

After the Long Poem

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ABSTRACT: This meditation by a practitioner made after writing a “life-poem” covers such topics as defining the long poem and its processes; ending the long poem, or not; gender and genre (epic, lyric); the counterpoem; the poem as research; and issues around reading. The essay incorporates comments on poetics by other practitioners.

COULD I EVER WRITE AN ADEQUATE SUMMATION of my work with the long poem? My writing of *Drafts* is a palimpsest of encounters and stacked timelines, necessities, drives, and stubbornness. Such an account would track my involvement with a wayward genre, my ways of inhabiting its generative, mysterious space. I had no “answers” given beforehand and did not know what writing this “life-poem” would entail when I began. It was a throw of the dice. The throws were heuristic—into a space I was making by walking into it. At every throw was chance or mischance as well as an obscure sense of intention. Where was this poem going? Was it worth anything? And why was this project fascinating enough and exigent enough to constitute my whole poetic output and practice for over twenty-five years? The dice were thrown more than 115 times (plus there were some not-finished poems, little wrecks); the total: 114 and then 1 “unnumbered” work. Can one count the occasions of risk, choice, and judgment in making art? For every line written, moved, revised, and shaped is a risk and a question, a suspicion, an inhabiting of the terrain that has itself been shaped by that attempt to inhabit it. The long poem—or any work taking decades but with “product” along the way—is a risk: emotionally, structurally, intellectually.

It’s hard to say whether any long-poem writers can finally answer the question why. Why did they want to write a long poem? Why did they write *this* work? Such poets will often talk about what (what kinds of things provoked them, what they intended to accomplish) or about how (how

they did this, what were the mechanisms, methods, tactics, formal analogues). It is also difficult to settle the relation of the poem to its own presence and memory, to its various purposes and shifts of purpose. Further, in explaining “why,” poets’ answers often sound strangely overgeneralized and simplistic. Williams’s retrospective remark (but early goal) “To find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me” is evocative but displaces the question (What does “an image” mean? Why the ambiguity of “about”? And what, for goodness’ sake, is “large enough?”).¹ Pound’s prospective remark “I have begun an endless poem, of no known category . . . all about everything” delivers proleptic literary pride in his long poem *avant* most of *la lettre*.² The question why interests me because, despite *Drafts*, I can’t get a straight answer from myself, either.³ So my title here—“after the long poem”—could it mean subsequent to, concerning, and still in pursuit of? Yes, all of the above.

Terminology first and briefly. There are two kinds of long poems: one kind is book-length, generally ending, taking months or a few years to complete, relatively contained if also thematically rich. The second kind takes decades to write, has multiple-book construction, possibly does not end, and is often excessive: a life’s work. Peter Middleton calls these the long poem and the Very Long Poem (VLP); Ron Silliman calls these the long poem and the “longpoem” (one word); Nigel Alderman calls long ones “modern epics,” short ones “pocket epics.” The valorization of the VLP (with “VIP” encrypted) holds for the first two poet-critics; the third really prefers the containable—and so do most teachers.⁴

Why choose to write a long poem? Well, when does a person ask this question? At the inception of the poem, a writer might simply wonder whether s/he can carry out that formal-emotional idea, that yearning for a book of “everything” (suspicious gloss: whatever that could mean). Pound’s remarks to various correspondents around 1915 and 1917 use exhortatory combinations of words like “big,” “long,” “endless,” “leviathanic,” and (my absolute favorite as an indicator of monumental gleam crossed with a suggestion of size) “chryselephantine.”⁵ The word only means gold and ivory together, but the “elephant” is no accident so far as I’m concerned. “Let’s see whether I can keep this going” was my approximate feeling at inception. Although it was pretty unclear

¹ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography* (1951; New York: New Directions, 1967), 391.

² Ezra Pound, letter to James Joyce, March 17, 1917, in *Pound/Joyce: The Letters of Ezra Pound to James Joyce*, ed. Forrest Read (New York: New Directions, 1966), 102.

³ *Drafts* is a long poem composed from 1986 to 2012. I did not end it but folded it up after creating an even-odd number of sections (either 114 or 115) at over a thousand pages, only, after a few years—now—to open that question again, beginning in 2013, with a number of book-length interstitial poems as well as a new longer work, with the title *Traces*.

⁴ Peter Middleton, “The Longing of the Long Poem,” *Jacket Magazine* 40 (July 2010), <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/40/middleton-long-poem.shtml>. Ron Silliman talks about why he uses the term “longpoem,” as one word without a gap, in “As to Violin Music’: Time in the Longpoem,” *Jacket Magazine* 27 (April 2005), <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/27/silliman.html>. Another summary is Nigel Alderman, “Introduction: Pocket Epics; British Poetry after Modernism,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 13, no. 1 (2000): 1–2. He clearly resists “the grandiose [epic] projects of high modernism.” My implicit ideal cases are enormous Books with a capital B—each by one person somehow self-elected to present a summary Book of Thinking and Seeing to the culture. This (Mallarméan but actually written) Book—in length, accumulation, evaluation, and loose ends everywhere—has many analogues among poems of the linguistically experimental (my tilt here).

⁵ On September 21, 1915, Pound wrote to literary journalist Milton Bronner that he was “at work on a chryselephantine poem of immeasurable length which will occupy me for the next four decades unless it becomes a bore.” This letter, now in the Alice Corbin Henderson Archive of the Harry Ransom Research Center, is cited from Robert M. Crunden, *American Salons: Encounters with European Modernism, 1885–1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 472.

what “this” was, I had a sense of excitement and challenge: something odd was occurring that ruptured more normal and consumable poetry. I wasn’t making numerological, thematic, or even stamina predictions in 1986. Beginning was like a research project or experiment: set something up (or more like: recognize that something was emerging, a meditative descriptive cluster of two intermingled poems), and see whether any results emerge. The “something set up” was the scintillating suggestiveness of the word “drafts” itself. Was that my “why”? To plumb the finished and unfinished? The open and closed? The “beginning again and again”? Only about seven years later did the poem and I collaborate to articulate its evolving mechanisms (the fold, the number 19, the themes of largest and smallest, and other patterns).⁶

Even later, in light of my critical propositions about social philology, I might try to identify a zone somewhere between form and content in which a particular kind of rhetoric occurs—a telling telling, to make a reduplicative. However, this is a more difficult question: what element of the social field is being condensed and elaborated in any formal urgency in a work? What, for instance, could the fold or repetition with a difference mean on such a scale? What did it mean that I sometimes used strong, heavily closural canto-endings, even rhymed ones, and yet immediately began again? Was this an homage to the interpretive continuances in investigative practices? Were the multiple bearings of the segment (line and section) a way of pointing to social feelings of contradiction and hope, and of the one and the many via the splits, junctures, and combinations of verbal collage?

I was hardly unaware of prior practitioners—far from it, and no one is. After my early readings of Ezra Pound, Williams Carlos Williams, and H.D., the immediate on-switch was the work of Beverly Dahlen in *A Reading*. Her essayistic, associative practice (similar to Robert Duncan’s and to H.D.’s) was a way of inhabiting time with thinking in writing. It was as if I had to break the hegemony of “the poem” or the finished artifact (even of “the poet”) to find a way of being with or inside “writing” itself—the unfinished, the collective, the endless. Dahlen was herself infused with the romantic modernist ethos of Robert Duncan. His own prospectus in “The Poet and Poetry” symposium, published a year before Charles Olson’s 1950 “Projective Verse,” constitutes a program for the long poem as well as for his oeuvre. “How to increase the complexity of interpenetration of parts; how to make the poem go on as long as possible—that is to contain the maximum quantity of moving parts so that the final performance of choreography and design will keep me intrigued intellectually and emotionally.”⁷ (Note everyone’s urgency contra boredom! Which is like an urge against period style.) Speaking from my “after,” it is here, as well as in the Williams-inflected word “writing,” that I now find a sense of *Drafts*.

Perhaps the long poem as ongoing writing is the “counterpoem,” like a “countermap,” opening or disturbing boundaries of the physical artifact and its solidified meanings, immersed in its own making and its ethics, politics, poetics.⁸ This may be why Marinetti’s “Parole in libertà” and the Mallarméan “Coup de Dés” / “Crise de Vers” ensemble—so totally different from each other in traditions, poetics, and implications—were ruptures nonetheless at the head of the long-poem

⁶ See my preface to *Surge: Drafts 96–114* (Cromer, Norfolk: Salt, 2013), 1–19.

⁷ Robert Duncan, *Collected Essays and Other Prose*, ed. James Maynard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 33.

⁸ Dee Morris and Stephen Voyce, “Precarity, Poetry and the Practice of Counter-Mapping,” in *Poetics and Precarity: University at Buffalo Creeley Lecture in Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Myung Mi Kim and Cristanne Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

enterprise in the twentieth century. You did have in some way to break the page and break syntax in order to propel the counterpoem, to create event beyond object.

Reading any long poem is also an event, an experience in which you shift scales repeatedly, from structure to detail, from line to sentence, from statement to sound, from visual text to semantic. A reader is called in a lot of directions, and attention is difficult to organize and to prioritize. The scale shifts and local bumpiness of a long poem are challenges, for you have almost no idea how any one bit, any detail, is going to “fit” into the “whole”—if those ideas matter. Multitexting, however, unlike multitasking, should give pleasure at every turn.

When Ron Silliman answered the question why, he simply proposed *that* he was doing such a poem, working out the structural-rhetorical question of the sentence. The length of the result is “extraneous.”⁹ To treat the length of the long poem as a side product is a counterintuitive (if not an antic) finding, given that it is size that a reader sees and faces. *The Alphabet*—like *Drafts*, like “A,” like *Iovis*, like *Ark*, like *Place* (Allen Fisher), like *The Cantos* (and so on)—is a gigantic book. But length may simply be an effect of activity for the writer, first a choice of *these* activities, then (crucially) of their sustaining (or continuance). These activities—let’s call them the work of insight, cultural labor, or struggles with being a cultural worker—are the fundamental terms; length is a result of producing continuous (or continuities of—or interrupted continuities of) intervention/invention by poetic commentary into one’s culture as constituted, in one’s time as given. Length is a way of wagering/waging against and inside time and findings in the medium of language.

Early in the process, when you simply don’t know what is going to happen with such a work, it might be too early to say, or you are not ready to propose, why. And once you have ended (or stopped) a long poem, it might be too late: the poem itself should be an answer. The secret answer to the question “why” early in a career might, however, simply be ambition—the ambition to achieve this kind of otherness and critique within poetry. This argument is somewhat circular: Why did I do it? Because I had the ambition to do it.¹⁰ Such a question-evading answer is helpful because it immediately raises the emotionally invested, affect-laden part of the literary career to full center stage. A long poem does seem to be a mark of ambition. And what is ambition but a desire to manifest ongoing poiesis (you see this in Pound’s several preannouncements)? The metabook, the counterbook, is by definition endless and unfinishable, always a pulse of evocative light (chryselephantine?) gleaming beyond you.

This answer (ambition) does suggest that a long poem is, and remains, a benchmark of achievement and even that long-poem writers have some lingering sense of the hierarchy of genres, a hierarchy that is problematic, patriarchal, and even obsolete—except as it saturates cultural heritage.¹¹ Do people write long poems because these represent the peak of poetic achieve-

⁹ Ron Silliman, “I Wanted to Write Sentences: Decision Making in the American Longpoem,” *Sagetrieb* 11, nos. 2–3 (Spring–Fall 1992): 14.

¹⁰ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “On *Drafts*: A Memorandum of Understanding,” in *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 209–17 (originally published in *TO* 1, no. 1 [July 1992]), comes to this conclusion.

¹¹ The critical locus classicus is Susan Stanford Friedman, “When a ‘Long’ Poem Is a ‘Big’ Poem: Self-Authorizing Strategies in Women’s Twentieth-Century ‘Long Poems,’” *LIT* 2 (1990): 9–25. As Friedman observes, a weighting of importance in volume, space, time, scope, and authority is conventionally linked to hierarchies of genre and needs to be faced or consciously addressed by women writers. For a brief discussion of Friedman, see Alan Golding, “Macro, Micro, Material: Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ *Drafts* and the Post-objectivist Serial Poem,” *Black Box Manifold* 16 (July 2016), <http://www.manifold.group.shef.ac.uk/issue16/AlanGoldingEssayBM16.pdf>.

ment? Phrased that way, this question involves an argument about “epic” (as genre or metaphor) and “peak” and, soon after, “gender.” Clearly, people have invested a lot in those observations. My surface denial that overt gender topics and stances were a direct motivation for *Drafts* is an underhanded acknowledgment that they did matter. Wouldn’t it be better to acknowledge that long poems by women are few; that in “the” (i.e., any) canon they are downplayed and undercut and, like female activity almost anywhere, are considered minor and negligible even when they are not? As with other so-called minorities, women are considered “less universal” in their interests than . . . a more hegemonic other. Alice Notley has offered a cunning and intelligent defense of the meaning of epic narrative for her work. For Anne Waldman, epic and gender figure as well: “Taking up the long poem was like taking up a gauntlet to challenge the idea that epic was exclusively a male form. What could hold handle transmit incubate resound digress permit transgress more than the long poem? What could demand attention and attempt to deliver apotheosis, new form and language, declare ethos for writing in the first place (a ground zero charnel ground), stay difficult and ‘female’ yet transcend gender more than the long boundary-less poem?”¹² Both poets have, with their long poems, made clear their answers to the muted, sly, and destabilizing assumptions of female poetic inadequacy that have large implications for overly narrow “canons” of long-poem reading.

If implicit arguments about long poems do propose hierarchies (of genre, of gender, of cultural achievement), repeatedly engaging and disengaging with this is a feature of female work in the long poem. One must engage because certain assumptions blur or distort one’s senses of desire, language urgencies, and possibility. While one shouldn’t be unaware of long poetry before yours nor of its almost incessant maleness, one must disengage because using words like “peak” and “achievement” or “major” and “minor” along with “male” and “female” are reactive to already powerful strictures and may necessitate tedious outlays of critical energy better spent in doing your cultural work.

So do female writers have the poetic stamina, cultural scope, and intellectual leverage to write longpoems or long poems? There is no doubt that among the questions I knew I was answering with *Drafts* was this. (The answer is yes, incidentally.) It is also true that I wanted to write “otherhow”—as if we had already made a turn beyond gender assumptions and stereotypes, queerly (we would now say). I think I was poetically right but optimistic about reception. Hence, all three of these women (among others) have a double strategy, at once facing their cultural situation as women and trying to extend gendered culture, transcend, subvert, claim a postgender inventiveness while absolutely aware of the complex cultural claims of gender on them and their careers. Their strategies are precarious, mobile, contradictory, and dialectic—all at once.

I did feel that I was contesting a genre—but not the epic, which seemed simply an interesting thing, over there, and not quite the word for what I was doing.¹³ Rather, I was encircling the variable short things sometimes called “the” lyric. That this resistance to the lyric “I,” and its poetic limits in imagery and scope, was quixotic did not make it any less powerful at the time. My argument was still clearly involved with gender, as well as genre. My stagey “anti”-lyric (anti-feminine but not anti-lyrical position, muttering “gender” sub rosa) proved to be generative, but it still

¹² Anne Waldman, email message to author, August 8, 2014.

¹³ On claiming the epic, see Alice Notley, *Homer’s Art*, pamphlet 9 (Canton, NY: Institute of Further Studies, 1990), 6–7; and Alice Notley, “The ‘Feminine’ Epic” (1995, on *Descent of Alette*), in *Coming After: Essays on Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 171–80. See as well her “Women and Poetry” (1991), in *Coming After*, 167–70.

affirmed binaries that I was trying to undo. As my poem got longer and fuller, that pure (willful) anti-lyric position therefore slowly eroded and became vestigial.

Just as there's no doubt that long-poem writers, a canny lot educated in their art, are well aware of multiple genres, there's also no doubt that smart critics can offer many taxonomies, both generic and historically thematic, and can produce striking analogies for the long poem. For analogies, try the suggestive "ruin" and "anatomy" that Brian McHale proposes; or journey, quest, city as model, daily life in its plethora, the library, the archive, the encyclopedia, the culture, the constellation.¹⁴ A Very Long Poem, I might say, is a horse built by a committee of one. This involves contentious meetings over time. Actually, it's a talking horse. It can talk back (cf. Pegasus). Or, as Helen Frankenthaler said in another context: "You tell it, and then it tells you."¹⁵

In 2014 at the Modernist Studies Association meeting and, before, in Sussex in 2008, I too invested in taxonomic classificatory systems with multiple long-poem and VLP examples. (1) Narrative/Musical/Mythic Works, (2) Hyperspace Encyclopedic "Epics," (3) Works of Seriality, (4) Odic Logbooks of Continuance, (5) New Realist Procedurals, (6) Long Poem as Essay or Conceptual Text. I forbear from offering other functionalist choices—such as "the cosmological," "the psychosocial," "the historical/documentary" long poems—as rubrics. Particularly at the MSA, at the end of each suggestion, I ritually undercut each schema, for taxonomy captures only one tendency of the complex individual poems or one trajectory to the exclusion of contradictions and weirdness. Even the most elegantly suggestive and minimalist genre notations are fundamentally useless (to say this more nicely, "reductive"), because the long poem is a heterogeneous and multiple (wayward and excessive) enterprise, containing traces of multitudes, any set of which can be critically emphasized. In her book carefully separating the genres into a very useful taxonomy, Smaro Kamboureli eventually interweaves them.¹⁶ Boundary crossing is central.

For pure elegance in minimalism, I refer to Roland Barthes's chapter "The Dialectic of the Book and the Album," along with the other curious genre analogies that are constantly hanging around the long poem—the "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" ideal of modernism or the "happening" performance piece (even though a long *poem* has no operative or staged markers).¹⁷ So any genre discussion or any analogy for the form, mode, or stakes simply becomes a question of what one wants to emphasize as a particular reading strategy. These things are much fun to propose, as any category system would be, for persistent acts of evaluation and curiosity are quite illuminating, and they might induce a critic to open underread poems.

My fundamental answer is some bolus of why, what, and how: that the long poem is an ongoing event and an activity, not a thing, although it becomes a "thing" along the way, for whenever it is printed, it's a book-like object. But for the poet and for the question why, a long poem is

¹⁴ Brian McHale, *The Obligation to the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004). He treats bounded long poems.

¹⁵ Take this moment as Zukofskian. Helen Frankenthaler, speech at Harvard/Radcliffe in 1976; cited in *Giving Up One's Mark: Helen Frankenthaler in the 1960's and 1970's*, curated by Douglas Dreishpoon (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 2014), 7.

¹⁶ Smaro Kamboureli, *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–79 and 1979–80)*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). This is a work in every way suggestive for theorizing the long poem.

fundamentally an activity—which would be some metapoetic mixture of poesis and endlessness. Or endlessness as a symptom of the basic activity of poesis (making).

It is in fact uncanny how the long poem corresponds to the Steinian poetics of “Composition as Explanation.” “Beginning again and again” and “continuous present” are both ways of keeping the poem in *Jetztzeit*; and the third criterion, “using everything,” involves an unsystematic encyclopedism because it also involves “composing anything into the thing.” These three propositions do not lead to unity or consistency but to an evolving boundary (which in an endless work is actually a moving border...).¹⁸ One has the intense feeling of that moving border with the moving line of Nathaniel Mackey’s *Song of the Andoumboulou*, offering a sense of time as space. In recent work, his “beginning again and again” has a distinct sociopolitical dimension.

All this is, in another language, the equivalent of saying what Duncan did: that the only genre you really need, the master genre, is activity—poesis itself or “praxis” or “writing.” The root experience is therefore excess, as in “this poem is running away with me” and “this poem is carrying me somewhere I don’t understand.” Making one, you are, in effect, inside poesis. It is a good feeling but not always comfortable (to say the least); as in Barthes’s definition of bliss, this kind of activity incites fundamental anxieties along with its *jouissance*.¹⁹

So the VLP, the “longpoem,” may best be described as a habitation in time by the poet, a thinking-in-writing to create a very large fictive space in which s/he lives and thinks, in which almost everything that person writes comes into that poem. It’s as simple as having inexhaustible feelings of plethora coupled with desire (“to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me”). A longpoem expresses a desire to be in your own poetic universe, to create a parallel world accounting for this world (in a variety of ways—critical, awestruck, desirous, accumulative, hectoring, elegiac), to write one thing under one, or just a few, titles. Such a claim of entitlement is exemplary. It is like having a very large, career-defining research project. The long poem is singularly investigative by virtue of scope but also by making every word and gesture count, as if a lyric intensity had been expanded across acres—without poetic attenuation but with serious attention to porousness within the intricate large-scale rhythms of structure.

Pound’s proleptic term “an endless poem” points to an interesting characteristic of the VLPs, which generally don’t seek to end and may open themselves up after closing and add another bit, may declare a number of cantos and overpass it, or may just not bother to stop. The disinclination to finish (or even to stop) in the life-poem/longpoem mode may be seen in several examples. The topos of *A Reading* is the interminable analysis; Dahlen’s work may be intermittent but it has not yet ended. Mackey’s two long poems (*Song of the Andoumboulou* and *Mu*) became “two and the same,” as announced in *Splay Anthem*: “each the other’s understudy.”²⁰ Silliman has doubled works—*The Alphabet* is published, and *Universe* (a pleasing, punful title) has begun; both are slotted under the ur-work as expanded synthesis, called *Ketjak*. *Drafts* “said” it would not “end”; it closed up, reopened with several interstitial works (in several different books), and is now continuing into another suggestive term: *Traces*. And there is James Merrill’s operatic tour de force, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, so elegant, so baroque, so “finished”—but wait: after it

¹⁸ Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation” (1926), in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (1946; New York: Modern Library, 1962), 511–23.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 12–18.

²⁰ Nathaniel Mackey, *Splay Anthem* (New York: New Directions, 2002, 2006), ix.

was published in 1982, Merrill added a long “Coda: The Higher Keys,” opening and closing the work once more in 1992.

So too Williams with *Paterson*, Book Five (and the wee notes for something unwritten denominated Book Six). So too Pound, who gave up on the aspirational Dantesque number 100 in favor of permanently continuing *The Cantos*. These are both life-poems that ended only with their authors’ deaths. One might say something similar of *The Maximus Poems*—finished and unfinished have almost nothing to do with them; it is simply the project, up to Olson’s rather poignant early end.

So the Very Long Poem is a work that at base refuses to end—for why should Scheherazade end her story?—and in which the debate between poet and poem (Middleton talks eloquently of this) is won either by the poem or by death.²¹ The poets are not, thereby, the losers but rather the lost—in the middle of that woods, obsessed with their habitation in the time-space of the poem, the project, the work, which is a kind of haunting. And a drive. And a pleasure. The work is not necessarily coterminous with one’s life (some of us are not dead yet); the work is simply necessary to our lives. Desire is the dynamic. Why? Such work is a boon companion. We have doubled life itself with this work. It’s a double act of socio-aesthetic citizenship—real citizenship and citizenship in your own self-invented “site.” We have doubled our time and doubled our space. We have a life, and then we have the life of the poem.

That’s why the longpoem is not really about space covered (how many pages), though that is a striking measure and makes hard work for the reader. (And sometimes for publishers, alas.) Sheer length and its downsides (prolixity, profusion, looseness, decentered accumulation, difficulty for the earnest reader of “keeping it all in your head” [as if! you can’t; you can’t; you are having an experience]) may distinguish the mode superficially or in shorthand, but length itself is like a symptom without being the germ of the enterprise. It’s not even how many years it takes—though that comes closer to identifying the longpoem, or VLP, as such. Rather, it is a way of stating that the necessity doesn’t end. It’s the writer’s relationship in time, with time, via the poem. You might want more poem the same way you might want more time. You want to work out its specific individual issues and suggestiveness (in every canto, for those who work with poems of self-difference) or see the mechanism you have set up absorb even more (for those who work with poems of rhetorical self-sameness). You want to see what happens next, what calls to you vocationally, and how you respond. The poem “wants” to be created as more of itself with you as the medium. There is always a next thing, a next move that feels idiomatic to what went before—in tone, in structure (if not in specific forms or genres), in your conviction about it, or in your habit of specific accumulations. And you want more of it, more saturation in it, because it has become itself (with a life of its own) and has been illuminated by doubling your life. Nathaniel Mackey speaks in parallel terms about this sense of doubling life: “I mean that [in the long poem] life creates an accompaniment to itself, a second take or a double take, something like a sound track to a movie. There’s a particular resonance and dimension it gets from and gives itself through poetry.”²²

To repeat: finished and unfinished have nothing to do with this. The operable terms for the long poem are activity (praxis or poesis—the practice or the making) and desire (drive, necessity, Middleton’s “longing”). It’s the desire or drive to be endlessly making something “all about

²¹ The Scheherazade metaphor is one that Lyn Hejinian uses to high advantage.

²² “An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey,” conducted by Jeanne Heuving, *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 212.

everything,” inside poiesis. So will you have enough time to get this “everything” in? The answer is, by definition, no—you won’t (no matter how old and still productive you manage to be). The desire to be in your own poetic universe, to create a parallel world of form and word accounting for this world, is the pursuit that pursues you. The blessing is poiesis. Who can want to mark or to experience “the end”? A