sec. 2.

18. The quotations in this paragraph are from Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), bk. 2, sec. 28.

19. Nagel, "The Absurd," *Mortal Questions*.

20. *Ibid.*, 23.

21. In John Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

22. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 6:45.

23. All quotations are from the 1805 version of *The Prelude*. Neil Hertz discusses some of the following passages in chapters 3 and 10 of *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

24. In John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York: Viking, 1975).



## THE NEAR FUTURE

FOR ROBERT DASH

I used to think that the soul  
Grew by remembering, that by retaining  
The character of all the times and places it had lived  
And working backwards, year by year,  
It reached the center of a landscape  
Time couldn't penetrate, a green and white house  
Surrounded by a chorus of trees,  
Whose rooms were always filled with other people.  
And now I think that it was just scenery,

The private illusion of a world  
In which the "I" is the mind of an object,  
And lacks features, and is part of the world in which it has to try to live.  
For the soul knows that it's empty  
And longs to dissolve, like a stray dream,  
Back into nature, back into those things  
Which had never seemed quite clear enough before.  
But until now it could only see itself.

I used to think that there was a wall  
You could touch with your hand, but not understand,  
And that the soul had to pass through it alone.  
I thought that other people's lives  
Were like the walls of a room, keeping me inside,  
Away from those things that were my real nature—

The houses, trees, and curbstones,  
The noisy birds outside my bedroom window  
And the thick ticking outside—  
Taking the time that real things require.

Why do real things have to take so long?  
I knew that time needed things, but there were so many  
And they exploded like birds when I was almost close enough to touch  
    them,  
And then drifted back into the near future,  
The center of the year.  
But the furniture isn't as dense as it was  
A few months ago, and it's finally quiet outside,  
And there are a couple of empty rooms upstairs.

## THE SUBSTITUTE FOR TIME

*How things bind and blend themselves together!*

—Ruskin, *Praeterita*

I came back at last to my own house.  
Gradually the clear, uninhabited breath  
That had sprung up where the spent soul disappeared  
Curved in around me, and then it too slowly disappeared.  
And I have been living here ever since  
In the scope of my single mind, the confines of a heart  
Which is without confinement, in a final pause  
Before the threshold of the future and the warm,  
Inexhaustible silence at the center of the lost world.  
Now the days are sweeter than they used to be,

The memories come more quickly, and the world at twilight,  
The world I live in now, is the world I dreamed about  
So many years ago, and now I have.  
How far it feels from that infatuation with the childish  
Dream of passing through a vibrant death into my real life!  
How thin time seems, how late the fragrance  
Bursting from the captured moments of my childhood  
Into the warm evening air that still surrounds me here.  
And how the names still throb inside my mind, and how my heart  
    dissolves  
Into a trembling, luminous confusion of bright tears.

\*



## FLEETING FORMS OF LIFE

I guess the point is that the  
Task would seem that much more  
Difficult without the kind of  
Peace they bring me, or the

Hope I always find in their  
Elaborate denials and evasions,  
In these brief, extraordinary  
States that settle over me.

They bring an aura of restraint,  
Of things interminably delayed, of  
Fantasies that organize my nights  
And occupy my days with dreams.

I like to think of them as ways  
To reinvent myself, as forms that  
Constitute a life alternative to  
Mine, but that convey a mood I

Realize can seem at times almost  
Unreal, almost inhuman, almost  
Willfully despondent. True,  
I want to rid myself of things

That lent my life its savor,  
Like those prospects of a future  
That dissolved as I got older,  
Or the promises of a past that

3  
Got away somehow; but after that  
I want to wake into the years and  
Slowly try to re-create my world  
By living in it, here and now.

## CLOUDS

I love the insulation of strange cities:  
 Living in your head, the routines of home  
 Becoming more and more remote,  
 Alone and floating through the streets  
 As through the sky, anonymous and languageless  
 Here at the epicenter of three wars. Yesterday  
 I took the S-Bahn into town again  
 To see the Kiefer in the Neue Nationalgalerie,  
 A burned-out field with smoke still rising from the furrows  
 In a landscape scarred with traces of humanity  
 At its most brutal, and yet for all that, traces of humanity.  
 What makes the world so frightening? In the end  
 What terrifies me isn't its brutality, its violent hostility,  
 But its indifference, like a towering sky of clouds  
 Filled with the wonder of the absolutely meaningless.  
 I went back to the Alte Nationalgalerie  
 For one last look at its enchanting show of clouds—  
 Constable's and Turner's, Ruskin's clouds and Goethe's  
 Clouds so faint they're barely clouds at all, just lines.  
 There was a small glass case that held a panel  
 Painted by the author of a book I'd read when I was twenty-five—  
 Adalbert Stifter, *Limestone*—but hadn't thought about in years.  
 Yet there were Stifter's clouds, a pale yellow sky  
 Behind some shapes already indistinct (and this was *yesterday*),  
 As even the most vivid words and hours turn faint,  
 Turn into memories, and disappear. Is that so frightening?  
 Evanescence is a way of seeming free, free to disappear

Into the background of the city, of the sky,  
 Into a vast surround indifferent to these secret lives  
 That come and go without a second thought  
 Beyond whatever lingers in some incidental lines,  
 Hanging for a while in the air like clouds  
 Almost too faint to see, like Goethe's clouds.



As a smirking peasant boy, his upper body glistening with sweat,  
And then a blood-soaked dental scene of overwhelming cruelty, then  
a thug,  
All hanging in an exhibition in the Pitti Palace just across the bridge.  
"And I am sweating a lot by now" as I make my way along Via Romana,  
Following this trajectory—a trajectory that started with a mystery  
And peeled away its layers to reveal the human form inside—  
To its logical conclusion in La Specola, the anatomical museum  
Filled with specimens of almost every living thing,  
And then the finally human body, open for the world to see,  
Like David flayed, or St. Sebastian disemboweled  
Instead of punctured here and there by arrows, and brains  
Where golden halos used to be. Somewhere in the remote past  
There was a message from an angel. What happened next  
Depends on whom you ask, but if you ask me, I'd say it led to these—  
These wax models of the body, with its veins, entrails, and nerves,  
From which nothing is missing except its old significance;  
As though the history of art were the story of its disappearance,  
Of the deflation of the word into a slowly disappearing  
Word made flesh, of the flesh demystified at last.

1135

No one has to write any special way—  
You make it up as you go along. I started  
Writing this way—no thoughts at first,  
Then a lot of words in the guise of thoughts,  
Then real thoughts—a long time ago.  
You can write or think about death directly,  
Or you can write about it by indirection  
And delay, the way the diary of a day  
Reflects the silence waiting darkly at the end,  
Like the silence lingering after graduation,  
When the students have all gone away  
And the ghost campus descends.  
I don't know what to say about Darragh—  
A painter who gradually convinced himself  
That he saw what he didn't actually see,  
Until finally he couldn't see at all. I loved him  
In a way, though the "in a way" tells all:  
There was something not quite there, and now  
There's nothing there at all. I drove by his house  
Last Saturday, when I was visiting Bob.  
Vines and weeds were everywhere, bushes  
Encroached upon the porch, there was a dull,  
Uneasy feeling something bad had happened there  
That left an empty house with empty windows  
I had to stretch to see through, staring into rooms as  
Empty as a skull from which the mind has gone.  
I couldn't look in the studio. I took pictures

Of the For Sale sign, and then drove home  
 Or what felt like home. The Saturday afternoon  
 Was bland and beautiful, with no sense of an ending  
 Or the thought that gradually insinuates itself  
 In the back of the mind, in a studio, alone.

I'm waiting at th  
 On West Eleven  
 From the Larch  
 When I'm in Ne  
 Since I've retire  
 Gene's is down  
 You can watch p  
 Above your hea  
 When I was a ki  
 I sometimes thir  
 To make sense c  
 And didn't do s  
 And then I thinl  
 It's not a book a  
 And then it's go  
 To unfold is mis  
 And when some  
 Too late and inc  
 We care too muc  
 Feelings can be  
 But in the way t  
 Exhilarated and  
 In a while, to se  
 About the thing  
 At the Japan So



## A PRIVATE SINGULARITY

I used to like being young, and I still do,  
Because I think I still am. There are physical  
Objections to that thought, and yet what  
Fascinates me now is how obsessed I was at thirty-five  
With feeling older than I was: it seemed so smart  
And worldly, so fastidiously knowing to dwell so much  
On time—on what it gives, what it destroys, on how it feels.  
And now it's here and doesn't feel like anything at all:  
A little warm perhaps, a little cool, but mostly waiting on my  
Life to fill it up, and meanwhile living in the light and listening  
To the music floating through my living room each night.  
It's something you recognize in retrospect, long after  
Everything that used to fill those years has disappeared  
And they've become regrets and images, leaving you alone  
In a perpetual present, in a nondescript small room where it began.  
You find it in yourself: the ways that led inexorably from  
Home to here are simply stories now, leading nowhere anymore;  
The wilderness they led through is the space behind a door  
Through which a sentence flows, following a map in the heart.  
Along the way the self that you were born as turns into  
The person you created, but they come together at the end,  
United in the memory where time began: the tinkling of a bell  
On a garden gate in Combray, or the clang of a driven nail  
In a Los Angeles backyard, or a pure, angelic clang in Nova Scotia—  
Whatever age restores. It isn't the generalizations I loved  
At thirty-five that move me now, but single moments  
When my life comes into focus, and the feeling of the years  
Between them comes alive. Time stops, and then resumes its story,

7

Like a train to Balbec or a steamer to Brazil. We moved to San Diego,  
Then I headed east, then settled in the middle of the country  
Where I've waited now for almost forty years, going through the  
Motions of the moments as they pass from now to nothing,  
Reading by their light. I don't know why I'm reading them again—  
Elizabeth Bishop, Proust. The stories you remember feel like mirrors,  
And rereading them like leafing through your life at a certain age,  
As though the years were pages. I keep living in the light  
Under the door, waiting on those vague sensations floating in  
And out of consciousness like odors, like the smell of sperm and lilacs.  
In the afternoon I bicycle to a park that overlooks Lake Michigan,  
Linger on a bench and read *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and *Time Reborn*,  
A physics book that argues time is real. And that's my life—  
It isn't much, yet it hangs together: its obsessions dovetail,  
As the private world of my experience takes its place  
Within a natural order that absorbs it, but for a while lets it live.  
It feels like such a miracle, this life: it promises everything,  
And even keeps its promise when you've grown too old to care.  
It seems unremarkable at first, and then as time goes by it  
Starts to seem unreal, a figment of the years inside a universe  
That flows around them and dissolves them in the end,  
But meanwhile lets you linger in a universe of one:  
A village on a summer afternoon, a garden after dark,  
A small backyard beneath a boring California sky.  
I said I still felt young, and so I am, yet what that means  
Eludes me. Maybe it's the feeling of the presence  
Of the past, or its disappearance, or both of them at once—  
A long estrangement and a private singularity, intact  
Within a tinkling bell, an iron nail, a pure, angelic clang—  
The echo of a clear, metallic sound from childhood,  
Where time began: "Oh, beautiful sound, strike again!"

## STANT ELEGIST

can play the accordion and doesn't.

H. Auden

ate myself.  
the light ever better  
died a year ago,  
the same light  
recognize poetry anymore—  
together to validate themselves  
and effecting nothing.  
that surrounded the page  
em like souvenirs  
dy told you what to say  
way it mattered  
was said or who was speaking  
derstand than what there was to see.  
background to the days  
I know it's the same fantasy  
uent past from which the present fell,  
n only truly happy doing *this*,  
equent. And even that isn't true—  
ake life feel human  
though there's no one listening.  
the hill: my pleasure  
alf-remembered  
returns, and I almost  
sitantly, and clear my throat.

## SELFIE STICK

To snap yourself from half a life away,  
With the City of Lights floating in the background  
And a smile frozen on the same face you wore on a day  
In 1985 in the garden of Hotel des Marronniers,  
The hotel we're staying in now. *On a day:*  
What used to be a real time and an actual place  
Isn't real anymore, although the person that I'd been  
Is still real, and the eternal present I inhabit remains real too,  
At least for now. What holds it together is internal to it,  
Like the music of the mirror that arises out of nowhere  
And continues forever, through the vagaries of adolescence  
And middle age and the fear of gradually getting old,  
Until it ends abruptly, for no reason, on a random afternoon,  
The way a Patricia Highsmith character might die, in a freak fall  
On a nondescript street thousands of miles from home.

It didn't happen. But something like it will in time,  
And then time ends. Life seems necessary from the inside,  
But from the outside it's contingent and terrifying,  
With the precariousness of existence written on its face.  
I keep waiting for the thing to happen, meanwhile  
Holding it at arm's length, keeping it at bay.

ublished eleven  
d the Lenore  
Tufts Poetry  
for Poetry. He  
Wittgenstein,  
y, and is the  
y Emeritus at  
ee.

(tail),

azaki



## GIL'S CAFE

For now the kingdom feels sufficient and complete,  
And summer seems to flow through everything:  
A girl slides by on roller blades,  
The flags flap on the flagpoles, and across the street  
The afternoon holds court at Gil's Cafe.  
There is this sense of plenitude and peace  
And of the presence of the world—  
Wasps on the driveway, and purple flowers on the trees,  
And a bicycle goes rolling down the hill;  
And at length it starts to deepen and increase.

And even as it deepens something turns away,  
As though the day were the reflection of a purer day  
In which the summer's measures never ended.  
The eye that seeks it fills the universe with shapes,  
A fabulist, an inquisitor of space  
Removed from life by dreams of something other than this life,  
Distracted by the bare idea of heaven,  
Suspended in the earthly heaven of this afternoon  
As off the lake a light breeze blows  
And all there is to see lies dormant in the sun.

The sun shines on the houses and the churches and the schools,  
On restaurants and parks, on marriages and love affairs,  
The playground with its monkey bars and slides,  
The bench where someone sits and thinks about the future,  
The accident in which a person's life abruptly ends.

9  
The world is like the fiction of a face,  
Which tries to hide the emptiness behind a smile  
Yet seems so beautiful—insignificant,  
And like everything on which the sunlight falls  
Impermanent, but enough for a while.

## SALLY'S HAIR

It's like living in a light bulb, with the leaves  
Like filaments and the sky a shell of thin, transparent glass  
Enclosing the late heaven of a summer day, a canopy  
Of incandescent blue above the dappled sunlight golden on the grass.

I took the train back from Poughkeepsie to New York  
And in the Port Authority, there at the Suburban Transit window,  
She asked, "Is this the bus to Princeton?"—which it was.  
"Do you know Geoffrey Love?" I said I did. She had the blondest hair

Which fell across her shoulders, and a dress of almost phosphorescent  
blue.

She liked Ayn Rand. We went down to the Village for a drink,  
Where I contrived to miss the last bus to New Jersey, and at 3 a.m. we  
Walked around and found a cheap hotel I hadn't enough money for

And fooled around on its dilapidated couch. An early morning bus  
(She'd come to see her brother), dinner plans and missed connections  
And a message on his door about the Jersey shore. Next day  
A summer dormitory room, my roommates gone: "Are you," she asked,

"A hedonist?" I guessed so. Then she had to catch her plane.  
Sally—Sally Roche. She called that night from Florida,  
And then I never heard from her again. I wonder where she is now,  
*Who* she is now. That was thirty-seven years ago

10  
And I'm too old to be surprised again. The days are open,  
Life conceals no depths, no mysteries, the sky is everywhere,  
The leaves are all ablaze with light, the blond light  
Of a summer afternoon that made me think again of Sally's hair.