

Mouthing Off

I want to start from a dream I had the night after meeting Annie Janowitz at a book launch, and where we talked about what I might do today. The book was an academic one, concerned with gender roles in eighteenth century literature.

In my dream I held a newly-published book, a huge anthology titled *Sexualities*, to which I was the one non-academic contributor—I'd contributed some poems and turned to them after identifying their place in the Contents—there was my name, page 105. But the signatures had been misbound, so pages 105 and following were impossible to track, and pages four hundred and following were where my contribution should have been. So I put aside the book, a little put out. Then returned a little later to find the page sequence had become correct, but my pages were replaced by a bound-in bunch of crude photocopies of almost-obliterated official documents looking much like passports—not even properly aligned, but carelessly skew. So again I put it aside, baffled. But I couldn't resist picking up the book again and turning for a third time to where my contribution should be. There it was, and the poems looked fine—I thought, I must commit these to memory for when I wake. But where my name should have appeared at the head was a blank, and the pages following were poorly inked so whole paragraphs faded out—in fact the entire text looked like sea-waves, with bold and faint shifting incessantly. It occurred to me that what I *could* read seemed like the writing of another poet—an American poet whose work I've long admired and whose name, John Wieners, resembles mine—and Wieners is not only a gay poet but a drag queen, someone whose identity is spectacularly provisional.

Yet having remarked this I remained proud of these poems, and put down the book intending to copy them with my name added, to the people whose opinion matters to me.

This dream points up the anxieties attached to my standing before you here in the guise of a poet, close to where I go about my ordinary and respectable life as an NHS bureaucrat.

What after all am I to represent? What is the relationship between the poems you may have puzzled over already and my presence? It's only a month or two since I set those poems aside and now I will try to recreate them in a way which differs from the writing relationship—I won't be occupied or surrounded or absorbed, but taking the poems from elsewhere and mouthing them.

They will be narrowed by extrusion through a single voice. That is the conventional account, outwith the separate category of performance poetry—that my standing before you here has reduced the poems before I recite them. There was probably little mistaking my gender or ethnicity when reading the poems as *texts*, but my age, my voice, my respectability—these may be at once reassuring and disappointing.

I think though that translation from text into poem may need to be helped by vocal performance and that this is so especially when it comes to poems which have the appearance of complex texts. The principle of their integration is far harder to discern than are their various discourses to tease apart—for you surely, since students of English tend to feel more comfortable with textuality than with oral hedonism. In fact there's hardly a language to talk about their integration except that of prosody, which most discussion doesn't even recognise as concerned with delivering a unity while incorporating difference—and there isn't a language of prosody which is much help with most contemporary poetry. I find myself reduced to vague talk of *cadence* or corporeality, but the latter has become an exercise-yard for theorists. All I want to do now, by reading these poems, is to ask you to consider their oral unity or incoherence, although that might mean listening out beyond my old-fashioned well-spokenness.

So here are the poems you have read, but now replaced within a sector of the galaxy of poems to which they belong. I'm trying to avoid the term 'sequence' which to me sounds too goal-directed and why I don't like goal-directedness will emerge in what I will say after reading.

[see endnote]

These poems have their temporal origins in jottings prompted by news reports from Bosnia. Maybe I wanted to say something about nationalism and constructions of identity, but in poetry you tend to discover what you're about or what your poems are about some way down the line, and instrumental intent tends to be frustrated and even quite derailed by the language's collateral creativity. I neglected my jottings and returning to them after a year or two reflected how pointless it had been to have any point in view for the poems. If a poem has a point, for its author it's often at the point of its greatest opacity, since transparency returns the poem to *décor*, a recital of the known and familiar. In which case why trouble with all that absurd attention to language's undertones and grace-notes, unless, that is, you have a waiting audience eager to share pain or celebrate membership?

The period of swarming vacancy which commuting to work affords, ravel on my Psion a scroll of observations, erotic musing, and shreds and tags of language. These are never quite random—they have a way of accretion, not so much like a growing crystal as like a hermit crab's assembly of its provisional shell, perhaps. They may also be assemblies such as tors or middens, which start to map out a wider field. But a few fragments of this and that began to adhere to my Bosnian jottings. And others configured themselves elsewhere—usually there are two or three such adherences or plottings or programmes under way in parallel. That doesn't preclude a different kind of writing where a poem might arrive all at once, but I think that kind of arrival is dependent on its landing-strip having been marked out in the way I describe.

It occurred to me as I pushed around these particular bits and pieces and others, that an interesting proposition would be to generate a work out of a private and inexplicit, an unstated obsession—to generate a work that was beside the point and all round the point, a point which would never be spelt out and might resist identification. The poems would be side-effects, grown fetishistically—impelled by what they looked aside from. And that's the way I went about *Dew on the Knuckle*, *Due on the Nail*. It differs from the way I've found such clusters to emerge previously, in that rather than simply losing sight of a starting point I insisted it remained apparent to me during the process of writing; repeatedly the linear advance of the poems was bent inward and pleached about the invisible idol.

So these are poems which are *about* something, and what they're about doesn't really matter—and what that would deliver, I hoped, might be poems with the compulsion and compellingness of referentiality but the ranginess of collateral creativity. Or to use a more physical analogy, the poems would be held together by metastases of a primary growth which itself would be difficult if not impossible to locate.

So this full and empty point, this cynosure and repeated distraction, began to appear and not-appear across the field of these poems.

Points lie on or describe lines, especially in poems, and lines three-dimensionally meet to form figures. Soon I found these poems to be preoccupied with boxes and bags. The boxes I associate with the boxes of the American sculptor Don Judd, whose work I'd found discussed in a book by the art critic and intriguingly peculiar poet Marjorie Welish—many years ago I saw black-&-white reproductions of Judd's work and it astonished me now to learn these grey boxes (again reproduced in black-&-white in Welish's book) actually were saturated with colour. Then I saw a Judd at Tate Modern and went right out to buy a book reproducing his work in colour—these are colour sinks or tanks rather than boxes.

So the boxes in my poems don't stand simply for a sort of bad rationalism or formal projection of the points and their lines; they refer also to enclosures like Judd's which are seductive and gorgeous. Equally the bags aren't just a fashionable gesture towards chaos theory (I mean, describe the shape of a used bag) and they aren't invariably attractive because sometimes they clothe someone attractive (in my poems that is)—they also bear crass company logos or can be shoddy and messy.

Anyway, these poems have their fill of points and boxes and bags. And they're at once baggy and boxy—most of them look like boxes and are rather intricately constructed, but they're a bit bumpy too, and some poems sag into string bags and gloop and fluffballs. These also tend to be the poems that arrived almost whole, organic rather than constructed.

Now that's one constellation that might be discerned amidst the poems. One thing that makes my poems hard to negotiate in an a-leads-to-b kind of way is that usually there are quite a few such constellations traceable—but this can allow a relaxed view too. If you deliberately pull back from focus as you might when looking at the stars in order to achieve the gestalt of a constellation, that's not a bad opening strategy with a problematic poem. If you start by looking too hard, there's just too much or many. Poems are not written necessarily for a practice of close reading which can mop up all semantic spillage as it goes, although I do think close reading is the essential skill for enjoying poems of the modern western literary tradition. It's just that we need to be realistic about the conditions for close reading. We are always distracted by the light-pollution of our preconceptions and social assemblies, and by our partiality and laziness.

But more than that, the conditions for close reading are difficult to contrive for those who are not given to it professionally. Attention which is neither immediately goal-directed nor a distracting background nor the reception of what arrives at once acceptably, does not merely require protected time—as protected as the analytic hour in psychoanalysis; but requires a break from habitual and inculcated modes of attention. It is hard to break from the habit of scanning for the sociological symptom, or for information your job will demand you have available, or to be sure the kids are safe.

In reality there must be an intermediate stage in reading poems which recognises that there are far too many poems about. A serious reading of poets as different as George Herbert, P.B. Shelley and Frank O'Hara—to confine the range to dead white males—raises the question of how anyone could read anything else in a lifetime, giving those poets due attention. I have no solution to this. When it

comes to complex contemporary poetry, you have to develop a scanning mechanism which enables you to determine that this or that poem might be worth the effort, might be better than going to the movies.

For me some of what decides that is rhythmic, some is about a partiality for what I regard as poetic process—that is, that the poem is driven by a necessity that is marked in the poem through a kind of relay between figuration such as metaphor and conceptual thought, and that this in turn is engaged in a relay with sound-pattern and rhythm. That's a poor exposition, but among what it excludes might be:

- Poems which are self-sealing—title frames, last line wraps up, nothing left.
- Poems which are programmatic—tendentiously refuse to deliver, on the assumption that capitalism will be brought to its knees by disrupted syntax in a poem published in an edition of 200.
- Poems which advertise the poet's travel opportunities or presence at great opera performances.
- Poems which are designed principally to convey green, feminist or anti-racist messages. Poems will register these commitments if they're important to the writer; but look at me, what a good person I am, makes for poor poems.

Your needs and desires will be different, and they change over time and from time to time for any of us. A taste for the unassignable, for the unaccountable, is a minority one. For many, language which doesn't put all the cards on the table or which hurls down all the cards at once, is truly offensive—and that's one reason why there's not a living to be made from writing poetry.

Having made a provocative and somewhat spurious distinction between a text and a poem, there's one more thing I'd like to say about poems which is that a peculiarity of some kinds of poetry—and not just the kind I write but perhaps especially so—is that things and feelings and ideas and so-called images are difficult to separate. The *arguments* of my writing are difficult to distinguish from the relationships between words as objects. I have an intuition that a primitive kind of orality is involved here, with these mouthed objects and words. Alongside this primitive, lalling usage, language continues to operate symbolically and relationally—that is, to recognise relational networks and an external range of reference which doesn't point chiefly to the author. When I suggest what boxes and bags might have come to mean in these poems, that indicates that linguistic usage is not confined to the psychotic or hysterical. So the tensions and liaisons between primary process and conscious shaping, between the power of infrastructure and the power of reference, contribute to that relay effect between

sound chains (that is, words as objects), metaphorical chains and conceptual chains—characteristic of Shelley for example.

[Another reading; see endnote]

As with any artistic practice, writing poetry is a curse to its practitioner as much as a blessing. The curse lies in the exactions of the linguistic field once set in play. I mean the way in this set of poems the points, bags and boxes seized my not-quite-inner life—I don't think artists have inner lives, their innerness is diverted into the materials they manipulate and combine—or chew over. There were many times I wanted to punch my way out of this bag—for months on end I would be unfaithful, following any new sprite, and then be lured back into the prison under construction or constriction. Since finishing I've been writing funk lyrics for a friend's band for a liberating play with genre. Though there's a new bind—I'm kept awake at night by rhyme schemes. Which at least is a change from what I may have neglected at work.

Because I tend to be asked about it, I want to take that cue and finish by saying something about the relationship between poetry and what I do for a living, which is trying to improve mental health services in East London.

My work life is governed, harried, by instrumental reason. This is a familiar lot, as much so for someone working as I do in mental health as for an academic teaching English Literature, and in each case is similarly and infuriatingly perverse. The evidence for effectiveness of particular interventions in mental health remains a site of ideological conflict as least as strenuous as anything in critical theory and of rather more acute consequence for their objects—a word I use advisedly. Few could describe themselves as survivors of literary criticism with the moral legitimacy of survivors of psychiatry.

All my acts must be goal-directed; it is expected I should be clear regarding their aims—or indeed 'my' aims which also are 'our' aims because they are presumed to be incontestable and self-evident—; my acts should produce measurable outcomes, which is to say identifiable and predictable effects. Predictability is paramount, and this is the prevailing characteristic of a managerialism which saturates our lives. 'Our' indeed, for managerialism does not only 'impact' as we say on the lives of managers or even those formally occupied in work or as students, but increasingly on the lives of the most socially marginalized (as we say also)—the margin being defined by its distance from a social text which has been formulated for consistency like a Starbuck's latte.

For example, government social initiatives focus on key predictors of disorderly conduct; the child of a single mother on a sink estate in Tower Hamlets will be subject to a range of programmes from the cradle into late adolescence in the interests of his or her social inclusion, in the interests of diverting his or her environmentally predictable course into a course predicted by well-researched social programmes.

- And this is what we shall do
- But it is only through partnership
- We can deliver. We make no excuses
- For asking for a clear return
- On the hard-earned money people
- Like you and me contribute

And so on.

As the managerial discourses come to pervade the institutions of personal development, health, social improvement and education, irruptions of a range of older political and developmental discourses become increasingly embarrassing. This does not apply simply to the language of those who subscribe still to the grand narratives of modernism, Marxist or Freudian, but to any language evidently delivering an excess or leaving a remnant. *Evidently* since despite progress in promoting a bleached and instrumental prose—this government's official documents are entirely consistent in style with Blair's speeches—language always says more than its authors intend; even its impoverishment has something additional to say. When the Department of Health sets up a High Security Oversight Group, the oversight that can allow such a name is telling of a failure to think of how others listen, bespeaking arrogance as well as a lack of humour.

The language of determinable output and the extraction of the last pound of surplus value and an unmitigated, censorious moralism (whose difference from morality is clear in, for a recent instance, our government's denial of the Armenian holocaust or persistence in sanctions against Iraq), these seem to me to be connected intimately. What will this or that act or act of speech produce? For acts to be accountable, their side-effects must be controlled rigorously. For their side-effects to be controlled, the latitude of their performers must be ever more constricted. Against this it remains important to assert that the journey matters more than the arrival, for the arrival is at best disappointing and at its most predictable, deadly. To feel alive means to say, I went looking for this or that which I thought I wanted, and instead I found something which mattered to me far more.

For me poetry is exemplary in that wise, and these remarks followed from my asking myself: What does it mean to be *ashamed* to write poetry? For an audience to be embarrassed for the poet? To be ashamed to acknowledge 'being a poet'? (The poet Denise Riley writes about linguistic unease, something wider, but I doubt that say John le Carré feels embarrassed to acknowledge he's a writer.) I've come to believe that shame attaches increasingly to ways of being which resist final translation into objects *out there* and their manipulation. Poems have a status as objects which seems to me peculiarly provisional by comparison with other written products, because they work where the outside obtrudes as air and food and where the inside runs its current and sets out its stall against the palate. Shame resides in the remnant, what we have been unable to leave behind or to consume cleanly. Embarrassment is felt in excess, in supplying too much. Which I think is where I should stop, having already got carried away.

[Endnote: the poems read at these points in the original delivery of John Wilkinson's paper are now published in *Parataxis* 10 ed. Drew Milne (Parataxis: Cambridge, 2001)]

how it happens

*el Burren sabe más que tonedeaf banknote anxious to forget Three Mile Island bong hit of Sandino ambush though it's legal enough as if comparability were an intrinsic characteristic of our objects of investigation a random sample of standard-issue polypropalene yellow-belly jacket of his love his epistemological hiccup his absolute inconsistency or his legible forest on the verge of the edge of becoming alternative jargon in love with the fossil next door or mystificatory aerodynamic but not *that* kind of democracy he said straightening his white wig for *se paga por ver* and all that's alive is dead and all that's dead alive except perhaps renewed insolence under a halo of bullets and a Kissengerian smooch to contain the threat of truancy figment cast as an echo of *la patria* as patriarchy in drag coming to the rub the rub the rub the anesthetic and the panwbroken pistolero like excruciating hospitality and Marx's carbuncles combined and multiplied because these are what we call elections but for the beard without which no prophet [profit] can succeed *verdad?**

For Whom Does It Boom?

Pondering the foco theory
of dropping the kids off
at the pool as a form of self-
defense against future attack,
she shrieked at anything as though
everything, as though to flatter
herself with the paranoia
of sacrosanct undertow,
untainted by legality,
untainted by periods of
enforced leisure, untainted
by positions of equality
requiring subordination,
& sorry, but I don't have time
for an existential crisis right now.

Just sign the contract
workers & everything will be fine.
This is why we have cities.
This is why we have hidden
proclivities & putative roots,
typewriters & ice-cube trays.
This is why Scratch says we
don't wanna upset the upsetter.
We're building buildings now,
putting the fun back in
free-market fundamentalism,
extemporizing the nutritive value
of beefsteaks & so we have no time
for your medicatably ungracious,
your medicatably foregone.

Vagueness, Poetry

11th April, 2001, 2.44 p.m.: Can I be something vague? Does this question have only one legitimate contingency, that is, the possible definition of vagueness in logical discourse? Can the world itself be vague, beyond or despite the logical insistence that its “vagueness” would be merely a characteristic attributed irrationally to it? Things are now quite different than they were last November, and also they are perhaps unchanging in roughly the same way that they always were. I want to address this question *now*, as Midwestern Capital enjoys its upward trend in jingoism, and as I sit waiting for my teeth to be repaired after they were smashed out of my head in a drunken accident. I feel vagueness, and in writing poetry I hope anxiously to commit this vagueness, in words whose historic etymology ought in a less comprised predicament to resist it. What is vague does not, for me, as for Russell, have a “chance of being true”; the inconstancy of my effort in life and the inconstancy also of that life itself, including and expelling the concrete world daily more or less objectified, is not in either case an inconstancy which is likely ever to end. It will not end through being construed rationally as a process to which there must be a rational outcome, unless I am capable of suppressing my disbelief in this, as St. Augustine did very beautifully before the recent inauguration, abandonment of the Kyoto Treaty etc. Is vagueness for life, or a gift of half-cognitive depression, life-deductible? At present I can work through my own question only in poetry.

This last admission raises an immediate problem. The classic and perhaps most influential account of vagueness is by Bertrand Russell, a writer for whom any putative distortions in consciousness are fundamentally not evidence for a distorted world. Furthermore, and such that his argument advances away from all Kantian traditions, Russell believes that the world *is not* distorted, not uncertain or unknowable, despite whatever limitations of knowledge we may presently suffer or enjoy, and that by definition no “object” in the world can itself be vague. Russell further distinguishes “knowledge” from “knowing as an occurrence”: if we speak of knowledge as vague, we cannot logically mean that “knowing as an occurrence” has this vague character; it is not the occurrence, but the “relation” of the occurrence to “that which is known” which we must mean.

Vagueness in a cognitive occurrence is a characteristic of its relation to that which is known, not a characteristic of the occurrence itself.

(1)

It is for Russell important that logic should direct its audience toward what they must (or incontrovertibly ought) to mean, just as in a different breath and finer spirit it is important also for Trotsky, or for Pound, that language should be in this way a directive. Vagueness, in Russell's account, "is" the logical definition of vagueness; or at least, it does not exceed or fall short of this account other than in the universal sense in which any concept must necessarily exceed or fall short of an account of it. That is also to say, vagueness is a clearly understood characteristic of cognitive relations; there is nothing vague about how vagueness must be understood.

Russell goes on to describe the inherence of vagueness in things which appear to us at a distance: "...there is less vagueness in the near appearance than in the distant one." Accuracy, on the contrary, is not a matter of degree, but an "ideal limit." It is in (Russell's) theory possible for us to see anything of a visual character with perfect accuracy, even if at present we lack the technology sufficient for this; but we could never in our cognitive relation to an object experience *perfect vagueness*, and as a poet I would say that it is perhaps for this reason—that vagueness is not an ideal limit—that Russell seems despite and also through his analytic discussion to value the concept of vagueness less than the concept of accuracy. Russell would probably have replied that concepts are not *per se* meaningfully valuable or invaluable, and that the two concepts are distinguished inherently with respect to their differing relevance to conceptual thought as a whole; as a poet I would scoff at this.

Ignorance "as an occurrence" here means something very practical. It is the event of my feeling preoccupied with a question which *can* be defined and even resolved logically, but which I feel *ought* not to be. If this is merely my own perversity as a non-logician, it is a perversity which comes with, and is sustained by, a great deal of frustration and unhappiness. 3.57 p.m.: should I correct myself on this account.

Russell defines vagueness as "merely the contrary of precision." In this he is surely wrong, since vagueness is the contrary also of imprecision. As an example look at the sky, suppressing temporarily the feeling that I am now switching from argufier-mode to poet-mode. With any luck there will be clouds. Russell says "it is obvious that what you see of a man who is 200 yards away is vague compared to what you see of a man who is 2 feet away..." Is our perception of clouds vague? Are the clouds themselves vague in appearance, such that when flying in an aeroplane and looking out the window the clouds are suddenly less vague? Do we purchase the reduced vagueness of clouds along with a flight to Washington? The image of clouds is often used to describe vague or obscure sensations, or vague expression; but clouds themselves are not more vague because they are distant. Or rather, we do not attribute to the "distant appearance" of clouds any vagueness which might be a characteristic of our "cognitive relation" to them. Poetically I could insist even that the vagueness of

clouds is perfect: the sky is a famous “ideal limit”, and clouds are the moralized substance of our literal upward perception. To fly through them is not to perceive them less vaguely, unless in the crypto-vatic sense perpetrated by Heidegger when he declares that “only by the circumspection with which one takes account of things in farming, is the south wind discovered in its Being.” (2) Exemplifying this arc of thought, we could say that clouds are discovered in their Being (or made less ontologically vague) only by the “circumspection” of meteorological strategists advising the U.S. Air Force when to head out on a bombing raid.

The etymological root of “vague” is the Latin *vag-us*, which means “wandering”, “inconstant” or “uncertain”. Vagueness is the (sometimes negative) loss of fixity, whether in a physical landscape too hostile or too beautiful to allow us to sit still, or in a cognitive occurrence with some preferred certain outcome. It is absolutely imbricated with desire, both as positive and negative expressions of that desire, and as a condition which may rationally or irrationally be accountable for desire itself, and for violence also. Wordsworth could have known this when he wrote the line “I wandered lonely as a cloud”, bringing into mutable and temporary harmony two senses of the word “vague”: its historical rootedness in *vag-us* (again made active by “I”) and its generalized metaphor in nature (“a cloud”). The harmony in this historical-universal moment of vagueness is the comparison “lonely as”—this is the “relation”, as Russell would say, of Wordsworth’s knowledge, brought into words and so made linguistically (rather than just cognitively) thematic. At the ideal limit of his distance from them, Wordsworth is in this respect suddenly equivalent to the mutable figure across the sky: both he and this single cloud are lonely. Though in *having wandered* Wordsworth knows also the vagueness of recollection, and this is a vagueness which—connoted etymologically, and therefore with an implicit sense of the historical nature of him who wanders—cannot be replicated imaginatively in the cloud. In their loneliness they are similar, since both the wanderer and the cloud are alone vaguely; and yet the loneliness of each is also precisely their difference from each other, in this respect: that whereas the vagueness of “a cloud” is imagined essentially to be of universal and permanent acceptance, the wanderer’s vagueness is imagined essentially to be historical.

What could be the history of vagueness? Does the value of “a near appearance” relative to that of “a distant appearance” change over time, such that the different degrees of vagueness, which in Russell’s discussion are the difference of objects in cognition, might at one point seem more or less beautiful, irrelevant, oppressive or imperceptible than at another point? In my own vagueness I feel the specific pressure of history. “Degrees” of vagueness, insofar as I would use this falsifying term, are the meaningful expression principally of the likewise falsely conceptualized “degrees” to which I feel that history presses in on me. Unfortunately this conviction is structurally reminiscent of an alibi; I think now

that this reminiscence is a violent and negative *principle*, and as such perfectly necessitated.

By history (as Olson often began his utterances) I now mean the totality of present and past relations, and the totality also of these relations as they are falsified and distorted in commodity form. This seems perhaps like an unfairly vague definition of history. It is. At 5.29 p.m. it is not looking any less unfair or vague, nor does it seem likely to become so.

A cigarette break. More precisely: one *Lucky Strike*, product of British American Tobacco Group, recently defended against smuggling charges by its Chairman the ex-Chancellor Kenneth Clark, made under license from Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation, Louisville, Kentucky, U.S.A. Stubbed out in my home, 5.39 p.m.

As a rhapsodist shirking verse, Pound made in 1933 some comments about Bolshevism, a social philosophy and party which he argued to have been spirited into existence by *The Talmud*. (3) The Bolsheviks, he said, “ have proclaimed that literature is for the state, but they don't mean it as, say, I do. I believe that any precise use of words is bound in the long run to be useful to the state and the world at large.” (4) Pound had long believed this, or had long believed it incipiently; since 1913 he had been both complacent and famously discontent in maintaining that “good art” is “the art that is most precise”. (5) Pound may well have been right, for a brief while, and with the full pathos of a man who was right only circumstantially and, furthermore, whose rightness was on that account violently self-contradicting. Things having been thrown now to altogether different winds, Poetry can recoil at Pound's insistences. What can it possibly mean for words to be used, in poetry, “precisely”? How is art “precise”, and for whom is it so? I think of Gerhard Richter's seminal blur in 1968, named vaguely ‘ohne titel (Strich)’. Can we now accept even playfully that diction is the manifest outcome of an author's choices, *and* that these choices should somehow be calibrated by judgment of their success or failure to create a precise result? Does this question ask us implicitly to recognize a State, or, at the very fantastic least, some “Eutopia” (as Pound preferred anachronistically to spell it), through the real or imaginable lived-experience of which we can understand what “precision” really means, or ought to mean? Pound thought so and said so. His *Homage to Sextus Propertius* is a truly accomplished work, I can think of little or no American poetry which could be said unquestionably to equal its achievement. Pound was also imbecilic in his judgment of Wordsworth, which pivoted on the brave observation borrowed from Ford, that Wordsworth had no ear for the *mot juste*. In this as in other things Olson seemed to follow him. Though averagely dismissive of Johnson's poetry, Pound did admire in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* what he considered “the perfectly weighed and placed word.” Elsewhere he wrote: “Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.”

Given his frequent comparison of poets to physicians (on the level working-field of joint ethical participation in an *Idea Statale*), Pound would surely have grimaced, as surely on other occasions he often did, at O'Hara's measly outcry "words! be / sick as I am sick". The echo may however have pleased Pound: be [sic.] as I am [sic.], or: be (precisely) *thus*; I am (precisely) *thus*. To separate out this echo is to distort the line, which can be read as sustaining the echo only because of how inseparably it contradicts the line's more obvious and direct sense. I am thus, and sick; I am precisely this, and yet not precisely myself as I am ideally, but downcast, nauseated, "not feeling myself", given awkwardly to the vagaries of what Freud called "parapraxes". It is almost as if the line-break here is parapraxical, a kind of stutter or quick mental hiccup, the mind wandering out across the page and then pulled back to its senses at the left margin. "Vagary" (to explain my use of the word here) is from the Latin *vagari*: to wander. When I am sick, my mind wanders, as Freud described. The vagaries of Capital could be its wandering across the globe, its subsumption of the meaning of "mediation" beneath the great macroeconomic vagueness of its total effects and ineffects. Pound despised these vagaries, and the specific vagueness of paper currency as inherited from a "Protestant" English monarch bent on equipping a standing army in the service of economic imperialism. His mind would not be permitted to wander, but must be responsible in recognition of "the touchstone of...art", that is "its precision". *Sic.*, but never so unvigilant as to be *sick*, nor so damaged as to be (in Prynne's words) "sick and nonplussed". That is, both *sic et non*. (6)

Vigilance is important, now, to what I understand about the vagueness I feel. Could it be that Pound was exactly right, and that to be *exactly* right is indeed the best way to be so; that "the durability of the writing depends on the exactitude"? Is this true, 6.12 p.m.? Larkin was exactly or precisely right in his choice of the penultimate word "that", in his poem 'Home Is So Sad'. That vase. The emphasized deictic: this is precision as prescription, again to recall Pound's analogy of the poet and the doctor. To be handed a chosen placebo. Larkin wanted conspicuously to prescribe a feeling of poignant certainty, in no uncertain terms. The expression "precision as prescription" can also be more precisely understood. It contains an implicit nod to Heidegger, in whose grammatical hermeneutics the "as" connective is a staple and necessary feature. I feel in contrast the desire for an "as-not-quite" connective, writing here "as-not-quite" a poet, "as-not-quite" lonely in my shared loneliness, and particularly as (at 6.20 p.m.) I begin to wonder if I can finish this, if I can put down without delay the difficult sense of what I feel, before leaving this room for a night out drink-clouded in precisely the same old bar.

It is vigilant now not to avoid but to comprehend vagueness, to substantiate for and in vagueness its dialectics; this is a laborious kind of vigilance. For me it is most thorough only in writing poetry. I feel my work

becoming thickened by inspecificities, I see and produce language ripped down a screen in vagueness. It is a kind of unhappiness and can in facile ways be attributed to anything: I say “over the lilac / and nothing and bake” maybe because, what? Kim Il-Jong? Because a Labour MP in Portsmouth called the Paulsgrove outbursts a healthy expression of democracy? What I feel is a pressure not to specify, but more anxiously a pressure *not to concede to precision*, by which I do mean Pound’s sense of the word, and Russell’s sense, and the word less specially understood. This would be easier to theorize could I believe that vagueness in language were a definite index of disappointment, or alienation, or even of the pretentious belief that I experience these conditions. I would then merely be documenting and not dementing life. It is perhaps *vaguely* such an index; but this reflexive circularity, the characterization of experience by reference to itself as a predicate, is now—in our present spin of days—a form of recumbent and ultimately indifferent thinking. My care for my own life pushes me against this, it would be difficult even to keep word-processing and printing-out vagueness after vagueness if I could never (as I have not yet managed to) understand less satisfactorily what it means to do so. *Less* satisfactorily, because my poetry is itself both unsatisfying and caused by intense feelings of dissatisfaction; in fact, I have to trust that it *ought* to be unsatisfying, and that my feeling compelled to write it should be explained in a way that not only reflects but also incites and strengthens that dissatisfaction. I have to trust this by no simple recourse to the received notion that poems should irritate a reader into her own acts of interpretive “freedom”. That “freedom” is now conceptually falsified by its recent art-history, in which the banalization of dissidence has been the theme *ad nauseam* both implicitly and explicitly for many perishable years. And in that nausea, stringent within its daily confine, both [sic] and sick, sick and nonplussed, how precisely should I write about my life for other people? And of course, not only (or ever wholly or exclusively or even principally) about my life.

Gadamer says in a study of Celan’s poetry that it is “obligatory” that a poem “not contain a single word standing for something in such a way that another word could be substituted for it.” This obligation is of course intensely a question of desire, I feel it as an impasse beyond which it is now both so facile and so necessary to transgress, and which is so easily analogized in the rapid-replacement culture of Commodity imperialism, that I cannot avoid either the transgression or the disappointment with which it discolours the times of my life. In writing I refuse what I know very precisely I should accept. My life has the tendency to seem refused also.

Eliot wrote “It is impossible to say just what I mean”. I feel more contradicted: there is a pressure to change or abrogate this line. Can it be possible to say *just* what I don’t mean, and to say it precisely with *justice*, with the now transformed value of *le mot juste*? Is it true to accept vaguely that I am what I don’t mean? Or, to say just what I mean impossibly? In these updates of

Eliot—banalized slightly by their playful return to *detournement* achieved through altered word order—it is *what I mean* which takes on the impossible character that Eliot's line had attributed merely to *saying*. There is an assault here on *le mot juste*, precisely because self-expression is no longer the principal frustration. It is my distance from that archaic frustration which I feel, the vagueness of how I could be frustrated by that particular kind of impossibility; other kinds of impossibility now seem too pressing and gigantic.

Horkheimer and Adorno once wrote: "The blindfold over Justitia's eyes does not only mean that there should be no assault upon justice, but that justice does not originate in freedom." (7) Perhaps that blindfold means also that Justitia cannot discriminate between the near appearance and the distant one, and that Justice therefore cannot, as in Russell's scheme, be herself the cause of whatever vagueness she may know. Inasmuch as I am just as I am, I am neither the factory nor the pollution; I am just the person queuing for his prescription of ventolin. Is *le mot juste*, so admired by Pound, the negation of vagueness? Had vagueness been, at this earlier point in the century, unjust? Could it now be time to reverse the intuitive order of that relation, choosing to feel that vagueness is the just positivity of which precision is the distorted negative? There would have to be very good reasons for accepting such a reversal. It would have to be in some sense the wrong thing to accept, or an outcome to accept only very imprecisely; not the reversal itself, but *our way of accepting it* (e.g. poetry) is what must be crucially at stake. Styles of thought which are rationally counterproductive are not "irrational", not shifted from a centre of *logos*: they are the means to create a rational counterproduct. In this they are now sufficiently vital that they could turn out not only to have been true, but also to have reduced and so beautifully to have intensified what 'impossibility' is. Impossibility is not presently very beautiful or intense: it is too prolific. A certain practiced overvaluation of precision (e.g. the U.S. budget for laser-targeted air-to-ground missiles) causes me to feel this, as I rise in the library elevator-shaft in search of one specific book among millions.

Impossibility is not just a faded watchword echoing the 1960s campus occupations of 'Utopian' vocab. It is the absolute target-concept; it is a positive contingency of all humane expression. Against *what I am*, the prospectus foisted into the ego like a shut and bolted echo-chamber, there is *what we cannot be, but are*. The present tense of ourselves ("we are") is here in outright logical defiance of ourselves in abstract ("we can / cannot be"): this defiance is crucial and true, it is impossible, and as such expressible only without precision. It is also a form of unhappiness. To help establish this rational counterproduct—the defiance against ourselves in abstract—vagueness would have to be possible not only as a cognitive dye on the fabric of perceived objects (i.e. not only as a predicate), but as the status and provocation of those objects, including myself and my feelings, under a present regime bolstered by capitalization on all the precise estimates. In poetry this impossible defiance shines, like love as the ideal limit of hatred.

(1) Russell, 'Vagueness' in *Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* (London: Routledge, 1983-) vol.9 151.
All citations from Russell are from this paper.

(2) Heidegger, *Being and Time* 112

(3) "The Talmud is the one and only begetter of the Bolshevik system" Ezra Pound, 'Universality', radio broadcast on May 4th, 1942. See *certain Radio Speeches of Ezra Pound* ed. William Levy (Rotterdam: Cold Turkey Press, 1975) [unpaginated].

(4) Pound, *Jefferson and / or Mussolini. L'Idea Statale. Fascism As I Have Seen It.* (London: Stanley Nott, 1935) 74

(5) Pound, 'The Serious Artist', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1968) 44

(6) J.H. Prynne '[What do you say then...]' in *Down Where Changed*, reprinted in *Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1999) 310

(7) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 17

CHE QIANZI (TRANS. LI ZHIMIN)

Flowers of Two Persons

Flowers in two lips, grow,
Some red words, like two roses.
Two roses,
One is taller than the other, above blue light,
The slightly shorter one leans
Against its lover's shoulders, murmuring;

China pink, golden;

Flowers blooming in eyes, for rooms at night,
Pave carpet, purple meridian and parallel lines;
The planet suspended between two bodies,
Blooming more violets than sea water.
One warship of violet,
Another warship of violet, gold-spot-jumping
Sunlight, the flower centre of violets, the intersects in
The carpet, like two persons with hands crossed
Embracing for the past.
The gold timepieces in the tender wool of the purple carpet,
As if having China pink at hand, she seizes time.

Two persons, having relationship with flowers,
Having been years. At the intersects of
Growing and blooming: embracing for brains.

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