from *The Acts of the Reappearing Pheasant: The Return of Experimental: Italian and American Poets and Critics in New York* (November 10–12, 2022, ed. Iuri Moscardi & Sandro-Angelo de Thomasis (New York: Agincourt, 2025)

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Critical Poetic Grace

The critic is always in a secondary position to the poet, but this secondariness is not an inferior position. The proper critical service to poetry and poetics obligates the critic to a version of imaginative intellect different from but closely related to the graceful poiesis of the poet. The critic cannot be a Spinozist.[1] The critic serves without derogation the mixing of intellect and imagination in poetry. To overmaster the poet, poetry, and poiesis is a sinful betrayal that condemns the fallen critic to the hell of conversation.

I will say a little about three terms: "obligates," "graceful poiesis," and "overmaster." The first and third of these should help with "sinful betrayal" and "conversation." "Hell" asks for little attention. Altogether, we might catch a glimpse of imaginative intellect.

"Obligates" stands there asking for a theoretician or a philologist, even perhaps for a comedian's riff. Worse, it might lure them and so us into the law and theological, philosophical, or conventional morals. To escape, let us look at or listen to obligation:

> What's most radical about [Reznikoff's] *Testimony* is the kind of reading his method makes possible. . .. *Testimony* is numbing, but this experience of being numbed is the place not where aesthetic experience ends but where it begins […]; he does not turn away from aesthetics but rather shifts the aesthetic frame from the "content" to the reading experience itself. (*Pitch of Poetry* 38–39)

On the obligation not to turn away from content, moralists will insist on the content, not the practice or the art. But the poet/critic can read, think, and write; moralists are naïve instruments, products of the forces that appear as

[1] EN: See Morrison, James C. "Why Spinoza Had No Aesthetics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 47, no. 4, 1989, pp. 359–65. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/431135. Accessed 16 Jan. 2024.

content, which they think aesthetics can store in a sort of nicety. The content of *Testimony* is the elision of linguistic excess endlessly regenerated by the unstoppable machine of legal diagnosis and assignment—the bureaucratic record of criminal inscription. The persons caught, the society that catches, the language routinized in repetitive torrents of incarceration—all these, irredeemable, invite mourning and so cries or indifferent silence.

Redemption and aesthetic transformation are off the table. Commodification is the normal, well-paved path, the one versified by the same forces that create the irredeemable. Stories of redemption, which palliate guilt or amuse indifference and alert emotions otherwise inert before content without commodity—these are what we normally find. Wallace Stevens, under whose sign this conference convened, says that a poem is not a success until others accept the poet's imagination as an alternative to the real. "The Noble Rider" says that the poet's "function is to make his imagination theirs and […] he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others" ("The Necessary Angel" 660–661). Poiesis does not confuse content with the real. For poetry, the real includes the forces that make the content and those forces' extensions as the normalities, the habituations, the cultures that keep them in place, visible in the frames that make them familiar and readable. To keep with Stevens, then, poetic obligation is to create alternatives to the real, to the forces that obscure both art and the real, that safely turn us to content so we can obligingly lie in the language of conversation. Bernstein says Reznikoff's conceptual use of found language forces a change in our reading or leaves us with history unreadable. Reznikoff is a name for poiesis that turns us toward a new knowledge of reality and the value of challenged language. If Reznikoff delivers Stevensian success, his art is an aversion to the pressures that create horror or indifference and induce silence or conversation.

The poet is obligate to the real as the source of alternatives to it. This is the way it must be. The poet is bound. Poiesis is not permissive, no matter how fertile the poet's various faculties. Poiesis does not enact. The poet's obligation is not legal, moral, or dependent. Poetry and poems are not transactional. They are not profitable, and we might debate if they are valuable. Poets persist within the biometrics of the real, and, as poets/critics, express the invention of their own technical achievements, especially vis-à-vis the barbaric real in their histories.

Reznikoff's *Testimony* works because its irredeemable content is within reach of the poet's technique, which in attempted repetition becomes a barrier

to poiesis that must discard it. "*Holocaust*," Bernstein writes, "overwhelmed the techniques" (*Pitch of Poetry* 40). He cannot get an effective distance from the content in writing. He needs to change voice from "world-embracing" to anger, defiance, and comic glee, from writing to sound (40). Voiced contempt liberates. This is what it means to be obligate, inseparable from the real but particular in nature and function as its alternative.

Critics can explain the success and failure of technique, but they must expose art as the alternative to the real from which it cannot secede. The critic is not obligate like the poet. The critic is, rather, in the real to which the poet is obligate. Whatever the critic is, it is by inescapable attention to the situation poiesis occupies. Criticism is an after-effect—if you prefer, an echo—of poiesis, a secondary quality of making, a quality inevitably responsive not only to alternatives but the entire cosmos so created within and against the real; we might even say alert to how this process produces the reality that we know as history. If we can secularize the word, we can say the critic is an effect of grace.

St. Augustine prays to God: "Guard me with the power of Your grace here and in all places." He has a Stevensian image of grace: "Will is to grace as the horse is to the rider" (Augustine). Religion might make this moralism. Theology could debate free will and determinism. Note, however, that for Augustine grace responsibly holds in place the numbers of beauty.

For this moment, a simple equation will do. The critic is an after-effect of poiesis and grace. Scholars have said that art is a secularized form of religion. M.H. Abrams and Mario Praz made books of this idea. However, what if grace is a trope of poiesis, an appropriation of the human making of good works by the powers of religious thinking and institutional power? Along these lines of re-establishing priority, the poet is the location where grace lives, where poiesis does its essential work of creating the real and its alternatives. The critic's secondariness lies within the project of grace. I am trying to approach the fundamentals of force and will.

Just as Reznikoff changes the pitch in reading *Holocaust* so that, by the grace of sound, he creates contempt and liberates us from horrible silence, Bernstein separates grace from will, echoing Augustine. "We don't earn it [language]," Bernstein writes, "but it is forever there for us." The critic says it does not matter much; what the poet says is always there: grace, language, and sound. What matters is the poet's existence as the embodied agent of poiesis, as the place in the species where the imaginative intellect lives and works.

Tradition knows the echoing permanence of poetic grace. Consider the founding myth: Orpheus, shielded by the grace of gods to descend to hell, charming death, but, as always, failing at redemption—yet always left singing, a head—a brain—a voice—a mouth and song. According to the myth, others save the essential fragment of Orpheus, even when the Maenads tear him apart or Zeus blasts him. These others are critics.

Conversation and sinful betrayal are close friends. "Sound is grace," Bernstein wrote, imagining new works in new media. We can hear a saving grace in Bernstein here since we know full well that corporate and state power dominate the new media, but he knows voice will sing even adrift on the current of these forces. But ever the comedian—once again, we are in the shadow of Stevens—Bernstein says how the head came to sing alone, just as a body part on someone else's stream. Sound is grace and forever there, plentifully "as the social-material dimension of human language" (*Pitch of Poetry* 33). The Utopianism of such high-toned speech deserves the mock that comes with a change in the pitch, the sale, the tone, and the turn: "Its fleece was white as snow" (33). So, how innocent of us to believe in this plenitude's permanent presence—it's been said before—and we have the horrors. So, the mockery of white snow makes us realize our conversational assurances, with their comforting packaging of concept and category—the mock makes us feel the instability of the statement or belief that it's always there. Even in the most basic and long-standing forms, the poet is also always there to remind us that there are alternatives even to the assurances on offer, even as the mockeries that decry our desires for surety. "We don't earn it" (33). The grace is out there, doing all of this—the promise and mockery, which is itself the originality of music (the child) within the whole. Content is packaged, given, and taken away with the assurance that the poet sings and laughs bitterly but with original innocence. For just a moment, the poet-become-critic seems to have joined the conversation, but it was all the trick of art—call it comedy, the essay's theater turning the readers and the work back toward the world hopefully now resident in the mind.

To see what happens when the poet takes on conversation, see Bernstein's peacefully entitled "The Pataquerical Imagination," in which, among other things, in echo of Beckett's trilogy, a mountainous entanglement of conversations about poetry, language, politics, theory and so on run, not loose, but into victories and words that hold their space. So, in the spirit of this critic's ghost, let me cite one exemplary instance of victory over conversation:

> Dickinson's "meaning," says [Walter Benn] Michaels, is aligned with "grace rather than works"—which doesn't sound kosher to me. But then we have seen the problem these textual wild beasts have caused before. Michaels is nothing if not dogged in his distrust of midrashic antinomianism, and like an American Sancho Panza he makes a habit of charging at chimeras. This is the price of being an aesthetic: —"show me, I'm from Missouri"—nativist. (*Pitch of Poetry* 324–325)

This sounds like critique, but do not be misled. This is puppeteering at a high level of comic reduction. Pound could cite the Adams family when getting his Americanism on in *The Cantos*. Bernstein cannot do the Pound schtick because the world has changed. Michaels is what has become of the American aesthetic now as an enforcement mechanism, in the dark shade of American prejudice—there is a trivial difference—that has little use except as an example of how the American "leaders" do not even try to see the real—of which they are a symptom. The puppeteering is art, alongside the blind but noisy real.

For Stevens, the poet's pitch plants their imagination in the reader where the real held the ground. So, then, there can be new knowledge of reality. Poets sell their goods in unusual ways, and no matter how elegant or high they sound, their line is a spiel or a patter. The critic knows the differences matter and how to buy and resell some judged right or better. The critic's job is to buy and resell, assaying which promotion is the name and work of graceful poiesis pointing to itself. "The poetics of disfluency and disability is the horizon for a querical poetics of de-arrangement" (*Pitch of Poetry* 338). This sentence opens a movement that sounds the poet's imagination as a field of interests turned away from conversation—"narratives of social/cultural identities or disabilities"—toward the responsibility of poetry and poetics—new poems, new readers. Or, it finds a horizon that creates a field where the "*otherwise intelligible*," as it calls its task and creations, emerge and stand out as different from the unreliable "junk bonds" of normal conversation. Within the horizon, slanted or bent in a certain way, the otherwise intelligible is averse to conversation, to the community of forced converts turned together. And what does conversation demand now? The mellowing of the bent, tamed into pity-ful objectification. Ending work, process, emergence, and grace.

Can a critic make a mistake? If so, it would take the form of misreading and misrecognition. It would mean not seeing the poet naming the emerging alternative to the real, bound as it is to the real, the poet keeping open the field to where the alternative emerges, now seeing the poet at work. Borrowing from

R. P. Blackmur, we learn that the critic's job cannot take the form of a mistake.[2] Criticism is a function found active and distributed irregularly across the spectrum of obligation, where the real and its alternatives converge and avert.

If the critic is a quality, an emanation of poiesis, then Augustine and Stevens's idiom obliges the critic's will to serve grace or accept its guidance. To assert will against grace is an old story that, in this case, betrays poiesis. How is this sinful? Because it rushes to join the conversation, to convert, to become one of the conversos but from desire or conviction rather than coercion. In *The Rape of Lucrece*, Shakespeare makes evil, consensus, and limited sight—indeed, confidence in limited sight—the nature of sin:

> They think not but that every eye can see
> The same disgrace which they themselves behold;
> And therefore would they still in darkness be,
> To have their unseen sin remain untold. (Shakespeare 1427)

It does not matter which conversation the ersatz critic joins or adds to. The sin lies in thinking that all eyes see only the "same disgrace" they see and that, one way or the other, motivates their will to move along a well-versed path. Safe within the conversation, they trust their common sin will remain unseen. Consensus—not only to consent, and there is the act of will, but to feel at home in agreement. To remain in accord, to join a harmony, and not to hear the bend in their own pitch—that holds them close—or to want, or feel, the new pitch, the new slant when it comes. Indeed, it might then feel like robbery, taking away home and accord. Shakespeare's *Lucrece* is useful: "O comfort-killing Night, image of hell! / Dim register and notary of shame / […] /Vast sin-concealing chaos!" (Shakespeare 1427).

The sinfuls see only the same as they believe all others see. Together, they produce the "Vast sin-concealing chaos," which is still home to most and invisible to more. All of this together is the "image of hell." It is the dark counterpart to poetic work obligate to the real.

[2] EN: See Bové, Paul A. "R.P. Blackmur and the Job of the Critic: Turning from the New Criticism." *Criticism*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1983, pp. 359–80. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23105101. Accessed 16 Jan. 2024.

"State Your Own Ideas as A Response to Others" (Graff)

As it happens, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein wrote that command. It could as easily have come from Richard Rorty, who got the neopragmatist movement going with his 1979 book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. An essential element of this movement is Rorty's idea that conversation is the device and convention by which—and where, if we change the metaphor from tool to site—truths emerge, at least for a time, from discussion, agreement, and concession, only and always to undergo revision, dismissal, or erasure. Conversation becomes the field of truth and its archive. It frees truth from metaphysics and grand projects or narratives motivated by will, desire, or tradition. Freedom brings with it the tragicomic acceptance of contingency, which itself will or should bring to the conversants their own freedom from the sometimes monstrous but inescapable failures of grand projects and grand illusions. Rorty writes, "[T]here are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints, provided by the remarks of fellow inquirers" (165). Despite objections by scholars of traditional pragmatism (Webb 2012) or political thinkers dissatisfied by his assignment of virtue to dominant forms of liberalism in rich, specifically Anglo-Saxon countries (Tambornino 1997), intellectuals, especially academics, were open to the authority of Rorty's main street claims about truth and contingency. In turn, it established a view of conversation as a necessary, inescapable, versatile, and virtuous domain. This protean manifold can take form as collegial discourse, as a practice of institutional struggle for social justice (or injustice), but always appearing as a social condition essential to agreed and, therefore, contingent knowledge. These claims, precisely because of their institutional establishment, found resistance from less mainstream and more engaged thinkers. Cornel West, for example, forcefully rejected Rorty's framework on political, moral, and ethical grounds. His own prophetic pragmatism "shuns any linguistic, communicative, or conversational models and replaces them with a focus on the multileveled operations of power" (West 223). Nonetheless, conversation became and stays a valued meme and sometimes a practice of liberal belief and institutional and social practice.

Rorty says that conversation is the sole limit condition on truth-seeking and social agreement.[3] Historians of American pragmatism see Rorty's

[3] EN: See, for example, Rorty, Richard. "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism." *Pro-*

insistence on this point as an original development of John Dewey's thinking about inquiry. They debate if Rorty's position enriches or impoverishes his predecessor's work. Because, however, the history of philosophy often traces lines within the archive called philosophy, it sometimes misses influences or contexts external to philosophy that belong to the genealogy of their studies. For example, there is a non-pragmatist element in the genealogy of Rorty's claims, one that enables it, gives it space to develop, and has already put in place a grammar of knowledge production that silently resides outside Rorty's own discussions. This element could lead to a new set of questions about Rorty, most outside this essay, whose thought sits within the rise of computing. Shortly before Rorty reworked Dewey's theory of inquiry, "Conversation Theory" assembled several advanced sciences to provide a cybernetic foundation for knowledge production. It prefigured and opened a space that facilitated Rorty's thinking about the primacy of retail conversation.

Conversation Theory "refers to concepts, memories and the like manifest in detailed transactions: either stretches of dialogue, or stretches of many faceted behaviour" (Pask 11). It extends beyond one-to-one exchanges "to conversation with many participants or many aim topics," in other words, to social institutions, communities, parties, and societies in toto (186). In any conversation of whatever size, Conversation Theory allows "for the existence of many *aims* at once" (202). Conversation Theory and neo-pragmatist views on knowledge production in conversational frames converge, agreeing that "verbal conversation" exteriorizes "cognition," making conversation about conversation possible. For Rorty, with his unironic embrace of contingency, infinite regression within relativism is no problem.

In contrast, since the goal of conversation theory is to study the cognitive processes revealed in conversation, conversation about conversation must yield to cybernetic method or "the information available to an external observer […] will decrease very rapidly to the vanishing point" (Pask 1). Truth for a Rortyian is entirely contingent, argued, agreed, local, dissolving, reforming, and draining away. It always draws any observer inside conversation where freedom (most ironically) lies alone. Conversation is an ethical obligation despite its quality as a social accident, as contingent, or even as a regulated life practice such as listening. Truth appears in conversation—can it move out?

ceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, vol. 53, no. 6, 1980, pp. 717–38. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/3131427. Accessed 18 Jan. 2024.

Can it exist elsewhere?—because of "consensual practices and norms among those conversing," yet, as Rorty has it in a remarkable inversion of Socratic practice, "truth" only appears there because the truth work is and has always been forensic. As classical pragmatists point out debating Rorty's claims to derive his work from Dewey, "the natural world of which we are a deeply embedded part imposes constraints independently of the 'remarks of fellow inquirers.'" Events, which we might call history or poetry, have "the capacity […] to produce a brute surprise contrary to any individual belief or group 'conversation'" (Webb 57). Rorty might have hoped to free our minds from the metaphysical or positivistic ambitions of institutionalized philosophy by bringing truth into the social world of human action and interest. Still, for those who are not philosophers, his project was less informed and more constrictive than Cornel West's strong critique suggests.

Rorty makes truth the dependent and prisoner of conversation, a mode of life with specific grammars, fashions, and entangled histories, all reified, to the exclusion of all other forms of life. Furthermore, as far as he finds truth-seeking and the condition of truth itself in conversation without reserve, it is an essential, necessary, and seemingly inescapable phenomenally natural part of being human, of species identity. (This is, in other words, ontology and anthropology.) Yet, Rorty is unsophisticated about the character of conversation. Consider, for example, names as a special instance of words. A conversant under the sign, Kardashian, presents pure consumer fetish identity in the semblance of proposed uniqueness. Whereas Arden or Brighton might present the utopian efforts in struggles of liberation, which are already marked by the necessity of their difference, as placed inevitably within the system of repression itself. What speaks, then, or transpires in conversation—when the names at play denominate ranges of determination, testify to the dialectic of inescapable control and determined resistance, and enact the perpetual churn of commoditization after the death of hope and revolution? Conversation becomes another unexamined utopia, competing with and underlying others as an imagined space of rich life and resolution. From this comes careers and prizes.

In 1588, Montaigne published the opening sentences of his essay, "De l'Art de Conferer." Authorized English translations of "*conferer*" are "discussion" (Frame 1958) or "conversation" (Screech 2003). Philologists, concerned with etymology and usage, insist that *conferer* or *conference*, without the acute accent, *conférence*, in usage denoted "a strictly polemical exchange" (Szabari

1003), a form common in the neoclassical Renaissance. As "debate," *conferer* is a literary alternative to scholastic disputation and, undoubtedly, a predecessor to literary criticism. But first, it is a capacity or form of the essay, and because it is essayistic, it can always be staged, performed, and set before our eyes and ears, doubled, allowing it to be fully displayed. *Le Littré, Dictionnaire de la langue française* has an entry for *conferer*, the usage of which it illustrates with quotations from Montaigne's essays. It describes the word's etymology and development in this way:

> [D]u latin *conferre*, par un changement de conjugaison ; de *cum*, et *ferre*, porter. La série des sens est « porter avec » , qui se dédouble en accorder et comparer, puis, neutralement, contribuer, qui se rapporte, à accorder, et raisonner ensemble, qui se rapporte à comparer. (Littré)[4]

If we believe *Littré* on the mobilization of *conferrer*, on the working out of transformations potential within *cum* + *ferre*, especially as a mode of *dédoublement*, we see, as we must, our obligation to the art of the word, which is to say, to its work, its play of textures and details in the essay's movement along the lines provoked by its potential. Yet, a reader can find a seeming authority to evade the obligation.

Montaigne famously said he would rather lose sight than hearing or speech because *conferer* is "the most fruitful and natural exercise of our mind." By contrast, the essay continues, "The study of books is a languishing and feeble activity that gives no heat, whereas discussion teaches and exercises us at the same time" (*The Complete Essays* 704). However, the author of those lines is nowhere more at home with himself or his thinking than in his library. In lines written after 1588, in an essay weighing "three kinds of association," Montaigne describes the architecture of his chateau's tower in Dordogne. On the highest of its three floors is a library, to which he twice famously withdrew from public and political life. "In my library," he says, "I spend most of the days of my life, and most of the hours of my day." Only a long walk within its walls would make his library a better fit for life and work. "Those who study

[4] EN: "From the Latin *conferre*, by a change in conjugation; from *cum* and *ferre*, 'to carry.' The sequence of meanings is 'carry with,' which doubles in 'to grant' and 'to compare,' and neutrally, 'to attribute,' which brings 'to grant' and 'to reason' together, which leads to 'to compare'" (editors' translation).

without a book are all in the same boat," he writes, "as those unable to walk and think." Montaigne's library, atop his tower, exercises him and keeps

> the crowd away. […] There is my throne. I try to make my authority over it absolute, and to withdraw this one corner from all society, conjugal, filial, and civil. […] Sorry the man, to my mind, who has not in his own home a place to be all by himself, to pay his court privately to himself, to hide! (629).

Montaigne, in the eighth essay of book three, sounds different from the writer of the third essay. What do we have? A writer of his own ideas and emotions, recording and testing contingently in the occasion? Fallen one day on the task of thinking about place and the need for privacy as a desire for life and, on another day, into the recognition that debate better stimulates his thought? If so, does it matter if he comes to the tower's reading and thinking as a settlement after realizing debate or conversation are time-wasting practices? Do they record the general "situatedness" of writing, speaking, and thinking? How foolish to imagine we read records of personal experience when we read these essays! Inquiring these ways assumes a relation between the essayist and the essays that lacks justification other than habit and an ideological commitment to a phenomenological realism within which lies a psychological personalism.

The 1950s are one marker in the gradual displacement of such inappropriate ideological responses, ways of positioning reading and words, in Montaigne. Yet, before Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault differently made authorship complicated and unstable, a contingent, functionally coded concept, Mallarmé, one of their influences, articulated a poetics that did away with the "person author" and established what we once called the impersonality of poetry, or to put it another way, escaped the categories of the personal that caged no matter how comfortably the poem in biography, context, or motive. In 1897, Mallarmé published his essay, "Crise de vers" ("The Crisis of Poetry"), dissolving the poet to free the poem: "L'œuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire de poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés" (246).

Some philologically trained readers see apparent contradictions in Montaigne as contingencies grasped in writing, whereby the constantly expanding contingency stabilizes in the aesthetic project, not of self-representation but the more profoundly realistic idea that the self exists only in and as the writing. This aesthetic aspires to the redemption of contingency (and circularly of the self), making it not transportable or permanent truth but, for the better, an

infusion of value into the contingency of verbal production within speech or writing.

> It is rather that in writing, *and only in writing*, Montaigne claims to escape mere accidental being and to translate it into a 'substance': yet, it should be added that this is so only in the particular piece of writing that he calls *The Essays*, a text that is never weary of exposing this accidental, contingent character of its own production by additions. (Szabari 1003)

Something must be said of conversation and contingency—for conversation as a form of contingency, as immersed in the larger frame of contingency—that gives them value. Work must be done. For the philologist, the poet redeems contingency as the necessary, inescapable material condition of self-existence as formed by self-expression and self-presentation. This is just as it is for Rorty: freeing truth from masterful grand projects redeems conversation. The primary characteristic it acquires is as a concept device for saving contingency from meaningless, chaotic existence, as ruin in deformation. An act that also would save from the same ruination, as a disguised aesthesis, the human, obligated to conversation.

Mallarmé has it that the qualities of elocution must fade out for the mobilized inequalities of words to clash. Against this impersonal poet, the philological reader comes across an essay on the art of *conferrer* and, unable to tolerate or think contingency, repurposes the essay as an ontological redemption of human beings in self-writing, as the transfiguration of contingency into permanent value. This reader is obligate to the real and averse to jumping wild words. There is a Gnostic urge in the philological critic, as in the neopragmatist. Montaigne's essay tempts readers to use metaphors of motion and flow to describe the experience of reading, which, in turn, they assign as qualities to the art itself.

Take up instead a critical practice that creates a position obligate to the essay. Describe it as art: this essay compiles or assembles elements of *conferrer* as this intensely mobilized word breaks itself open in the essayist's mind. In a remark added after 1588, Montaigne says that when he reads, he looks for style, not subject. He says this is a way to know a famous mind (708). Style is not mind; it is not a possession—it is not the property of an author, or the author made *propre*, that is, his own, a self. Montaigne looks not for a person but for a mind adequate to language, those mobilized words so unequal in status and force. "Ineptitude," "stupidity," and "obstinacy"—these words name

what he finds and cannot tolerate in the processes of carrying on with debate or proleptically conversation.

In the essay, the mind and imagination follow where led, carried along by the word with the concept. When this leads to comparing, to relation, to the effort to agree or reason, then comes what he cannot tolerate. In conversation, staged in the essay's imagination, the essayist and the obstinate are at each other's throats. There is no hope of agreement or education because the minds are different: "[F]rom a stump there is nothing worthwhile to be hoped or enjoyed" (708). Montaigne inscribes this fragment of *conferrer* firmly in place by superimposing it on another figural fragment in which the essayist reflects on encounters with obstinacy and stupidity to show the stupidity of anger and intolerance that comes with being "worked up and stung by the absurdities of the world" (709).

If it seems absurd to readers to consider Montaigne as lacking elocutionary qualities as Mallarmé insists the poet must be, consider that this essay on *conferrer* contains these sentences, which require such a reading and sense of Montaigne as the place where the art of carrying together creates the palimpsestic assemblage of what moderns would call conversation:

> I dare not only to speak of myself, but to speak of only myself. […] I do not love myself so indiscriminately, nor am I so attached and wedded to myself, that I cannot distinguish and consider myself apart. […] I who am king of the matter I treat […] do not for all that believe myself in all I write. I often hazard sallies of my mind which I mistrust […] but I let them run at venture (720–721).

We must recall that the images traced throughout this essay are set as debate. The essay traces the mobilized elements of *conferrer,* depositing them together in a palimpsest that leaves their conflicts there as a contribution to thought. Those who make conversation serve their Gnostic desires should take Montaigne's effort seriously. They should seek their own pre-emption. Or, we might say, they have taken that essay seriously and moved against it for their Gnostic purposes. They scratch out tracings to reduce the word to their own desire. This is how the critic flees the responsibility of secondariness. For the ideologue, the poet must be made secondary, beheaded. But the head sings.

In *Pitch of Poetry*, Bernstein says that the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets rejected the Rortyian relativism that made "truth and meaning […] fundamentally unknowable" (68) while also assuming the identity of pragmatism. To my point, however, of the poet's obligating function, Bernstein says the proper

poetic logic is constructivist, which means that "[i]n the poetry, syllogistic logic and naturalistic plot gave way to intuitively felt, aesthetically designed, or programmatically arranged connections among elements of a work" (68). This sentence is a gloss on Mallarmé's hard-to-translate negative quality of the impersonal poet, one who is without elocutionary qualities or qualities that might be called elocutionary. Mallarmé's poetics has a place for the poet as a collocation of capacities, which neither depend upon a pre-existent poetic subject or psychological person nor create the same as a fashioned artifact or mainstream commodity. Design is a Renaissance term, the property of Michelangelo, that designates an intellectual capacity to do art with the media at hand—stone, sounds, paint, or graphemes—to design, connect, and feel.

Is this a species quality made by conversation or that converses or converts? Recall names in conversation and the wish-fulfillments of self-fashioning, which comes in place of anthropology, psychology, and ontology. Thinking about the art of poetry, Bernstein, setting all firmly outside conversation, writes this: "[O]ne isn't imprisoned by the identity that one is given, or that one is stigmatized with, or even that one chooses as one might a name" (198). Design is embodiment without reference and ideally without an author. Rather than shaping your words always in response to others, in anticipation of their response, of the vast echo chamber of repetition, the post-Mallarmé poet will, while creating, move as far from the hell of repetition not by simulation but by emptying expectation that enjoys simulacra, the age without aura. The local name for this would be Echopoetics, "a network of stopgaps." Accidents, damns, and organs—"Echopoetics is the nonlinear resonance of one motif bouncing off another within an aesthetics of constellation. Even more, it's the sensation of allusion in the absence of allusion. In other words, the echo I'm after is a blank: a shadow of an absent source" (x). "Bouncing off another" is also a translation of Mallarmé: "mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés."[5] Or is it an echo? It cannot be a conversation, for that's where names stand averse to design.

[5] EN: Here is the full sentence: "L'œuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poëte, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, *par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés.*"