

# “Full / of Endless Distances”: Forms of Desire in Poetic Attention

---

Lucy Alford  
Stanford University

**ABSTRACT:** This essay explores desire as one mode of poetic attention. Through readings of poems by Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Robert Hass, and Wallace Stevens, I show how desire is given form through the formal orchestration of attention. In these poems, desire emerges as a mode of attention brought into tension by inflections of interest and lack. This reading gives us a new way of thinking about the poetics of desire and a new language for exploring how desire is not only described but also produced and embodied in poetic form.

**W**HAT ARE LOVE AND DESIRE, and how do we identify their particular workings, dynamic shape, and stance as forms of poetic attention? What distinguishes the love poem from the ode or from the poem of descriptive observation? In the love poem, we find an essential tug between interested and disinterested attention that can be said to form the intersection between aesthetic experience and relationships in the nonaesthetic realm, the field of semantic “aboutness” that grounds the lyric’s representational impulse. The relation between *I* and *thou*, or between *I* and the absence of a *thou*, is fundamental to the lyric tradition from its earliest instantiations. It is also the seat of what can be understood as the primary ethical or relational dynamic in the poem—the address of gaze and speech between one and an other.

The primary distinguishing characteristic of both love and desire—as felt experience and as poetic gesture—is interest. Contemplation inflected by interest begins to move into the realm of “kinds of love,” which can include parental, erotic, or fraternal loves or nonhuman attachments, such as the love felt for a particular object or place. Add to interest an interval of distance (the experience of lack that produces the dynamic of longing) and we move one step closer to the particular dynamics of desire. “Longing,” wrote Robert Hass (in a poem to which I will return), occurs “because desire is full / of endless distances.” This interval of distance, inflected

by interest (I not only gaze at this apple and appreciate it “objectively” but also want to take it in my hand and bite), is the foundation upon which desirous attention rests, an interval of relation between subject and object formed by a particular composition of attention’s dynamic characteristics.<sup>1</sup> One could go further and say that, while in the poetry of *love* the interval of distance is less central and greater emphasis is placed on appreciation and enjoyment of the relation of proximity, in *desire* the relation is more dominantly characterized by distance, by not having.<sup>2</sup> The role of spatiotemporal remove is placed at the center of the attentive relationship, and the status of interest is intensified from appreciation to longing. Both love and desire require an interval of distance and difference between subject and object (otherwise there would be no relation), but in desire the interval is widened, more tensely felt, sharpened by frustration. The greater the emphasis on remove, and the more the attention is inflected with the effort (a form of interest) to reduce or eliminate the distance, the more desirous the attentional stance. We find this tensed interval<sup>3</sup> embodied as physical distance in one of the earliest examples of love poetry, written between the fifteenth and tenth centuries BCE. In it, the speaker stands at the bank of a river (likely the Nile), looking across the water to the lover who waits (at least in the speaker’s imagination) on the distant shore:

The little sycamore she planted  
prepares to speak—the sound of rustling leaves  
sweeter than honey.

On its lovely green limbs  
is new fruit and ripe fruit red as blood jasper,  
and leaves of green jasper.

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay is drawn, in part, from my current book project, entitled *Forms of Poetic Attention*, which seeks to give language to the forms of attention poems both produce and require. In the longer version I develop the concept of poetic attention more fully, analyzing the dynamic elements that come together to form some of its particular modes. For the purposes of this essay, it is enough to note that attention is a complex and many-faced faculty that takes form through a variety of inflections, and that the two most pivotal in the formation of desire are (a) the degree of interest and (b) the degree of spatiotemporal remove between subject and object.

<sup>2</sup> David Schalkwyk notes the marked absence of “love” in current critical discourse, in comparison with (or, rather, supplanted by) emphasis on power and desire: “Love has all but vanished from current critical discourse. . . . A pair of terms that now regularly do service in its place—power and desire—have replaced love.” David Schalkwyk, “Love and Service in *Twelfth Night* and the *Sonnets*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56 (Spring 2005): 76. Schalkwyk suggests that this critical shift away from love stems from the perception that power and desire “promised to strip love of its murkiness and sentimentality. . . . shift[ing] our attention from a relatively naïve and common-sense obsession with what characters feel to the structural conditions that allow such feelings to be manipulated in relations of power and subjection” (76). However, as I have noted, there are important differences between desire and love, and vigilance at their boundaries is vital to an understanding of either term. Schalkwyk’s sketch of what differentiates love from desire resonates with my own in focusing on the characteristic of spatiotemporal remove: “Love is concerned not just with the absences and inequities of desire but also with the pleasures of intimacy and the demands of reciprocity.” Moreover, “the intimacy and reciprocity inherent in love may be borrowed from relationships. . . . that appear at first sight to be wholly unerotic” (77).

<sup>3</sup> In Husserl, attention is a physical act of tending- or, more aptly, *tensing-toward*. He writes, “In general, *attention is a tending of the ego toward an intentional object*, toward a unity which ‘appears’ continually in the change of the modes of its givenness. . . ; it is a tending-toward in realization.” Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, ed. Ludwig Landgrebe, trans. James Spencer Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 80. Susi Ferrarello points out that “[t]he receptive activity creates a horizon of apprehending attention that modifies the structure of the not-yet-I, into a tension, meaning the I *tendens ad* (stretching toward) its object.” Susi Ferrarello, *Husserl’s Ethics and Practical Intentionality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 2.1.

Her love awaits me on the distant shore.

The river flows between us,  
crocodiles at the sandbars.

Yet I plunge into the river,  
my heart slicing currents, steady  
as if I were walking.

O my love, it is love  
that gives me strength and courage,  
love that fords the river.<sup>4</sup>

Spatial remove defines in large part the attentional reach of this poem. The poem inhabits the attentional stretch across the water, shore to shore.<sup>5</sup> The beloved object is not present, even in imaginative or remembered description. After the initial “she” who planted the sycamore, “she” is not present even as a subjective pronoun—only as the possessor of “her love,” in the plurality of “us,” and in the address to “my love.” Her *present* subjectivity is located in the tree itself, its anticipatory preparation to speak, the rustling of its leaves (aside from the speaker’s plunge, the only movement in the poem) signaling the presence of wind, the only one capable of traversing without risk the Nile’s breadth. A closer look reveals the presence of temporal remove as well, in the dynamics of waiting: the tree’s *preparation* to speak (a sound for which the speaker waits) and in the beloved’s imagined vigil on the other shore, waiting, and the speaker’s *preparation* to ford the currents, the barricades of crocodiles. This distance, physical and temporal, is a hallmark of desirous attention, constituted precisely by not-having, by lack. The poem’s primary mode is desire, though the speaker names it love. Love itself is present primarily in the loving attention given to the little tree in the first two stanzas, and in the final two stanzas’ turn to action, risking death.

The role of death in this poem is notable, positioned at the boundary between self and other. The force of desire risks two kinds of death: the peril to the subject in crossing over to the beloved (risking not only physical death but perhaps a death or change in subjectivity itself in union), on the one hand, and the death of not-having, on the other, as the subject is suspended on the shore, his life emptied into the distance separating him from her. In the shift from the first two stanzas to the last, the poem highlights a threshold at which one risk outweighs another, a tipping point at which the pleasures of memory and imagination do not suffice, and the pain of distance outmeasures the pain of crossing over.

---

<sup>4</sup> Translation by Sam Hamil, in *The Erotic Spirit*, ed. Sam Hamil (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 1. An earlier translation can be found in M. Samivel, *The Glory of Egypt* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1955), 99. Because my language abilities do not include ancient Egyptian, I have limited my reading to Hamil’s translation of this poem, focusing primarily on the semantic content and sequencing in the poem and not on those formal features that depend on reference to the original language, such as musicality, syntactic arrangement, and lexical and idiomatic choices. I work instead with Hamil’s translation as a poem in its own right and as a suggestion of how desire was composed at this earliest stage of lyric history.

<sup>5</sup> The spatiotemporal reach invoked in this poem is repeated in a long history of distasteful poems whose longing gaze looks not to a human beloved but to a place, a land. This longer history ranges from Psalm 137 to Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (3.1) to Derek Walcott’s “A Far Cry from Africa” and Mahmoud Darwish’s “In Her Absence I Created Her Image.” Poems of homesickness and exilic longing can be seen to occupy the attentional modes of both desire and recollection—a recollection charged with the tensed interval of desire or a desire shot through with temporal pastness and the uncertainty of return.

Desire's lack holds taut the interval of attention. Even when externally imposed (by, for example, wide water and toothed beasts), the restraint or constraint of not-having maintains attention's gaze, its necessary interval of relation, the hyphen of A-B. Closing the gap risks another kind of death, that of desire itself in the closure of its prelapsarian state of hunger, curiosity, the heightened sensitivity or "plenty" of hunger. Crossing the river marks a shift toward *love* and away from desire. For this reason some poems of desire actively maintain this hunger, resisting the closing of desire's gap. There is a sense that as soon as this gap is closed, the tautness of attention felt at the peak of longing also lapses, relaxes, dies.<sup>6</sup> Emily Dickinson's poem 579 is explicitly *about* the maintenance of hunger and the "hurt" of plenty:

I had been hungry, all the Years—  
 My Noon had Come—to dine—  
 I trembling drew the Table near—  
 And touched the Curious Wine—  
  
 'Twas this on Tables I had seen—  
 When turning, hungry, Home  
 I looked in Windows, for Wealth  
 I could not hope—for Mine—  
  
 I did not know the ample Bread—  
 'Twas so unlike the Crumb  
 The Birds and I, had often shared  
 In Nature's—Dining Room—  
  
 The Plenty hurt me—'twas so new—  
 Myself felt ill—and odd—  
 As Berry—of a Mountain Bush—  
 Transplanted—to a Road—  
  
 Nor was I hungry—so I found  
 That Hunger—was a way  
 Of Persons outside Windows—  
 The Entering—takes away.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Writing about this relationship between desire and not-having in poetic language, Allen Grossman notes, "Insofar as true-love imports a simultaneity (consistent with predication), it appears to intend a violation of what appears to be the logic of signification by language. As evidence of this, consider the following very simple observation: there are many poems of not yet having (petitional poems, as it were, or poems of seduction), and there are also poems (though proportionally to the first type many fewer) of having had (doxological poems as it were, e.g., the aubade). But there are no poems (certainly no Western poems) situated upon the zero point of having, of union just so. At that moment, the coincidence of consciousness and experience, language disappears and with it representation as depiction—for the same reasons, no doubt, that there are no private languages nor for that matter perfectly public languages." Allen Grossman, *True-Love: Essays on Poetry and Valuing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 34. Grossman goes on to claim that at a more essential level, "[p]oetry, like language itself, does not reach to the real."

<sup>7</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Back Bay Books, Little, Brown, 1960), 283.

Physical hunger becomes, for Dickinson, a metaphor for human desire, and the object of desire itself wavers in this poem between the “plenty” of the table and the plenty of desire itself. An indecisiveness emerges between these two conflicting aims—to enter and be full, or to remain outside (or on the far shore), so as to prolong and savor the pleasure of desire itself. The dashes that proliferate in this poem, and throughout Dickinson’s oeuvre of hungry texts, perforate the lines with absences, breaths held. The rhythmic effect of these silences in this poem contributes to the sense of hesitation, as the speaker falters between entry and resistance, between fulfillment and abstinence. The “plenty” of “ample Bread” at life’s “Noon” is made all the more sharp and acutely desired when punctuated by refusal, when held rhythmically at bay. Waiting, as the lover waits on the far shore, becomes a way of tasting without tasting, touching without entering.

We find this hesitation echoed throughout the poetry of desire, underlining its centrality to desire’s attentional self-preservation in distance and delay. *Twelfth Night*’s Feste insists that “In delay there lies no plenty,”<sup>8</sup> while Ben Jonson’s translation of Petronius Arbiter takes a comic angle on Dickinson’s restraint, this time more explicitly directed at the too-brief life span of passionate “doing” in comparison to the dance of foreplay:

Foeda est in coitu, et brevis voluptas,  
 Et tædet Veneris statim peractæ.  
 Non ergo ut pecudes libidinosæ,  
 Caci protinùs irruamus illuc:  
 Nam languescit amor peritque flamma,  
 Sed sic, sic, sine fine feriati,  
 Et tecum jaceamus osculantes:  
 Hic nullus labor est, ruborque nullus;  
 Hoc juvit, juvat, et diu juvabit:  
 Hoc non deficit, incipitque semper.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, poems that take place in or after the *crossing* of the Nile, in or after the *taking* of the ample bread, are no longer poems of desire. In these poems that attentional tension of longing, craving, and lack becomes filled and fulfilled in the act of enjoyment, description, pleasure, a fuller and less vexed mode of attention whose interested craning has been slaked and slackened. Marcus Argentarius writes of the act (or the rich memory of the act) of possession in the following poem:

<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 2.3.50. In his annotated edition of the plays, Samuel Johnson noted that the line is a play on the saying “In decay there lies no plenty”: “A reproof of avarice, which stores up perishable fruits till they decay. To these fruits the Poet, humorously, compares youth or virginity; which, he says, is a *stuff will not endure*.” Samuel Johnson, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, vol. 2 (London: J. and R. Tonson, 1765), 381.

<sup>9</sup> Petronius Arbiter, “Fragmentum,” translated by Ben Jonson in *The Works of Ben Jonson* (London: Edward Moxon, 1938), 740. Jonson’s translation is reprinted in Hamil, *Erotic Spirit*, 33: “Doing, a filthy pleasure is, and short; / And done, we straight repent us of the sport: / Let us not rush blindly on unto it; / Like lustful beasts, that only know to do it: / For lust will languish, and that heat decay. / Be thus, thus, keeping endless holiday, / Let us together closely lie and kiss, / There is no labour, nor no shame in this; / This hath pleased, doth please, and long will please; never / Can this decay, but is beginning ever.”

Στέρνα περι στέρνοις, μαστῶ δ' ἐπὶ μαστὸν ἐρείσας,  
 χεῖλεά τε γλυκεροῖς χεῖλεσι συμπίεσας  
 Ἀντιγόνης, καὶ χρῶτα λαβῶν πρὸς χρῶτα, τὰ λοιπὰ  
 σιγῶ, μάρτυς ἐφ' οἷς λύχνος ἐπεγράφετο.<sup>10</sup>

Where Dickinson's form was riddled with suspensions and withholdings and Jonson's translation was a dance of flirtation and delay, the syntax here is notably solid, focused on the part-to-part pairing of lover to lover, in recalled physical immediacy. The only withholding is the complete picture, which rests unprecariouly in memory, silenced only by discretion, a secret between the speaker and the lamp's silent witness. There is none of longing's distance here, no interval separating the object from perception. With nothing separating subject and object, breast upon breast and lips between lips, the poem produces the proximity and immediacy of love, not the tense interval of desire. The attentional stance is still inflected as strongly with interest, but this time it is the interest of possession, not of want. The poem's attentional field is full; nothing is missing or missed. The only subtle element of desire in the poem sneaks in in the use of the past tense: that the union takes place in memory signals a lack in the present.

In the poetry of both love and desire, the attentional lens is focalized—the degrees of selectivity and concentration are high, so that the object (or figure, to use Peter Stockwell's terminology)<sup>11</sup> fills most of the attentional field, and the ground recedes. Yet because of the heightened degree of interest, unlike in the ode, the subject's consciousness of its own standing in relation (either of distance or of proximity) to the object cuts into the attentional centrality of the object: I attend not only to the object on its own, in and for itself, but also to my own subjective position, my feelings for it, my longing, my distance, my proximity, my lack.

Unique to the poetics of desirous attention is the way it translates across other modes of attending, inflecting the act of attention to objects of direct perception (this apple I cannot [yet] bite into), remembrance (the boy I loved and lost), and imagination (my fantasy of one who does not exist). The object of attention need not be present, human, or even real to be desired. It is useful to recognize love poetry as possessed of a specific set of dynamics that can take place in a wide variety of modes and semantic settings. This allows us to trace the working of desirous attention as it maps and reconstellates our conventional assumptions about "love poetry."

One of the easy assumptions about love poetry is that it describes a simple one-to-one relation between lover and beloved—that the poem is composed around a singular object, either of desire or of love. Yet a closer look at the dynamics of love in a given poem often troubles this assumption: looking at a well-known sonnet seemingly addressed to a single "thee," we find more than one object of attention at play, layered (and even competing with one another) in different planes of the reading experience:

<sup>10</sup> Marcus Argentarius, in A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page, eds., *The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip and Some Contemporary Epigrams*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 154. Hamil (*Erotic Spirit*, 24) has translated this poem as follows: "Her perfect naked breast / Upon my breast, / Her lips between my lips, / I lay in perfect bliss / With lovely Antigone, / Nothing caught between us. / I will not tell the rest. / Only the lamp bore witness."

<sup>11</sup> Peter Stockwell, "Surreal Figures," in *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, ed. Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen (London: Routledge, 2003), 15–16.

Shall I compare thee to a Sommer's day?  
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate;  
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
 And Sommer's lease hath all too short a date;  
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
 And every fair from fair some-time declines,  
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
 But thy eternal Sommer shall not fade,  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
 Nor shall Death brag thou wandr'st in his shade,  
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:  
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

The poem opens with an address to "thee," the object of the speaker's attention. The opening line ends with a question mark, calling attention to the very framing of the poem itself and involving its dedicated object in its very composition. The question's upward lilt lights the opening. Posed to the reader or listener, the opening question also serves as invocation, placing the lover/writer, the beloved/reader, into a dialogue of involvement. As the poem moves forward, this dynamic of involvement and layered address is heightened by the repeated layering of phrases separated by semicolons, so that each new rhetorical turn is contained within the one before. Interestingly, the beloved his/herself is remarkably absent from the poem, present only in the secondariness of comparison: "more lovely and more temperate." More breath is given by far to the lesser comparative objects—the rough winds, the buds of May, summer's lease, the eye of heaven. The beloved is not present in any detail, only as a greater-than behind the description of a beloved world and its seasons, and present only in pronoun form: "thee," "thou," "thy." In the couplet, following the colon, we arrive at a kind of kernel of the poem's attention: the "thee" of the poem gives way to another beloved, the "this" that is the poem itself, and the poem seems to hold itself forward as the object of attention, the object that has been forming over the course of the poem through each additional layer of comparison. Indeed, the "thee" seems to morph over the course of the poem from the living beloved to the textual beloved, from the living beloved to the life-giving text. Here, "this" (the poem) has the definitive "last word." This shift also complicates the original gesture of praise, as the beloved is, by poem's end, not only left out in the cold as attention turns to the poem itself but also, it seems, no longer living, given life only by the text. On the one hand, in its focal shift from "thee" to "this," Shakespeare's poem performs the process of aesthetic immortalization of which it speaks; on the other, we find a veneration of the poem as the "beloved" slips, unmarked, from the frame—unmarked until the final line, in which "thee" has the last word: "So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." The "thee" of the first line's open question forms a chiasmus (ABBA) with the "this-this-thee" of the final line.

Turning a fresh eye to sonnet 18 is difficult today, when the opening line and the couplet (the lines that tend to be venerated in the sonnets, while the middle sections fall into a kind of haze) have become timeworn. Helen Vendler has noted, "To come, as a commentator, on this—the

most familiar of the poems . . . is both a balm and a test: what remains to be said?”<sup>12</sup> To respond to this “test” requires a deliberate act of slowing down, taking each line singly, setting it apart, paying a different kind of attention. And while it is true that cultural and critical absorption of this sonnet have been high, the subtle but significant work it does on our transitive attentional lens, paired with the lack of critical account of Shakespeare’s work as a trainer of the attention, merits its continued consideration from fresh vantages.

Vendler’s formalist approach focuses on the “this,” the formal object of attention, emphasizing not the *speaker’s* attentive gaze but the reader’s, exercised by Shakespeare’s “compositional powers” “to confer greater and greater mental scope on any whim of the imagination, enacting that widening gradually, so that the experience of reading a poem becomes the experience of pushing back the horizons of thought.” Indeed, she argues that “Shakespeare encourages alertness in his reader.”<sup>13</sup> Yet her analysis of sonnet 18’s widening conceptual and structural horizon focuses primarily within the *semantic* field (widening representational scope, a stretch to the imaginative mind’s eye, a widening of the temporal field represented in the language of the poem). Her treatment of the “object” of attention in sonnet 18 is the object of the *speaker’s* attraction, the semantic object: “It is difficult,” she writes, “to settle on a word for the object of the speaker’s affections. Each word prejudices the case. The ‘beloved’? The ‘object’? The ‘friend’? The ‘dark lady’?”<sup>14</sup> Contra arguments from the ethical criticism camp on how Shakespeare treated this shape-shifting object, she asserts, “The ethics of lyric writing lies in the accuracy of its *representation* of inner life, and in that alone”<sup>15</sup>—a statement that takes for granted the primacy of the poem’s *representational* capacities, leaving aside the other ways in which the sonnet might “encourage alertness.” The duty of the lyric is not to *produce* or *affect* inner life but to *represent* it. While her introduction identifies the compositional coup of the poem in the heightening of *readerly* attention, Vendler’s commentary remains primarily on the representational plane. We find a similar tension between the objects of the poem’s representational work and the poem’s object-like qualities, its structural dynamics, in Vendler’s recognition of the contrast between the “obviousness” of the sonnets’ propositional content (“love, jealousy, time’s depredations”) and the complexity of their effects. “Taken as a single object,” she observes, the sonnet sequence as a whole displays “dispersive gaps and uncertainties between its individual units. It is on just such large uncertainties that the small certainties of single sonnets float and collide.”<sup>16</sup> Vender sets her attention on the “unifying forces” at play in each sonnet, aiming to bring forth each poem’s “visible core.” This approach suggests the unfolding of a poetic object whose constitutive semantic matter is banal but whose formal dynamics or “surface” effects are anything but. However, despite its luminous account of the “forces” and “surfaces” at play in sonnet 18 and the vitality of its interpretive contribution, her commentary slips too easily between forms of analysis—between reading for symbolic significance, representational content, structural forces, and readerly effects—without distinction. This signals a stress point between a formalist, almost-mechanistic mode of reading and the desire to make form *mean*, to render the mechanism representational.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 120.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 (my emphasis).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33. In an impish turn to contemporary love lyric, Vendler quips that “Frank O’Hara had a better sense for the essential semantic emptiness of love lyrics when he represented them . . . as ‘saying’ ‘I need you, you need me, yum, yum,’” concluding that “[t]he appeal of lyric lies somewhere else than in its paraphrasable statement” (14).

The valued work of the poem is located not at the semantic level but in its formal dynamics, yet its significance lies not in the readerly effect (or the production of "alertness") but in what is "represented" or "displayed" in each sonnet. In contrast to this approach to the individual sonnet, Vendler's discussion of the sequence as a whole, the sum of these representations, assesses it not in terms of its representational or symbolic potential but as a "single object" in itself, an object that acts upon the reader. It does not explore the important differences at the fault lines between the representational field, the semantic content of the poem, and the related but distinct formal field of readerly attention in which representation plays a significant but nonetheless partial role. There is no mention of the *poem* as one of the several potential "objects" of the speaker's attraction, nor does she spend time on the important shift from semantic to formal object flagged *within the semantic field itself* in the poem's last line, probably because it is too obvious, a classic take on the Petrarchan convention of immortalization. And yet, sonnet 18 offers a rich example of a poem that plays actively with the convergence and divergence of semantic and formal attentional planes, in which the two engage in a bidirectional relation of translation, competition, and mutual constitution.

The loss (or at least precarity) suggested in Shakespeare's transposition of "thee" to "this" can be seen at the semiotic level as well, in the translation of living reality into language. Just as in George Oppen's "Psalm,"<sup>17</sup> the relationship between the formal and the semantic object of attention also brings to the fore the essential relationship between sign and signified, word and thing (and, at the ontological level, between phenomenal representations and noumenal objects). In "Meditation at Lagunitas" Robert Hass opens with "All the new thinking is about loss." And it's true, it is. "In this it resembles all the old thinking." After Hegel, after Heidegger, after Derrida, we learned and recited the ways in which language takes away presence, the way it replaces life with markers, the living cat with its three-letter supplement, the living flower with a dry snake of symbols, the living woman with a name, a noun, nothing. We learned that living particulars are only fallen and third-order stabs at the ideal, and the ideal is a space in which no life draws breath—a canceling out that centers on language's failure in the first instance and on its capacity to harm in the second:

The idea, for example, that each particular erases  
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-  
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk  
of that black birch is, by his presence,  
some tragic calling off from a first world  
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,  
because there is in this world no one thing  
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,  
a word is elegy to what it signifies.<sup>18</sup>

Hass's poem meditates on this thinking, new and old, inquiring about another way. The speaker, rehearsing these critical-theoretical losses in conversation with a friend, hears in the friend's voice "a thin wire of grief, a tone / almost querulous. After a while I understood that, / talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice / pine, hair, woman, you, and I.*"

<sup>17</sup> George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York: New Directions, 2002), 99.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas," in *Praise* (New York: Ecco, 1979), 4–5.

What if the course of language sometimes runs, Hass's speaker seems to invite us to ask, another way? Not into the "endless distances" of desire's lacks and the small but erosive transpositions of presence into abstraction but into presence, via the presence—far from abstract, full of mouth and tongue and the deep echo chambers of the ear—of poetic language, its body a living form among, not in the stead of, others, capable of opening rivers of memory and imagination and channeling them to the forefront of immediate perception? Speaking out of the memory of an act of love, the speaker confesses: "I felt a violent wonder at her presence / like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river / with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat, / muddy places where we caught little orange-silver fish / called *pumpkinseed*." "We can't do anything with an object that has no name,"<sup>19</sup> wrote Maurice Blanchot, one of the great theorizers of the losses inherent in language.<sup>20</sup> We name things in order to "do things" or even to *be* in relation to things.

There is tension between proximity and distance, between attention and neglect. Things come to the fore only to recede or refuse our grasp. The beloved is the beloved until the loving gaze alights instead on the act of love itself, the medium of the love song, the beauty of the vessel. "Thee" is wiped out, or at least neglected (she falls from the frame of my attention), in my attention to the formal beauty of "this." This erasure has been articulated by Blanchot as a primary linguistic loss: "something was there and is no longer there. Something has disappeared." The question follows:

How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*? The language of literature is a search for this moment which precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence; it wants the cat to exist, the pebble *taking the side of things*, not man, but the pebble, and in this pebble what man rejects by saying it, what is the foundation of speech and what speech excludes in speaking.... My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature—this is given to me and gives me more than I can understand. Just now the reality of words was an obstacle. Now, it is my only chance.<sup>21</sup>

There's a Wallace Stevens poem that comes to mind here, one of his more morbid and death-fixed poems but one that speaks to poetry's act of bringing forth object *in the flesh*:

Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbador  
 Within our bellies, we her chariot.  
 Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,

<sup>19</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill / Barrytown, 1999), 379.

<sup>20</sup> "I say, 'This woman.' Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and all poets whose theme is the essence of poetry have felt that the act of naming is disquieting and marvelous. A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, 'This woman' I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being—the very fact that it does not exist" (ibid.). Blanchot also brought attention to Hegel's statement that "Adam's first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence (as existing creatures)," from a collection of essays entitled *System of 1803–1804*, written prior to *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In a note Blanchot points out that "[Alexandre] Kojève, in his *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, interpreting a passage from *The Phenomenology*, demonstrates in a remarkable way how for Hegel comprehension was equivalent to murder" (379).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 383.

The lashes of that eye and its white lid.  
 Here is the cheek on which the lid declined,  
 And finger after finger, here, the hand,  
 The genius of that cheek. Here are the lips,  
 The bundle of the body and her feet.  
 Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbador.<sup>22</sup>

This is a different lyric beloved—not the living Badroulbador but her corpse, brought into life through language (here of course hammered home as the semantic and theoretical object of Stevens’s characteristically theoretically inclined poem). The *object* of the woman is allowed to decompose a little “within our bellies,” is brought forth in full material array, and is rendered present and granular, particularized, in poetic deixis: “Here is an eye. And here are, one by one, / the lashes of that eye and its white lid. / . . . / And finger after finger, here, the hand.” The first and last lines bind the “bundle” of the body, head to foot. What is composed is the body of the poem, brought into terrible visceral presence not in the soft gaze of “false compare” but in the stark light of attention, its ability to meditate in hyperfocus on the materiality—and mortality—of its object.

Does Stevens’s act of bringing the woman “out of the tomb” change the way we might read the transposition, or perhaps recomposition (for it does not seem a decomposition), of “thee” and “this” in sonnet 18? Yes, it does. Does the river of memory from woman to word in Hass’s poem, each syntactical shift and each syllable a physical pathway to the next memory, remain semantically fidelitous to the woman herself? No, it doesn’t: “It hardly had to do with her.” We’ve moved from desire to sex to another thirst and another salt, from one river to another, backward in time, deeper into the mud, another music, sillier, more senseless, to some deeply submerged place of memory where the small fish—their name, too, a name for something even smaller—still swim. How did we get here? Syntactically, we’ve been led in nested degrees of reference, and the sentence never brought us back to its original object, the object of lovemaking. It comes to a full stop farthest from its original object but closest to its true love, the formal object, the triplet “lo-li-ta” name that means almost nothing: “pumpkinseed.” “There are moments when the body is as numinous / as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.” The good flesh—that flesh, for being present, for bringing us back to the present, is good. That a present continues, now with us and beyond us, is also good.

One might go back and reread Oppen’s “Psalm” in this light, with an eye for the “this” of “In this in which the wild deer / startle and stare out,” listening differently for the “small nouns / Crying faith.” What faith is nested in the “this” of the poem? Why is there a faith act in the monosyllable of the small noun? What is risked, what is ventured? What’s at stake in our attending to an object of attention in this way? For Blanchot, it’s a matter as large and, perhaps more importantly, as small as existence: “Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book. Yes, happily language is a thing: it is a written thing, a bit of bark, a sliver of rock, a fragment of clay in which the reality of the earth continues to exist.”<sup>23</sup> Say it: “*blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.*”<sup>24</sup> A

<sup>22</sup> Wallace Stevens, “The Worms at Heaven’s Gate,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 40.

<sup>23</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death,” 383–84.

<sup>24</sup> Hass, “Meditation at Lagunitas,” 4.