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Spring 5-1-2009

## The Spiritual Value of Poetic Expression

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### Recommended Citation

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## I. Introduction: Language Set Free

The poem holds on at the edge of itself; so as to exist, it ceaselessly calls and hauls itself  
 from its Now-no-more back into its Ever-yet.  
 But this Ever-yet could only be an act of speaking. Not simply language and probably not  
 just verbal “correspondence” either.  
 But actualized language, set free under the sign of a radical individuation, which at the  
 same time stays mindful of the limits drawn by language, the possibilities opened by  
 language.  
 This Ever-yet of poems can only be found in a poem by someone who does not forget  
 that he speaks from the angle of inclination of his very being, his creatureliness.

—Paul Celan

Poetic expression constantly vacillates between its origin and its  
 completion: it dies the moment it is born out of the speaker—it is *said*, it is  
*done*—but is continuously resurrected in the hearer or reader, so that, inasmuch as  
 the expression possesses an independent existence, it exists as a potentiality. It is  
 not in a fixed relationship with its meaning; rather, the meaning is cyclically  
 renewed as the sublation of the dialectic between the expression itself and the  
 consciousness that receives it. This is the distinction between poetic expression  
 and the mere ‘correspondence’ mentioned by Celan. The ‘correspondence’ is  
 directed, and remains linear; it has only one life and only one ‘correct’ meaning. It  
 seems, especially to its speaker, that it can only either be comprehended or  
 misunderstood against its intended meaning, with little or no grey area, while  
 poetic expression has about it an aura of meaningspace.

*Poetic expression* refers to more than simply poetry *per se*. Indeed, the  
 quotation above is from a speech entitled “The Meridian” that Paul Celan gave  
 when he was awarded the Georg Büchner Prize. The entire speech borders on the  
 surreal; it is a poem in paragraphs, as are myriad forms of expression that might

be classified as something other than poetry *per se*. Indeed, each text that I consider possesses qualities of poetic expression, whether it be Bruce Fink's clinical applications of Lacan's theories on psychoanalysis, which I discuss when I explore the psychoanalytic construction of subjecthood, or Chögyam Trungpa's inspired writings against an egoistically constructed spirituality, which are the foundation for my discussion of the ego within Tibetan Buddhism. But one of the most poetically inclined theoretical contributions to this project is arguably Gilles Deleuze's text on *Bergsonism*, parts of which cast a brilliant light on Paul Celan's words and offer a frame (though an elastic one, to be sure) for this entire project.

In the final chapter of his text, Deleuze explores and elucidates Bergson's conceptions of the *possible*, *real*,<sup>1</sup> *virtual* and *actual*. In this model, the real precedes and delimits what is considered the possible; in Deleuze's words, what becomes real (for the real and the possible are cyclically related to one another) is "ready-made...pre-existent to itself," and, he goes on to say, "[i]n fact, it is not the real that resembles the possible, it is the possible that resembles the real." Current 'realities' condition future conceptions of the possible. "Possibility" becomes an illusory concept, or as Deleuze says, it becomes "a false notion, the source of false problems."<sup>2</sup> It is not difficult to see how such a false notion would give rise to *false consciousness*: perception built on delusions regarding what is—or what *can* be—real. Countering false consciousness is the aim of most forms of spirituality, though each has different considerations regarding what constitutes

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<sup>1</sup> This is not the same formulation of the *real* that will be used later in this paper; here, the term is used strictly in Bergson's, and subsequently Deleuze's, sense.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*. (New York: Zone Books, 1988) 98.

false consciousness and what comprises true consciousness, or enlightenment. I would say (though this will probably be a contentious proclamation to many) that most systems of self-awareness, such as psychoanalysis, are intrinsically spiritual, as they reveal us—and what is *not* us—to ourselves and aid us in bringing a sense of meaning to life, albeit not necessarily a cosmological one.

There is a system that is both spiritual *prima facie* and that closely parallels psychoanalysis in many ways, which is Buddhism. In this paper, I will be looking mainly at certain aspects of Tibetan Buddhism as well as English translations of Buddhist texts originally written in Sanskrit, which serve as foundational texts for a variety of the sects that have developed over time. *False consciousness* as I describe it above is ultimately a Buddhist concept. In much Buddhist thought, as we will see, false consciousness is associated with the cultivation of, and identification with, an ego-self that perpetuates delusion in order to preserve itself. This ego-self obscures a multidimensional, dynamic Mindspace similar to Deleuze's conception of the *virtual*.

For Bergson, and subsequently Deleuze, the virtual is, crucially, monistic: it is the “point of unification,” a “totality” or “Whole.”<sup>3</sup> As this virtual Whole is actualized, or as it becomes *actual*, it follows what Deleuze calls the rules of “difference or divergence and creation,” while the realization of the possible is conditioned by “resemblance” and “limitation.”<sup>4</sup> The virtual is linked to *potential* rather than *possibility*, and though this distinction may at first glance seem merely semantic, I think that when contemplated, it becomes clearer that possibility is in

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<sup>3</sup> Deleuze 93

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze 97

many ways a negative term: it immediately implies its opposite, *impossibility*, which displays the ‘rule of limitation’ mentioned above. The ‘rule of resemblance’ refers to the self-referential nature of the real/possible formulation. Potential, on the other hand, is a more positive term with less prescriptive, more generative connotations, exhibiting the rules of creative differentiation attributed to actualization by Deleuze.

But what does this mean in terms of language? To answer this question, I will turn again to Celan’s quotation: he speaks of “actualized language, set free under the sign of a radical individuation.” This would imply that language, too, springs from a virtual Wholeness, a virtual Babelian cacophony of Language, and that it must also undergo a process by which it moves from virtuality into actuality: the Language-potential is not language per se. From the simplest point of view, actualization, inasmuch as it necessitates differentiation, splits language into its various groupings: French, German, Swahili, and so forth. These subgroups of Language comprise smaller components, with categories and differentiated units overlapping as in a Venn diagram. But there is another, much more crucial aspect to actualization without which the process is utterly incomplete, which is its generative capability. Deleuze writes,

For what coexisted in the virtual ceases to coexist in the actual and is distributed in lines or parts that cannot be summed up, each one retaining the whole, except from a certain perspective... These lines of differentiation are therefore truly creative: They only actualize by inventing, they create in these conditions the physical, vital or psychical representative of the ontological level that they embody.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Deleuze 101

This is the real force of Celan's quotation: actualized language is not simply individuated, it is *radically* individuated, that is, as speech calls language out of virtuality, it creates language anew in every moment of expression. When language is spoken or received by one who is in some way aware<sup>6</sup> of the entire process of actualization, the creation as well as the differentiation—when spoken by Celan, for example—language is *set free*: free from its function as sheer signification, free from its oppressively direct correspondence to Things and Ideas, free from its burdensome responsibility to reason and rationality, free to dance, naked and joyous and shining, around the speaker to the rhythm of his breath.

Celan addresses the issue of awareness directly in his quotation, when he insists that the 'Ever-yet' of poems is only apparent to someone who "does not forget that he speaks from the angle of inclination of his very being, his creatureliness." This 'angle of inclination' is the angle of each individual's trajectory from the foundation of Being; of animal existence. That is, it is the particular way in which each creature is *actualized*, is pulled out of amorphous virtuality, the differentiation that allows each person to be unique in actuality. It does not describe *identity* or a personal, fated *soul*, rather, it describes merely the plurality of human manifestation against the backdrop of undifferentiated creaturehood. For *identity*, as we will come to understand throughout this paper, is an artificial construction, a cancerous corruption of the angle of inclination

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<sup>6</sup> When I say 'aware' here, I do not mean that the speaker or receiver must necessarily express the process in Deleuze's or Celan's terms, or that they must consciously follow the process step by step, but rather that they intuit that language is more than simply a system of signification and take joy in exploring and expressing that 'more'.

discussed by Celan. What is commonly considered as one's *identity* is amassed, more or less consciously, throughout a lifetime, while individuation simply unfolds, or develops. It is a subtle yet extraordinarily significant distinction: Celan is not urging that we simply be aware of the ways in which our personal identities or subjectivities color our receptions and communications, but rather, that we understand that every communication originates and terminates cyclically in the very fact of our subjecthood. Language can only be 'called out' of virtuality by those who understand that they themselves also underwent (and continue to undergo) the process of actualization, even if they do not understand it in those particular terms. We need to understand ourselves first as creatures before we can elevate ourselves as creators.

But what constitutes our *creatureliness*? What comprises us, not physiologically, but psychologically and, indeed, spiritually? There are myriad answers, and no one, including myself, can offer anything other than suggestions and partial explanations. But if we acknowledge that our understanding is incomplete and varied—indeed, if we celebrate that incompleteness—we can begin to approach our selves and our expressions as elastic constellations: bodies of moments, bodies of words and sounds and light and space, dynamic and infinitely, infinitely open.

## II(a). Constructing the Self: The Psychoanalytic Subject

When ‘I’ speak (or write, *express*, and so forth), who or what is actually speaking? It would be convenient if this ‘I’ could refer to a single, unified, and neatly packaged individual consciousness, some individual point of reference. And yet, this does not appear to be the case. The poet Arthur Rimbaud said famously “The I is an other” (“Je est un autre”) in a letter to Paul Demeny.<sup>7</sup> When he said this, Rimbaud could not have known that he was articulating one of the fundamental tenets of Lacanian thought. This utterance implies, at least in part, that the ‘I’ of speech refers to only a portion of that which constitutes what is generally thought of as a [unified] self. Lacan writes, “The point is not to know whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather to know whether, when I speak of myself, I am the same as the self of whom I speak.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, ‘I’ am not the same as this self of enunciation.

Indeed “self” itself is an especially problematic term, because, as (in common parlance) it points to an illusory unification, it is deceptively vague. However, I believe I can actually make good use of this vagueness if I use it deliberately, pointedly, and so from this point onward, when I use the term ‘self’ it will be specifically to signify this illusory unification, the sum of the parts as it were.

Specifically, the ‘I’ of speech refers to the ego—the portion of the self that is formed during the early stages of life in what Lacan calls the “mirror phase.”

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur Rimbaud and Claude Jeancolas, *Les lettres manuscrites de Rimbaud*. (Paris : Textuel, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*. (New York: Norton Books, 1999) 430.



The mirror phase, which occurs at around six to eighteen months of age, describes the point at which the child locates her identity in an image that is external to her: her own reflection. The reflection becomes for the child the “ideal ego” (not to be confused with the “ego-ideal”), that is, the child’s own image comes to fascinate her and she becomes convinced that she *is* this very image and that it is this image, this self-as-image, that the child’s mother finds desirable enough for her to provide the child with the necessary care. This marks the beginning of the fascination with the self as such, and particularly with the self as separate, and vulnerable in its separation. This fascination becomes a preoccupation with self-preservation, not simply *against* pain or death, but *for* the *selfhood*, or identity.

A problem then inevitably develops when the child comes to realize that this image only succeeds in ‘winning’ the parent’s affection, so to speak, when it conforms to the desire of the parent—that this “ideal ego” must succumb to an “ego-ideal” represented by and structured by the parents’ desire (for the child to do certain things at certain times, to act in certain ways, and so forth). In addition, the child perceives not only that her mother desires, but also that there is something other than the child herself that her mother desires; that the child alone is not sufficient to (ful)fill her mother’s desire.

In fact, nothing is sufficient to fulfill desire. ‘Lack’ is fundamental. We lack, and therefore we desire, and in many senses, therefore we live dynamically rather than merely existing in stasis. In Freud’s thought, this dynamic quality is attributed to the force of Eros, which he opposes to what he labels the death instinct. In Lacan’s thought, life is completely based upon desire—it is easy to

discern an associative or connotative link between the two terms, Eros and desire. Despite the common usage of the term, desire in this sense is not exclusively sexual and does not signify fleshlust, though desire can (and does) certainly manifest in that way.

Rather, 'desire' describes our search for something that can fill our lack, a doomed quest—for since lack is fundamental by definition, nothing can compensate for it. This is the agony of desire—the familiar experience of not wanting something once you get it no matter how preoccupied you were with desiring it. Desire absolutely cannot be satisfied; for both Freud and Lacan, complete satisfaction signifies death. But inevitably, in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we cling to the belief that desire can be satisfied *if only* we had this, or that, thus setting ourselves up for constant and often devastating disappointment. It is in this disappointment that life as most of us know it is constituted: every disappointment triggers another cycle of desire, for while desire can manifest as conscious want, its origin is largely unconscious. Desire does not succumb to rationality; it does not wither in the face of disappointment or perceived impossibility as we might sometimes consciously attempt to force it to, because desire remains largely unknown to us. It is rather like a dandelion: the part above the surface, exposed to consciousness, is only the scantest portion of the whole, while the root system remains underground. And, as with a dandelion, eradicating the visible portion does nothing to prevent the root from generating another stalk. Certain egoistic approaches to meditation (as, for example, in the elementary stages of Buddhist meditation, before some degree of enlightenment

or ego-dismantling has been achieved, or as in some New Age affirmation and visualization techniques, among others), only address desire's stalk rather than its root, and if the subject is not careful, she becomes fascinated with the very act of perpetually cutting the stalk and fails to do any actual uprooting. She becomes, in other words, caught in the critical tension between desire and satisfaction, desire and annihilation.

So we are compelled to act by desires that remain largely unknown to us, buried in the earth of the unconscious. Perhaps we catch glimpses in struggles with inclinations that seem alien to us, and yet, which we cannot seem to put out of our minds, inclinations that drive us to do things that we do not seem to *want* to do with our conscious minds, as certain people experience when they cheat on their spouses, or others when they sabotage their own would-be successes by doing anything from oversleeping at particularly inopportune times to walking away at the last minute from situations in which they fully intended to participate.

Ultimately, what we learn from the constant cycle of desire and disappointment is that the disappointment is inevitable *because* what we actually desire *is to desire*, not to be satisfied. In its strongest manifestations desire elicits in us a desperate longing that is at once experienced as a lack, an emptiness that must be filled, but that is also strangely scintillating and utterly fascinating to its subject. This simultaneous experience of extreme hunger and intense satisfaction is what Lacan refers to as *jouissance*.

While attempting to meditate one day, certain thoughts that I wrote down at the time in a notebook brought me to a greater, more tangible understanding of

jouissance. I am quoting the following passage more or less directly instead of immediately translating it into academic discourse because I think the revelatory nature of the experience is significant:

*Meditation reveals to me the agony of walking the edge of a precipice—the agony of wanting to fall because falling would kill the fear of falling; falling would kill the agony of walking the edge. In sitting [meditation], ‘falling’ would be coming out of meditation—it is almost meditating successfully that one is afraid of because it extends the agonizing fear of ‘failing’ to meditate. During the day, all I want to do is meditate, but when I actually sit down, I want to do anything but, even though the desire to meditate is still there, so the desire to get up and the desire to sit create an agonizing struggle, sometimes causing my eyes to pop open without my even being conscious of it. The suspension of the agony of continuing to sit—of succeeding to remain in agony—this can only be characterized as jouissance...*

The struggle with falling is in direct correlation to the relationship between Eros and the death instinct in Freudian thought. Freud describes Eros as a “sexual instinct” but goes on to say that it can also signify the instinct toward self-preservation. The death instinct is sadistic, a collection of “destructive impulses.”<sup>9</sup> In the precipice scenario above, Eros would manifest as the desire to successfully walk the edge, while the death instinct would quite literally manifest as the desire to fall. Falling can be seen as a result of the unconscious causing the body to waver and shake (seemingly) uncontrollably. Jouissance manifests as the

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<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*. (New York: Norton Books, 1960) 36-39.

overwhelming yet ecstatic strain that results from the perpetual struggle between Eros and what I will call the death instinct.<sup>10</sup> The ego seems to be theoretically situated between these two forces, acting as a kind of mediator: when the strain becomes too great by the ego's measure, it acts to distract, to deflect, to provide an outlet for the energy that builds up like heat between two palms rubbing together. This outlet can be, among other things, an outburst of anger or frustration, or it can be orgasm.

It is the ego, then, that thwarts meditation in a bid for its own survival. Meditation is a process by which the ego can be dissipated or shattered, and far from being a passive participant in this process, the ego manipulates both the other aspects of the self, and external objects and phenomena for the purpose of sustaining itself and maintaining a semblance of power over the rest of the self. As Bruce Fink describes the ego in one of his texts on Lacan, "The consciously thinking subject is, by and large, indistinguishable from the ego ..." and "the ego, according to Lacan, arises as a crystallization or sedimentation of ideal images, tantamount to a fixed, reified object with which the child learns to identify..."<sup>11</sup> The identification with the ego described here by Fink is exactly what occurs in the mirror stage of development discussed above.

The fact that, as Fink goes on to say, the ego is the "seat of fixation and narcissistic attachment" and a "repository of misunderstanding,"<sup>12</sup> implies further that our thoughts, our conscious, rationalizing, categorizing minds, are largely

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<sup>10</sup> After Freud. Though others have gone on to label the death instinct "Thanatos," I could find no such reference in Freud's work and could subsequently conceive of no real reason to employ the term myself.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) 36.

<sup>12</sup> Fink 37

illusory figments of our imaginations designed to compact us and cushion us against both the external world and, in a sense, our own *jouissance*. The unbearable tension of *jouissance* arises only in dichotomy with the ego, and the ego wants to thwart it because it is the very experience or apprehension by the other aspects of ‘self’ of the ego’s fault lines as it were; its weakness or, in Lacanian terms, its *lack*. In meditation specifically, *jouissance* is a manifestation of the ego’s resistance to the process of its own dismantling. Breaking the meditation (or meditation *attempt*) also breaks the tension, and while this can induce a feeling of relief, it constitutes an acquiescence to the ego’s resistance.

To understand how the ego performs its protective functions, we need to understand the relationship of the ego to the rest of the self, namely, to the unconscious. Lacan said that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other<sup>13</sup> and that this Other is the Symbolic, or language. The significance of this should not be underplayed. A person’s unconscious dictates to an extreme extent that person’s actions, speech, his wants and desires, and his relationships, both romantic and platonic. The conscious mind thinks itself to be in control of most of these aspects of life. In fact, its primary function is to rationalize (often through disavowal) or qualify the choices that actually flow from the unconscious as water from an underground spring, or as light from a small crack in the door.

This is not to say that the unconscious is the “real” or “true” subject or self, obscured by the ego and drowned out by the din of the conscious mind. Every aspect of the self is tenuous, every aspect lacks stasis, and in some way eludes signification, including the unconscious. This elusion is due to the very

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<sup>13</sup> Lacan 436

nature of language: language as the Symbolic precludes the Real, that which logically precedes the Symbolic, or in other words, that which signifies theoretically reference, though this referential relationship is obviously largely illusory. In fact, the Symbolic overtakes and supercedes the Real, renders it a mere fanciful idea that trails behind the feet of the Symbolic, a shadow.

Fink describes the Lacanian conception of the unconscious as a “continual playing out of a signifying chain excluded from consciousness, in which knowledge of a certain kind is embodied, is permanent in nature; in other words, it subsists throughout an individual’s life.”<sup>14</sup> The unconscious is made up of the pieces of information and communication that have been lost to the conscious mind, that did not *fit* there per se. These ‘pieces,’ then, can only be signifiers, rather than the emotions or unsignified impulses that many imagine to constitute the unconscious.

That these pieces are *left over* from a person’s own experience explains why each person’s unconscious affects them differently, and appears to constitute him as some kind of Real ‘individual’ while all the time actually being strictly structured by the Symbolic, a condition which precludes such Real individuality. Indeed, Fink states this unequivocally: “Now this ‘other’ subject...is *not* something which or someone who has some sort of permanent existence: it only appears when a propitious occasion presents itself. It is *not* some kind of underlying substance or substratum.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Fink 41

<sup>15</sup> Fink 41

The ego, then, acts as a lens, warping and manipulating the material of the unconscious (what, in the model of the lens, could be considered as the ‘light’ that passes through) when a “propitious occasion” allows portions of its material to manifest in the conscious mind. In a sense, the ego serves to naturalize the contents of the unconscious so that a person cannot discern the linguistically structured nature of her desire. Instead, she *feels* her thoughts and actions to belong to her in some fundamental way, to constitute something that can be called an identity, something that is unique to her. Paradoxically, such identities are usually attached to signifiers, they have labels, and these labels affect—these labels actually set the course for—the ways in which these identities manifest in a person. In other words, these identities are absolutely linguistically structured.

Slavoj Žižek writes, “One does something, one counts oneself as (declares oneself) the one who did it, and, on the base of this declaration, one does something new—the proper moment of subjective transformation occurs at the moment of declaration, not at the moment of the act.”<sup>16</sup> It is important to consider the fact that such “declarations” do not have to occur at a social level, or even at the level of speech, but indeed actually occur most often at the level of thought: we constantly declare ourselves *to* ourselves, a process by which we are continuously reified as “individuals,” or “personalities.” Not only this, but, as Žižek notes, it is a process that *structures*, rather than *describes*, how we act and speak.

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<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan*. (New York: Norton Books, 2006) 16.



It should be obvious by now that the ego's role in this process of reification is far from incidental. However, Fink is careful to point out that "in Lacan's version of psychoanalysis the ego is clearly not an active agent, the agent of interest being the unconscious."<sup>17</sup> This is why I have referred to the ego as a "lens," something that can *passively* manipulate that which passes through it. It could also be thought of as a prism, something that bends and deconstructs a blended beam so its components may be discernable to the conscious eye. However, this image should not lead one to believe that the ego's function is organizational in some kind of objectively correct way, for, to reiterate, "the ego is... a repository of misunderstanding" more akin to a broken mirror.<sup>18</sup>

*Self*, then, in the psychoanalytic sense, is an empty signifier, pointing toward a unity that simply does not exist as such. Rather than being a whole that is "greater than the sum of its parts," as the saying goes, we are in fact almost *less* than the sums of our parts. Our parts eclipse 'us,' dissolve 'us,' stand in 'our' places like so many cardboard cutouts. Each aspect of the 'self' signifies only the very impossibility of the existence of a unified, concrete 'self.' Superficially, one could say this is true of all aspects of the self *except* for the ego, the function of which is to signify this exact possibility of unity, and even to signify this possibility as an already-present reality. However, we must remember that the ego would in fact be completely superfluous if such a possibility were 'real,' for if the 'self' were actually unified and concrete, we would not need the ego to continuously convince us of that fact.

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<sup>17</sup> Fink 37

<sup>18</sup> Fink 37

## II(b). Constructing the Self: The Buddhist Subject

There is the ego, and there is something else. Something that the ego is other from, something untouchable and unchanging. Something that is not the “actions, the mental events.”<sup>19</sup> Something that is not anguish or pride, or self-doubt. But what, then, is it? Before attempting to elucidate what this “other” might consist of, I think it is important to grasp what indeed is meant by “ego” in this slightly different context. It might seem as though the ego is identifiable or synonymous with the subject, that which comprises the actual self. However, in Buddhist ideology, the ego is seen as something illusory that is, paradoxically, to be cut away so that one’s true nature<sup>20</sup> might be discovered. The judging ego is a “level of complication that takes us a long way from the basic simplicity of what we are.”<sup>21</sup> The ego is craving, the ego is punishment, the ego is worry, and, perhaps most significantly, the ego is thought and most speech. It is elusive and quite difficult to discuss academically. It is like a garment to be worn into the world, but one so intricate and worn so often it has become confused with the naked skin. We have forgotten what we are beneath the splendid robes we have woven. And the robe itself is constructed of so many beautiful and varying layers that even in trying to strip it off we grow confused as to what is actually beneath it.

One of the most poignant aspects of Buddhism as a spiritual (rather than purely philosophical) tradition is that it actually provides a *method* for slicing

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<sup>19</sup> Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. (Boston: Shambala, 1973) 70.

<sup>20</sup> Not to be confused with true *self*; it’s simply a way of distinguishing between the ego and the ‘Essential Mind’ beneath it, which will be discussed in greater detail later.

<sup>21</sup> Trungpa 15

through the layers of ego (as does the Western practice of psychoanalysis). Most sects of Buddhism, including the three vehicles of Tibetan Buddhism,<sup>22</sup> focus more on right action than on subscription to delineated beliefs. It is a testament, then, to ego's power that despite thousands of years of development, even the method that Buddhism employs is far from failsafe: "The problem is that ego can convert anything to its own use, even spirituality," Kagyu lineage-holder Chögyam Trungpa writes in his 1973 text *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. The ego is destructively clever, appropriating everything, even attempts to undermine it, in order to strengthen itself.<sup>23</sup>

Ego develops from what Trungpa calls the "basic ground,"<sup>24</sup> a state (or perhaps more accurately, *space*) characterized by openness and spontaneity. Trungpa relates this basic ground to the state of innocence before the fall in traditional Judeo-Christian mythology; in psychoanalysis, this may correspond to the experience of being in utero, to Lacan's pre-alienation 'Real,' or, in some ways, to Freud's conception of the 'oceanic feeling.' Trungpa asserts that we still experience—if only unconsciously, as it would be too instantaneous and elusive to capture with the mind—this state sometimes when we see some thing with which we are not familiar. Just before we try to make sense of it by categorizing it, we perceive it *as it is*, even if only for an instant. It is the space between perception and conceptualization. It is not void, per se, but a space in which to

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<sup>22</sup> The 'three vehicles' refers to the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana paths. In simple terms, they are the easy path, the middle way, and the diamond or hard path, respectively, and they differ subtly in method but have similar aspects and the same goals—like three sides of one tetrahedron.

<sup>23</sup> Trungpa 6

<sup>24</sup> Trungpa 122

move freely rather than a structured space; a space that inherently includes a sort of “primordial intelligence.”<sup>25</sup>

In Trungpa’s model, at the very beginning, in infancy, ‘I’ and this space are indistinguishable. Infants are not immediately self-conscious, rather, self-consciousness is a result of becoming increasingly active in the space; of interacting with the space through our senses. At some point, “we begin to spin more than was necessary to express the space.”<sup>26</sup> So, it seems to be a matter of the space and the ‘self’ beginning in a state not of utter indiscernibility, but of symbiosis, co-operation. We are like liquid in a container—if we are still, or if we only move about within the container, we conform to the container and *seem* indistinguishable from it, but if we become too active and slosh over the sides, we realize that we are separate. There may seem to be a problem with this metaphor: the container is a structured space whereas “basic ground” is supposed to be utterly open, but in fact, the moment we become self-conscious, the space solidifies. This is the introduction of duality to the consciousness, the experience that ‘I’ am separate from ‘space.’ As Trungpa says, this is the birth of “form,” of “other.”<sup>27</sup> It is also, therefore, the birth of ego.

So ego represents a sort of fundamental illusion, a fundamental ignorance of what we are in fact. It is an impulse to define our selves as ‘individual,’ to be uniquely significant in some way, to push toward ever-increasing separation. It becomes increasingly elaborate as it develops, employing emotion and concept to

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<sup>25</sup> Trungpa 123

<sup>26</sup> Trungpa 123

<sup>27</sup> Trungpa 123

prop it up, channeling the primordial intelligence of the basic ground into a logic-based intellectual intelligence.<sup>28</sup>

The ego, then, is tricky. It cannot accurately be called ‘real,’ because it is a construct and it cannot accurately be called ‘unreal’ because it exists; because, if left unchecked, it determines our actions and communications, and therefore our lives and societies. It is too powerful to be simply unreal, much like the concept of God. But whether one wants to label ego ‘real’ or not, what is actually significant is simply that it is not fundamentally what we are. The Bodhisattva, or one who seeks enlightenment in the Buddhist sense, must acknowledge that all beings are essentially ego-less. That is to say, nothing possesses an *essential* selfhood or personality; nothing exists as an independent, concrete unit. This is an interesting paradox: the ego is not supposed to exist—again, even in Lacan’s conception of the ego, it has no agency—and yet ‘it’ exerts a staggering influence upon us. In fact, most of the mental processes of which we are aware—that is, the contents of our conscious minds—are either wholly produced or mitigated by the ego. How could it simply not exist? Finding the solution requires resisting the inclination to reify such terms as “exist” and “not exist.” In reality, the ego is neither existent *nor nonexistent*. The ego is an illusion, which effectively amounts dialectically to a third classification of Being: something that does not ‘exist’ but still influences. It is similar in many ways to Deleuze’s conception of the virtual, that which *exists*, but as *potentiality*, except that the ego, rather than undergoing *actualization* in the Deleuzian sense, has been misidentified as *real*, as it is mistakenly assumed to be the source of consciousness (*I think, therefore I am*),

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<sup>28</sup> Trungpa 124

and therefore the source of possibility and impossibility; the source of judgments pertaining to reality.

Trungpa repeatedly characterizes the mind and the ego (as the mind is, in effect, the seat of the ego) as neurotic. It is as if the ego is somehow aware of how tenuous it is, as though constantly reasserting its control over the mind is not enough for it—it must also ensure that the mind does nothing to flush it out, as we saw in the discussion of *jouissance*. Like a parasite, everything we take in feeds the ego, though we might think we are feeding ourselves, and we are always left hungry, unsatisfied by what we take in. As the solidification of the ego progresses over time, so does our hunger, and we grow increasingly jealous, often sabotaging relationships in order to preserve our egos. The ego does not easily accept blame, it does not want to come up short, and so it justifies itself using emotion and intellect in order to protect its self against the challenges that an other inevitably poses to it. But preserving the ego essentially maintains our hunger: the (unenlightened) Buddhist subject, like the psychoanalytic subject, is constituted by desire. This constant defensiveness creates anxiety that for many people borders on unbearable, and it is not difficult to comprehend how this anxiety could give way to neurosis.

Generally speaking, most communication serves only to further reinforce the ego. ‘We’ speak to convince others and our selves that we are solid, real entities, and positive, morally justified entities at that. We communicate in different ways depending on ‘who’ we are trying to solidify ourselves as being. “Usually when we communicate with another person, we are driven by a kind of

neurotic speed.”<sup>29</sup> We build a kind of cocoon when speaking and are impelled to render it impenetrable, often using logic to make something inarguable that another listener might feel intuitively is off. When used this way, language is one of the most effective tools of the ego, especially in a society in which logic and rationality are prized above most other virtues.

In this context, linguistic expression is reduced to the manipulation of certain symbols for the neurotic purpose of creating, reinforcing, or even elevating, oneself. The communication in question does not have to be of a particularly grandiose nature for this to occur, rather, it happens in even the most mundane interactions. When relating events to a friend, for example, one often uses words in such a way as to put a particular slant on the story, so that the perceived antagonist of the situation may seem more solidly abusive, or pompous, or envious, and so forth. It is usually extremely subtle, so much so that a third party observing both the initial situation and the recounting might not even be able to call the story inaccurate, but would simply chalk the discrepancies up to differences in interpretation.

Interpretation is almost entirely ego-driven: “Whenever we begin to feel any discrepancy or conflict between our actions and the teachings, we immediately interpret the situation in such a way that the conflict is smoothed over.”<sup>30</sup> One could replace “the teachings” (here intended to mean Buddhist teachings) with almost any doctrine. The idea of ego-as-interpreter is essentially

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<sup>29</sup> Trungpa 161

<sup>30</sup> Trungpa 13

the basis for the belief that one needs a “spiritual friend” or guru to aid one on the Buddhist path: “written teachings are always open to the interpretation of ego.”<sup>31</sup>

This is simple enough to consider. Much more difficult is figuring out how to avoid participating in such interpretation, as the ego is quite skilled at masquerading interpretation as simple comprehension. Susan Sontag’s essay *Against Interpretation* offers a perspective that, though not Buddhist *per se*, has much in common with Trungpa’s elucidation of the subject. Of interpretation Sontag writes: “It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories.”<sup>32</sup> One could replace “art” with almost any word one wished, for the function of the ego in Buddhist ideology as interpretative agent quantifies and categorizes everything in order to transform the world from a chaotic mass into concise, manageable portions.

This process inevitably entails massive oversimplification of the complexities inherent in [R]eality. And the ego certainly does not oversimplify objectively; rather, it oversimplifies, or *interprets*, in a way that serves (either positively or negatively) the neuroses and desires that were formed by the ego in the first place. The ego-as-lens, or the ego-as-broken-mirror, warps everything along a similar trajectory, thus causing the illusion of unity, and often of near-stasis, among the (actually dynamic) aspects of the ‘self.’ It is not uncommon in Buddhist thought for the illusory nature of the ego to be associated with the deluding qualities of some forms of linguistic interchange, as in the Lankavatara Scripture, when the Buddha says,

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<sup>31</sup> Trungpa 88

<sup>32</sup> Pat Waugh, *Postmodernism, A Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 53.



“It is this combination of discrimination of imaginary marks of individuality, grouping them and giving them a name and becoming attached to them as objects, by reason of habit-energy that has been accumulated since beginningless time, that one builds up erroneous views whose only basis is false-imagination. For this reason, Bodhisattvas should avoid all discussions relating to assertions and negations whose only basis is words and logic.”<sup>33</sup>

Here Buddha cautions against the use of rhetoric by the ego, the use of language only to signify Things and Ideas, to establish and perpetuate rationality.

In the Surangama Sutra,<sup>34</sup> Gotama Buddha offers a more extensive elucidation on the illusory nature of selfhood and the processes of the conscious, rational mind. The metaphor he employs deals, unsurprisingly, with language and more specifically, with the physiological effects that words can induce: the saliva the mouth produces when one speaks about sour plums or the way the body wavers when the mind thinks of falling. The ego acts on the mind and the body like a word. Even the seemingly visceral aspects of conscious experience—as opposed to thought, which is more difficult to qualify or describe as a commonality—have their bases in the self- or ego-illusion.

For example, to our conscious minds, sensory information is seemingly divided physiologically by virtue of the various sense organs and we perceive such information as belonging to, or corresponding with, its respective body part. Indeed, the senses are usually taken for granted as fundamental, and perceptions

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<sup>33</sup> Dwight Goddard, Ed., *The Buddhist Bible*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966) Lankavatara Scripture, 285. This text is supposed to have been written early in the first century AD, with the earliest known translation into Chinese around 420 AD.

<sup>34</sup> Dwight Goddard, Ed., *The Buddhist Bible*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966) Surangama Sutra 157. This sutra, or scripture, was written in the first century AD by an unknown author and was subsequently translated from the original Sanskrit into Chinese in the eighth century AD.

based on the senses are often considered inarguably concrete. However, in the Surangama Sutra, the Buddha asserts that this is an illusory understanding of sense perception cultivated by the thinking mind (or ego) in (what I shall call) its campaign for organized selfhood. Empirical information gathered from the senses, therefore, is not to be taken for granted as representing some kind of objective, observable ‘fact.’ In the unenlightened subject, then, the senses serve mainly as tools for the ego, and as such, they both condition that subject’s reactions to her environment and help to continuously trigger her desire.

While the unenlightened Buddhist subject is ego-driven and constituted by an insatiable desire, the enlightened Buddhist subject is another matter. Enlightenment is simply the process of dissolving the ego-illusion: The Bodhisattva comes to understand that the web of associations and dualities that the thinking mind comprises is an overgrown tangle that obscures what the scriptures alternately call the Intuitive Mind, the Essential Mind, and the Enlightening Essence of Mind, among other similar titles. In this Mind, knowledge does not result from information gathered from the various sense organs and organized by the rational mind. Instead, knowledge arises intuitively by virtue of the essential clarity of the Mind once the thicket of associations is cut through and pulled away.<sup>35</sup>

This Essential Mind is not a god or even an underlying universal self, like the atman-brahman construction in some forms of Hinduism. Despite its English title, it does not even really constitute an essence in the strict sense of the word: it is not a ‘fundamental nature,’ nor does it possess any ‘inherent characteristics,’

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<sup>35</sup> Goddard 208 (Surangama Sutra)

for both of these terms imply differentiation. The Essential Mind is, essentially, empty. That is not to say that it is not-full; it does not imply a duality. The corresponding Sanskrit term is *sunyata*, which expresses the paradigm, “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” This should not be understood as some kind of koan, or alternately as some vague statement that implies that “everything is one,” or something of the sort. Rather, *sunyata* expresses the emptiness of all concepts of form, form as being devoid of any *inherent* meaning or significance, any *identity*, or *ego*—and this includes signifiers, such as “emptiness,” or “*sunyata*,” itself. However, the term also expresses the fact that in our rational minds, emptiness itself also becomes a form, takes on the solidity of a concept. Through its dual connotation, the term signifies an emptiness that remains tenuously unconceptualized. The Essential Mind, then, exists as unreified, undifferentiated, virtual space. It is what I will later describe as “awareness-without-self.”

The Buddha describes Essential Mind as a handkerchief, comprised of many threads that form one fabric, and compares the senses and the thinking mind to knots tied in the handkerchief.<sup>36</sup> Buddhist meditation practices and, subsequently, the process of enlightenment serve, in effect, to untie the knots in order to restore the Essential Mind to its essential[ly empty] form. While the path offered by Buddhism (in its various forms and sects) consists of extremely specific rituals and ideologies, there are myriad ways to begin dismantling the ego and restoring joyful, clear awareness to the Mind. One of these ways—the one that I will discuss in the next section of this paper—is to reassess and revise our relationships to language. For it is through language that we communicate both to

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<sup>36</sup> Goddard 17 (Surangama Sutra)

each other and ourselves, and it is through language that we differentiate Things from one another. When linguistic expression serves the ego, the differentiated units become reified and help to propel the cycle of delusion and desire. But, as we will see, this does not have to be the case.

### III. The Spiritual Value of Poetic Expression

I said above that we speak to convince our selves and others of our enduring solidity, our person-ality, our specific selfhood; I said, in other words, that communication generally serves the purposes of the ego. However, I am inclined to believe that this has more to do with the trajectory that most communication follows—the ego-lens through which it is projected—than with some fundamental quality of communication or of language. For though Lacan tells us that it is essentially the unconscious that speaks, if the ego conditions sensory perception and rational thought, it is not too far a leap to say that it *conditions* speech as well (remember Lacan’s image of the ego-as-sieve). However, Buddha notes in the Surangama Sutra that the senses have transcendental potential, as does the thinking mind. Might not speech, or linguistic communication in general, also carry with it the potential for transcendental existence?

It is important here to note that, especially in the Buddhist sense, but for my own purposes also, the term “transcendental” does not imply that these aspects are somehow separate from or dualistically counter to the ego-based processes. Instead, I would recall the image of the handkerchief used in section II to represent the Essential Mind—the handkerchief in its simplest, unknotted form is what is thought of as transcendental here.

The Buddha discusses transcendental sight in the Surangama Sutra, first describing how what I will call ego-sight involves perceiving sights through the lenses both of one’s past conditioning and the subsequent desires created by it. He

goes on to say that in so-called transcendental sight, “when you let your eyes perceive anything, if you let the sensation of seeing pass unheeded, not letting any discriminating thoughts of judgment arise in your mind, this unties all knots and is the genuine freedom...”<sup>37</sup> It is possible to have a similar relationship to words, to language. Words can pass through the mind and over the lips, or out of the fingers, just as visions of objects can pass through the eyes and back into the mind. For just as words serve as placeholders for Concepts and Things, *so do sights*. The non-transcendental vision of an object is already not-the-object-itself but is, rather, immediately an idea of the object and, as I suggested above, the same holds true for sounds, for smells, sensations of touch—no experience is purely empirical. This idea is not wholly novel to Western thought. Indeed, in Book VII of his Seminar Lacan says, “A sensory apparatus, Freud tells us, doesn’t only play the role of extinguisher or of shock-absorber...but also plays the role of sieve.”<sup>38</sup> Words are not anomalous; they alone do not alienate us from experience or from some undifferentiated ‘Reality’ any more than does the rest of our ego-selves. The ego just has not found it *quite* as easy to appropriate, assimilate, and naturalize language as it has the seemingly empirical aspects of Being.

In actuality, in the Buddhist sense, there is no objective order of reality from which words *can* alienate us. We must recall *sunyata* (form is emptiness; emptiness is form) to even begin to comprehend this. Even *without*, or perhaps rather *before* language, all that exists of reality are our concepts of it. The thinking mind precedes language; if it did not, how could it acquire and assimilate

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<sup>37</sup> Goddard 215 (Surangama Sutra)

<sup>38</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, Ed., *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*. (New York: Norton Books, 1992) 47.

language in the first place? Lacan, for one, developed vast theories based on the perceptions of infants, especially regarding their relationships to their mothers, before they really encounter language. Even many animals, specifically mammals, harbor impressions of the world that create myriad realities, as evidenced by the behavior of those who have been abused or mistreated, versus those who have not.

Therefore, words, while they stand for Things, stand for Things *that do not in fact exist as such*; that are not concrete or objective, even in the pre-linguistic sphere. In the Lankavatara Scripture, the Buddha tells his disciple Mahamati, “Discrimination of meaning is based upon the false-imagination that these sweet sounds which we call words and which are dependent upon whatever subjects they are supposed to stand for, *and which subjects are supposed to be self-existent, all of which is based on error* [sic]”<sup>39</sup> (emphasis added). Alternately, in the Diamond Sutra, the Buddha tells disciple Subhuti repeatedly that when he uses words to communicate, he intends them only as a “figure of speech,” going on to say, “But, Subhuti, as soon as I have spoken of these Buddhas and their Dharmas, I must recall the words, for there are no Buddhas and no Dharmas.”<sup>40</sup> When used in certain ways, words can actually express their own tenuousness and impermanence; it is the ego that clings to words as having permanent, objective meanings, or signifying concrete aspects of reality.

If, as in many of the Buddhist sutras, the thinking mind is viewed as the sixth sense, then language is a kind of seventh, and Lacan’s vision of the

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<sup>39</sup> Goddard 285 (Lankavatara Scripture)

<sup>40</sup> Goddard, 89-90 (Diamond Sutra)

unconscious as being structured by the Symbolic, or language, makes as much sense and seems as obvious as the statement that our conscious experience is structured by our other six senses. Perhaps it will be argued that what are commonly considered the five senses can rightly be called “senses” as such because they have a physiological basis, or because they are fundamental and do not have to be learned or acquired in the way that language does. However, the perceptions produced by sensory organs vary incredibly from human to human; also, these perceptions are often learned and shared culturally: preferences for certain flavors, or differing definitions of beauty. While grammar, reading, and writing must generally be studied and learned scholastically, verbal communication is adopted at an extremely young age and, at least in the case of one’s primary language, is acquired through a process that is largely inscrutable to those undergoing it. Children have the *sense* to mimic many of the words they hear spoken by adults, and to understand both that words are not just sounds—that they carry or point toward ‘meaning’—and that the linguistic system is more than the sum of its signifiers: children learn early how to use the words they know to structure new and varied sentences. Language is not an external tool or object that we pick up and utilize, it is part of our very being.

Language, then, is not merely the ego’s plaything. In fact, in many ways ego is terrified of language: of what it can reveal and of how powerful it can actually be. When linguistic expression resonates with a hearer, or a reader, the affective bond that is formed between that reader and that expression can be so profound as to elicit a physiological response, in the form of tears, or laughter,



chills, or supreme joy. And while the other senses reel in and assimilate bits of information like spun sugar around a paper stick, serving, as I mentioned earlier, to build some illusory opacity or solidity that can be labeled a “self,” the expressive language-sense reaches out from somewhere ‘behind’<sup>41</sup> this opacity. It has the potential to penetrate the limits of the expresser’s opacity and, rarely but magnificently, to breach the limit of the other’s as well—that is, to shatter ego-selfhood, and expose it not only as illusory, but as *unnecessary* and actually antithetical to true, fulfilling expression. Linguistic expression is how we come to understand one another, and while much communication occurs among egos, that which does not serves only to help decimate them.

Thus the ego’s aversion. But so pervasive is language and so necessary is some form or degree of linguistic expression that ego cannot simply resist or ignore it. Instead, it must find a way to subjugate language, to use it for ego’s own preservation. Fink writes of the disparity between ego discourse, which is directed toward constructing and discussing an ‘I’ or self, and unconscious discourse, which, as I mentioned above, consists of repressed signifiers and portions of signifiers. This latter discourse often inserts itself, quite uninvited, into ego discourse in the form of slips of the tongue and in signifiers that appear in dreams.<sup>42</sup> The ego does this by turning language on itself, which is the point at which words become fodder both for rhetoric, used to manipulate people’s emotions, and logic games, used to prove ‘truths’ that are at best contrived and at

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<sup>41</sup> I put behind in quotes here because to attempt to actually situate these things in a structural model would be somewhat absurd, since none of it, strictly speaking, *exists*, nor does any of it concretely *not exist*.

<sup>42</sup> Fink 8

worst oppressive, constituting a kind of violence. Luce Irigaray discusses the issue in terms of gender difference when she writes that men, and subsequently male discourse, are “structured in accordance with civil and religious norms that drastically reduce and transform reality” by excluding or disappearing the feminine.<sup>43</sup>

Similar dynamics are at work in any uneven exchange, whether the discrepancy be educational, or economic, or so forth. Even when the ‘self’ is interacting among itself, the exchange can be uneven. The ego attempts to exact destruction or at least subjugation on the aspects of self that it cannot fully incorporate. It uses its powers of rationalization and interpretation to bring the disparate aspects under its control: sometimes by referring to a moral authority that seems to require those aspects to be hated and repented; sometimes by belittling and disavowing them as ‘stupid’ or ‘childish,’ though of course there are even myriad other ways in which ego-violence manifests. Ego approaches the other in much the same way as it approaches the disparate elements of the self. It sees the other as a threat to its solidity and either turns on the other, as in the hegemonic model described by Irigaray, or uses the threat to turn back on its self (the disparate elements as compromising the ego’s solidity and weakening it in its exchange with the other, and so forth). For in its linguistic exchange with the other, the ego often employs rhetoric and wordgames to render the other—or the ‘other’ within the self—irrefutably ‘wrong’ and so sooth itself by repairing the gape opened by the very fact of the encounter with the other. Though there is a

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<sup>43</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*. (New York: Routledge, 1993) 28.

violent aspect to the process of shattering the ego as well, it is a purifying violence, a redemptive violence, and one in which language is liberated from the interests of the ego.

The ego warps language but then, when words inevitably fail to satisfy the ego, it denounces them and conjures fantasies of a higher reality that remains untainted by language, a kind of prelinguistic Eden where the ego can enjoy full satiation through direct apprehension of some deliciously solid ultimate truth.<sup>44</sup> In this model, a duality arises in which signifiers become the mundane and the signified becomes the sacred: something for which humans can only grasp with grammatical rituals, clung to desperately by those who nervously maintain that *there is something to all of this*, something behind it all. In fact, there is not. Words are not symbols of some strictly defined order of sacrality as is a crucifix, or even a mandala, but they can seem so when Reality becomes mythic through ego's tireless efforts to apprehend it. In the Buddhist sense, Reality consists of the Essential Mind described in section II; in the Lacanian sense, Reality, or the Real, is theoretically comprised of a direct relationship to experience that is unmitigated by language, though we have seen (and Lacan even notes) that experience as such is never unmitigated.

Language is, in effect, all there is, *not* in the sense that words themselves actually constitute objective Reality, but rather in the sense that, despite the Buddha's argument to the contrary in the Lankavatara Scripture,<sup>45</sup> words can

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<sup>44</sup> This can even come into play in seemingly 'spiritual' processes—indeed, Chögyam Trungpa's *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* is aimed at dissolving these egoistic forms of spirituality—but those who truly know the ego to be illusion know this fantasy to be illusory as well.

<sup>45</sup> "Words...cannot express highest Reality" Goddard, 287 (Lankavatara Scripture).

*express* Reality. That is not to say that words can *signify* Reality, that “Reality” as some Thing can hold the place of *signified*, which is what the Buddha may have been arguing against, but rather that each word carries the Real within it as a balloon carries space. The Real, or Reality, itself constitutes and is constituted by *space*: the space between words, the space *around* words, the space of breath, of silence, the space into which we reach for the Thing whispered to us by the word and come up empty-handed.

Around this space abides a series of tentative truths:<sup>46</sup> that, as Saussure taught us, differentiation is arbitrary; that differentiated units only have significance in terms of their relationships to each other; that this system of relationships is in constant flux. Saussure once said, “A language is a system which is intrinsically defenseless against the factors which constantly tend to shift relationships between signal and signification. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.”<sup>47</sup> The arbitrariness of ‘truth,’ and ‘reality’<sup>48</sup> (as abstractions posited by the ego) has similar consequences: the relationships between moments, perceptions, and concepts evolve with time, as new experiences and concepts are added to the index of self. The ego constantly repositions itself in the light of these additions in order to assimilate them in such a way that they do not challenge its solidity; in other words, it rationalizes the additions in a way that minimizes the challenges they pose to the ego’s solidity.

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<sup>46</sup> I say the truths are tentative so as to avoid reifying both the space and the truths that ‘lie within it.’ *For when I speak of space, and truths, I must immediately recall the words, for there are no spaces and no truths.*

<sup>47</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. (Chicago: Open Court, 1972) 76.

<sup>48</sup> I use ‘reality’ here to mean the ego’s assumptions about reality, and about possibilities for reality, much in the Deleuzian sense offered in the introduction.

The staunch absolutism displayed by the ego—especially regarding the solidity of its self and of the signifiers that its identity comprises—denies this elasticity, this space, which the continuous flux of existence implies.

The space that I am discussing should not be considered an abstraction, as there exist numerous examples of encounters with linguistic space. For example, in Freud's essay "Antithetical Sense of Primal Words," he references with reverence and fascination a pamphlet published by one K. Abel that describes an ancient Egyptian language in which each word signified a thing *as well as its opposite*. The pamphlet takes as a particular example the word *ken*, which meant, as Abel puts it, "strongweak." Regarding the construction Abel writes, "In reality this word indicated neither 'strong' nor 'weak,' but the relation between the two, and also the difference between them which created both in equal proportion ... Man has not been able to acquire even his oldest and simplest conceptions otherwise than in contrast with their opposite; he only gradually learnt to separate the two sides of the antithesis..."<sup>49</sup> (Incidentally, this theory bears remarkable resemblance to Buddhist conceptions of the evolution of differentiation.) But the linguistic space does not always imply a space of opposition, as in the context of Freud's paper, but can also be simply a space of otherness. The phrase, "you are still in the window," from my poem *The Collector*, which is printed in full later in the text, may serve as a useful example.<sup>50</sup>

The phrase can mean either that the person whom the speaker is addressing has remained in the window for some time, or that the person is

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<sup>49</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Creativity and the Unconscious*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) 58.

<sup>50</sup> See page 39.

motionless in the window. If I had intended to signify directly and literally either of the possible interpretations, I would have done so. However, in poetic expression, such nonoppositional linguistic space can be employed to impart both interpretations simultaneously. Every word carries something of this space and even most non-poetic utterances have multiple meanings depending on their contexts, but the difference between poetic and non-poetic expression is that encounters with poetic expression can trigger an experience that transcends mere comprehension of the intended *signification* of the expression, and is itself felt to be ineffable, though it was accessed linguistically. With non-poetic expression, the space may be acknowledged rationally, but it is not experienced *affectively*.

Marcel Proust encountered this space when he discovered the relationship between language and memory in an event that Walter Benjamin recounts in his *Illuminations*: “Proust, complaining of the barrenness and lack of depth in the images of Venice that his *mémoire volontaire* presented to him, notes that the very word ‘Venice’ made that wealth of images seem to him as vapid as an exhibition of photographs.”<sup>51</sup> Language, *viz.* the word *Venice* is connected to Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, which is the previously unconscious memory-sense evoked through contact with a material object, in this case a word. Of course, the other way to conceive of *mémoire involontaire* is as memoryspace, with *mémoire volontaire* as the collection of moment-objects, the cluttered narrative of selfhood. *Mémoire involontaire* ‘consists’ of experience that the ego has not managed to collect and assimilate.

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<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 187.

It is important to remember that for the vast majority of people the ego has complete command of conscious perception, with the result that most experience not processed by the conscious ego impresses itself upon the unconscious instead.<sup>52</sup> These impressions still *affect* conscious experience but in ways that are not immediately clear or scrutable to the ego. Freud wrote that the unconscious “has no other aim than to force its way through the pressure weighing on it [by the ego]...” As Freud notes repeatedly in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the ego is assailed both from without and *within*, and with that, we’re back to Rimbaud: *The I is an other*, an other for which the unconscious has little regard. When suddenly faced with an object—including a linguistic object—that is pregnant with memoryspace, we experience a stopmoment in which we come up against the limits of ego-being, of a selfhood that excludes so much of what constitutes us. A succession of these stopmoments can begin to perforate our ego-selves, but such instances cannot be contrived by the ego, as when it reacts to emotionally manipulative expressions like the soundtracks of many Hollywood dramas or impassioned political proselytizing. Rather, such moments are catalyzed by chance encounters with the linguistic object, pregnant with space.<sup>53</sup>

This space is inherent in the linguistic object; however, we have come to see that it is continuously obscured to most of us by a constant process of reification, whereby words are concretized and misidentified with the Things they are supposed [/we suppose them] to signify. We imbue words with undue weight

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<sup>52</sup> Benjamin 160

<sup>53</sup> One can, in fact, consciously cultivate the experience of a stopmoment, but only in certain instances, such as meditation. It is crucial that this conscious cultivation not be confused with ego-manipulation. I will come back to the relationship between meditation and stopmoment later in the text.

so that they become burdensome; no word or phrase feels like *enough* to say what one wants to say, so we qualify words with other words and drag them behind us, ever collecting. The space of the Real is *sensed*, but as something to be lamented rather than celebrated, as an inadequacy. In Lacan's thought, though lack fundamentally cannot be filled, we can learn through the psychoanalytic process to enjoy our incompleteness, to possess an awareness, rather than a fear, of our lack. The case is similar with language. The limit of representation—the elusive boundary between language and linguistic space—terrifies ego-beings, as it is in actuality a limitation on the ego's ability to represent its self, its identity, in any concrete sense. When we cease to be motivated and conditioned by the various forms of the ego's paranoia, we can actually learn to enjoy the limitation of its representability. In acknowledging openly that our languages, and subsequently our selves, are limited, we can begin to explore the space beyond those limitations; we can move freely in the space rather than attempting neurotically to deny its existence. Paradoxically, the boundary that marks the space begins, in a sense, to give way. It does not dissolve, to be sure; rather it takes on a certain elasticity.

Through the process of what I will call dereification, we can restore words, and—this is the crucial point—through words, *selves*, to this elasticity. Dereification is the process by which the solidity—the certainty—around one's concepts and memories (of the *mémoire volontaire*) begins to soften and dissolve, until one feels no authority or possessiveness over them, until they are weightless. Consider the description of one form of *reification* in *The Collector*:



Orange light sprays across your face.

You are still in the window,  
 chokethroated, swallowing the sharp  
 and blue-aired, the unlit  
 yet glowing squares of time—photographs  
 once trapped and taped to the wall, now drifting  
 and circling: ghostmoments.

And you,  
 just supposed to open your mouth to them.  
 To swallow and erupt them transformed  
 into the very cells of your being: technicolor  
 sphinx moths that hatch in swarms,  
 but die instantly in ashen piles.

And you,  
 just supposed to stick the tiny carcasses  
 to your boneframe with silver pins; to fashion  
 a skin of all your time. You are still  
 in the window, collecting your moments;

bedecking.

In this piece, moments undergo a metamorphosis within the self in which they are transformed from dynamic moments into a past, a personal history, a vestment of dead moments that cyclically constitute the ‘self.’ In dereification, then, the ‘self’ becomes overwhelmed. This can invoke a feeling of terror: it is as if the moths reanimate while they are being worn and, flapping their wings, manage to extricate themselves from their pins. At first they cover the self in swarms—*overwhelm* the self, so to speak—but then, *they take flight*, and leave the self with no cloak, no vestment with which to identify. The experience of selfhood ceases to be viable. One’s claim on reality, so to speak, gives way, and what is left, if the process is successful, is awareness in the absence of selfhood, Mind freed from the dead weight of identity.

This absolutely can be as transgressive an experience as it may sound: this process can be induced by certain forms of intoxication, namely psychedelic.

Inducing dereification chemically, however, can be a gamble. One can, it is true, experience ecstasy at the dissolution of self, but it is also possible to lose awareness along with selfhood, and so become blathering and psychotic, or paranoid, or vapid and dull. Also, as with any chemically induced experience, it is temporary, and, as the self reconstitutes itself as the chemical effects wear off, it is too easy to later consider the experience as merely a ‘trip’ and not a real possibility for experience.

The alternative, of course, is to gradually allow the process of dereification to unfold in a practice of meditation. In meditation, the self or ego is not denied, as it is sometimes thought, as the denial of ‘self’ still maintains the *reality* of a self in a kind of negative-reification. Instead, the workings of the egoself are observed from the position of the (in Buddhist terms) Essential Mind, the locus of awareness-without-self. The Lankavatara Scripture offers a description of a process of revealing Essential Mind, one which is ultimately a description of the dereification process described earlier: “When appearances and names are put away and all discrimination ceases, that which remains is the true and essential nature of things and, as nothing can be predicated as to the nature of essence, it is called the ‘Suchness’ of Reality.”<sup>54</sup> Suchness is essence-without-ego (for in Buddhist terms ‘ego’ refers both to the ego-self of a human being and to the illusory, seemingly unique characteristics of inanimate objects; that which makes an object desirable) or, in human terms, it is awareness-without-self. This Suchness contains and is contained within everything, but it is obscured by the ego-self through which we see it, smell it, taste it, touch it, hear it, and—speak it.

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<sup>54</sup> Goddard 299 (Lankavatara Scripture)

It is exactly this Suchness that is encountered in the stopmoment, as in this untitled poem by Celan<sup>55</sup>:

Mute autumn smells. The  
aster, unbent, passed  
through your memory  
between homeland and chasm.

A strange lostness was  
bodily present, you came  
near to  
living.

This *strange lostness*, the hauntedness of the *mute autumn smells*—could Celan be expressing anything other than Suchness? That he does not say so explicitly only compounds the effect: he does not say, “Look over here, at the Suchness of autumn, at the Suchness of your body!” Rather, he<sup>56</sup> allows his words (even more exquisite in the original German) and his form to *carry* their Suchness with them, their ‘balloons of the Real.’

Suchness, then, like the Real or Reality, constitutes a *space*. It is quite similar to the aura in Walter Benjamin’s sense, the aura being the particular Suchness Benjamin ascribes to certain artworks prior to the possibility of their technological reproduction, when they were located in a definite time and place. In certain New Age spiritualities, the aura refers to the field—or space—of energy around an individual; it is like the energetic manifestation of the person’s essence projected beyond her physical body. The Benjaminian aura, then, could be considered the energetic manifestation of the (original) work of art. Benjamin himself calls it a “strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a

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<sup>55</sup> John Felstiner, Trans., *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. (New York: Norton Books, 2001) 153.

<sup>56</sup> And translator, John Felstiner

distance, however near it may be.”<sup>57</sup> In his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Benjamin traces what he calls the “decline” in the aura of the work of art. He writes, “In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place.”<sup>58</sup> Benjamin goes on to relate this temporal and spatial sense to “authenticity,”<sup>59</sup> to which we can also relate Suchness.

To say that this authenticity is diminished in the reproduction is therefore akin to noting that the Suchness of the piece is diminished as well. The reproduction takes on its own Suchness—there can be no duality of having or not having Suchness, which is the main distinction between Suchness and Benjamin’s aura—but this is not the Suchness of the original piece, and it is a Suchness that is heavily obscured by function, value, desirability, and so forth. The space, in other words, becomes filled in with arbitrary valuations. This is true not just of the art-object, but also of language. As language becomes reduced to its signifying value and is used compulsively, its Suchness becomes increasingly overlooked by most people, and poetic expression is seen largely as overly emotive and obsolete, or even as something of which to be suspicious. Or, it is taken as ‘symbolic,’ as something that needs to be decoded in order to be understood. Indeed, this is the approach of most grade- and high school English classes, often the only places where poetry is encountered for many people. In this context, reading poetry becomes a chore, and whatever intuitive relationship one may feel with poetic

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<sup>57</sup> Walter Benjamin. *Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008) 23.

<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin. *Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008) 21.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin 21

expression is overlooked if it cannot be translated into the discourse of symbol and code. To compound the effect, linguistic space is now largely appropriated by advertising and political rhetoric, both of which use the space to manipulate both meaning and linguistic associations in the listener or reader. Because Benjamin's aura suffers *decline* under such a system, the aura cannot be reconstructed. But Suchness is only obscured, and can be rediscovered once the overgrowth covering it is cleared away.

I said earlier that Suchness in language is that which induces the stopmoment. This, too, can be set into a Benjaminian model. Benjamin writes, “[K]nowledge comes only in lightening flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.”<sup>60</sup> These “flashes” are, essentially, monadic: one must “discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event;”<sup>61</sup> they are flashes of awareness, moments of small yet significant awakenings, much like stopmoments. And, like stopmoments, they both spring from and generate *text*. Benjamin is discussing historical text rather than poetic expression, but the two are far from mutually exclusive. Text is the network of passageways between each monadic flash of awareness. The nodes and passages create a kind of scaffolding, a structure that contains and is contained within space. This is the space, the emptiness, within and around not only every body of text, but even every word and thing. It is the space of awakening, the pause that allows the flash, and the space within which the flash occurs and crystallizes and

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<sup>60</sup> Walter Benjamin, Roy Tiedemann, Trans., and Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Eds., *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) 456; [N1,1].

<sup>61</sup> Walter Benjamin, Roy Tiedemann, Trans., and Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Eds., *The Arcades Project* 456 [N2,6]

generates. Without this pause, knowledge and language both become conformist and compulsive; habits of thought and expression based on rule and repetition rather than the flash of awareness. The following original poem, “Lament,” traces the speaker’s desperation for *pause*:

Hurried eruptions from faces,  
whispered escapes  
into churning wordmills—

Anxiously we finger our pens:  
*take my word into your palm*  
*and press it there.*

The speaker senses that she is caught in the current of compulsive communication, but cannot seem to release herself. There is something she yearns to say, something beyond the scope of the compulsory system of expression and reception, but it remains ineffable to her and unabsorbable to any reader or hearer. This is the point in experience at which language might begin to seem unviable, or inadequate for full expression. The compulsory model is cyclical, so that the ineffability and unabsorbability preclude each other’s amelioration; the speaker’s mouth is crusted over with words that no longer possess any valence. Another poem, “Powerlines,” also expresses the agony of this particular kind of silence, which I will call *voiceness*—for this is not an open, empty silence, rather, it is the silence that stretches like thin plastic across the face, the silence that suffocates.

a cloud erupts from her throat  
a thousand schoolfish breathing  
a shadow            a murder of crows  
the black music of six-a.m.-and-sleepless—  
not Language only  
    black cries up to the milky swell—

and suddenly they are simply      gone  
 he beside her breathing  
        a concerto into noiselessness

once in thirds with the great black mass of sound

*my voice flew away      my voice perched on the  
 powerlines      my voice  
 waiting for an open throat*

watching with black eyes      *swallowing*  
        *swallowing*

no open throats      just round staring heads frozen  
    mute

she lays a hand over his mouth  
 to start the thaw

—the black voice watching      from the powerlines

\* \* \*

the crows return

his jaw tingles the world      dries up  
 outside

a shock of light      *my voice*

a crow with one white

feather

*waiting for an open throat*

that last slit of light sipping all the breath from the air  
 staring over the great grey nightway      one white  
    eye      *my*

*voice*

*perched on the powerlines*

*my wind*

*my wave  
 my black dying star*

*my voice flew away  
 my voice*

Notice the increase of literal space as the poem progresses. At the beginning, there is a marked sense of desperation—it is as if the speaker (in the italicized lines) is crying dumbly for her voice to return, while observing that the others around her are frozen voiceless as well. It is not a silence that pervades: as silence is the space between moments of expression, where there is no expression, there can be no silence either, and, subsequently, no space, which is reflected in the form. The poem begins to open up after the lapse of time signaled by the three asterisks; some kind of spring has arrived, and the call for the voice is now not so much a cry as it is a mantra, not so much a struggle within voicelessness as it is an *expression* of that state. It is as if the overwhelming frustration actually induces transcendence, as sometimes occurs when dealing with unfathomable physical pain. For in many Buddhist sects, including the Tibetan tradition that is predominant in this project, a distinction is drawn between the body's pain and the mind's reaction to it. The mind can learn how to detach itself from the pain, to step back and calmly observe the pain rather than reacting against it mentally. By not allowing the ego—that which 'feels' the pain as such; that which experiences it as 'my' pain—to react defensively, the Mind essentially bypasses the ego and the pain becomes an opportunity for meditation rather than for ego reinforcement. In this poem, then, the mind detaches from the pain and searing frustration of voicelessness—it ceases to resist that state—and only then is it, paradoxically, able to express that state with a kind of melancholic beauty.

Similarly, the *struggle* with compulsive expression can be transmuted into a sort of linguistic meditation on that very state. In writing, this is the moment in



which the hands tingle, the heart beats in triplets, and a flush comes over the face, but in which the mind is both focused and utterly detached. It is not carrying out some conscious plan as it creates, and yet the process is, to a certain extent, tangible and transparent to it. This Mind feels no ownership over what it creates and yet, it takes a sort of terrified joy in it, as though the entire precious creation might combust and disappear at any time. This awe has the potential to completely transform one's relationship to the self. Consider this poem by Rilke, in which the speaker professes ignorance of and wonder at the self, and yet manages by the end to arrive at one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhist enlightenment:

Ignorant before the heavens of my life,  
I stand and gaze in wonder. Oh the vastness  
of the stars. Their rising and descent. How still.  
As if I didn't exist. Do I have any  
share in this? Have I somehow dispensed with  
their pure effect? Does my blood's ebb and flow  
change with their changes? Let me put aside  
every desire, every relationship  
except this one, so that my heart grows used to  
its farthest spaces. Better that it live  
fully aware, in the terror of its stars, than  
as if protected, soothed by what is near.<sup>62</sup>

Better, indeed to live fully aware than soothed by what is near—'what is near' being the protective film of the ego. When the ego is pulled away, or at the very least circumnavigated and seen beyond (because, in psychoanalytic thought, the ego is seen not so much as something to be destroyed as it is something to be renovated) what is left of the self may feel frighteningly vulnerable and exposed; in Lacan's terms, the self is forced to come face to face with its own lack, which can bring insurmountable anguish if the person is not spiritually or

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<sup>62</sup> Stephen Mitchell, Trans., *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*. (New York: Modern Library, 1995) 114-115.

psychologically prepared, as mentioned in the discussion of dereification above. There is at the same time, however, the potential for sheer openness, a return to the “basic ground” discussed by Trungpa. Through a full, meditative awareness of the state of terror, one can actually move out of it, and toward an embrace of the startling vastness. Energies that were previously committed to the ego’s preservation can then, in the state of openness, be put toward *play*—within physical space, within linguistic space—and unlike the ego, which is only capable of consumption, play is truly generative. The ego devours and regurgitates words, things, and experiences, while in play they are created spontaneously, simply because there is something the Mind wants to express to which the existing terms, objects, events, and so forth are not quite conducive.

When the Mind plays within linguistic space, language evolves. This is, of course, not the only factor in its evolution; misuses that first become idiomatic and later become accepted as the norms also contribute. But linguistic play differs from this latter process in one quite important way. Though its results are not generally consciously intended, linguistic play is a conscious endeavor. When a word or phrase is misused and then assimilated, the perpetrators of the misuse often do not know or do not care that they are speaking ‘incorrectly.’<sup>63</sup> The player knows, at the very least, *that she is playing* with language, though whatever new permutations come out of her play may come as surprises even to her.

New compounds that use very common formal elements, such as -ness,

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<sup>63</sup> I put *incorrectly* in quotes here because I do not want to seem as if I am proscribing any degree of misuse—without it, language would not have kept stride with human development and would subsequently not be even remotely adequate for expression.

-less, un-, and so forth, provide the player with an opportunity to express a thought that has never before actually been expressed in quite that way, or, if it has at some point throughout time, not enough to become a real part of the form (in other words, a commonly expressed idea). Saussure posited analogy—or new words constructed from preexisting components—as the predominant creative force within language: “Analogy is responsible for all the normal modifications of the external aspect of words which are not due to sound change.”<sup>64</sup> For Saussure, “Every time a new creation is definitely accepted and ousts its rival, there is truly something created and something abandoned.”<sup>65</sup> But the ‘new creation’ does not have to be assimilated into everyday speech before it constitutes a new creation. And, in fact, most of these new creations do not supercede older terms, rather, they exist in parallel, and the proliferation of terms allows for increasingly precise and intuitive expression. This is not only true of new terms formed with prefixes and suffixes. Compounds made up of two complete words effectively fuse two words, and therefore two sets of connotations, into one. When words follow one another in a series (“the state of being without space”) each word qualifies the one or ones adjacent to it, and the mind must make sense of the relationships. *Spacelessness*, on the other hand, conveys one clean image: as Saussure wrote, “We find countless cases where a change in the signal brings with it a change in the idea expressed.”<sup>66</sup> When two words are at play, the effect is compounded, as in this piece, “recollections of a stepmother who has gone.”

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<sup>64</sup> Saussure 160

<sup>65</sup> Saussure 168

<sup>66</sup> Saussure 119

it's the blue that refuses to turn or the smell  
of oranges and rain that used to follow your hair like a  
description—

you expand on my palm like a sponge unclutched your softness  
is paralyzing I turn blue I harden  
so that you can not take me in you like  
to take me in these stillblue dusks

when I was four sleeping mouthbreathing you slid  
a furl of paper down my throat I was a bottle  
for your message a museum for your selves  
tacked to the inside of my chest cavity your eyes were holes  
that watched me breathe  
I darkened as you watched as I  
darkened my darkening  
darkened your eyes we exchange  
darknesses in the stillblue your eyes  
are holes that watch me breathe.

I simply could not find a way to convey the static twilight glow that came over my childhood bedroom each night in a way that suited the poem. So, I typed the poem out on a typewriter a number of times, with each draft differing from the one that preceded it. It was as though each time I fed a new page into the machine and began to write, I was beginning entirely from scratch. In maybe the fifth draft, *stillblue* appeared on the page. I muttered it to myself a few times and my hands began to tingle. Constructing a particularly apt new compound can only be described as spiritual; one has effectively *given birth* to an expression that would have miscarried otherwise. The new term plays like a mantra on the Mind. The sense is never that *I* created a new term; rather, it is as though it always existed in potential and I animated it, gave it voice, called it out of its virtual existence and into actuality. This is not to say that every author or speaker of poetic expression is utterly detached from their creation, nor that the creative process is similar or

even comparable among writers, but my own experience serves as an example of a generative process of actualization.

It would be lovely—and very convenient for the sake of this project—if there were an adroitly rational, prescriptive way in which I could conclude. In truth, there is not. I can only urge you, my readers, to rediscover the Suchness of language, to allow each word that you encounter to pierce the protective film of your egos so that oppressive ego-clutter and false consciousness can be dismantled, and replaced by a joyous embrace of space. It must be remembered that language preceded and will outlive us, that it is the way we impart experience to one another, and that its very transmission across time constitutes the collective memory known as history. If we do not seize the command of our utterances from our egos, we will forget, and perhaps even lose our inherent spiritual connection to language, and our words will grow heavy, and lifeless, and dark. We must remember that we can learn to receive each expression with openness, and let it burn into us, and within us—

(Birthright)

One word recalls the span of a single present long after its death  
as the flickering darkness  
recalls a star who died long  
before its light shot through our blinking perception—

*We dance with cadavers whose voices lit the sky.*

One word: contours gleaming with a holographic nowness,  
each curve tasted on the tongue,  
each pointed piece of space  
jutting through the skin of the mouth, shattered and at once whole in itself—

*They passed the flame to our mouths and died for us.*

One word echoes over the chasm between our selves and our  
selves cast it into space:  
moonlight exploding against a wall  
and thrown back toward its waning source:

*We will kiss you with this word, and you will set us  
ablaze.*

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## Project Summary

When I began this project, I, like most honors students, had absolutely no idea what form it would end up taking. In the four years leading up to the project three of my interests ripened into insatiable passions: poetry, religion (particularly Tibetan Buddhism), and psychoanalysis. I was relatively well-versed in the first two, and had only a vague conception of the third—I'd read a good amount of Freud's work but had not yet thoroughly digested it, so to speak—and I knew that the only project on which I could possibly focus for almost two years would have to incorporate all three.

Then I encountered Lacan, and his notion of the unconscious as structured by language. Here I was, trying to find a way to express my spiritual connection to language, and Lacan posits that language constitutes a part of my very being. I had the opportunity in Professor Gates' ETS 340 class, No Such Thing, to get a crash course in Lacanian psychoanalysis. I bought the new edition of the *Ecrits*, one year (1959-60) of his seminar, and two companion books by clinician Bruce Fink, and I dug in.

Exploring the Buddhist aspect of the project proved to be a bit trickier. I could find no courses that corresponded to what I wanted to learn and read, so I set off on my own...and realized that the only books available on the subject here in Syracuse were either much too cursory or too self-help oriented (except for Chögyam Trungpa's work, much of which I already owned). I abhor buying books online unless I know *exactly* what I need, or am buying en masse. I really wanted to browse through a variety of in-depth, preferably primary, texts on the

subject. Luckily, I had the opportunity when I took a cross-country road trip over the winter of 2008-9 and ended up in Boulder, CO, arguably the Mecca of Tibetan Buddhism in America. Here I found the “Buddhist Bible,” a collection of sutras translated from Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese, edited by Dwight Goddard, which proved most useful. I also discovered a few other texts that served as excellent background reading.

I wanted the project to be a patchwork of sorts. I knew that I was working with at least three separate discourses, and I wanted to leave them mostly intact; I did not want to reduce Buddhism and psychoanalysis, for example, to a series of vague parallels, and yet I did want to show the connections between them. This was a difficult balance to strike, especially when, through conversations with my advisor, Dr. M. Gail Hamner, Deleuze’s text on Bergson and various works of Benjamin’s were added into the equation. Dr. Hamner recommended that I use Deleuze’s *Bergsonism* to frame my use of the terms *real*, *virtual* and *actual*. Upon reading the text, I knew I wanted to use it in the introduction, but there was one issue. I was already using the word *real* in at least three separate senses: in Lacan’s sense, in which the ‘Real’ is that order of existence that remains untouched and unmediated by language (or, in Lacan’s terms, by the ‘Symbolic’); in the Buddhist sense, in which the highest ‘Reality’ refers to what is experienced by the enlightened Mind; and in the colloquial sense, where ‘reality’ refers to the tangible environment. Introducing Deleuze’s text added yet another usage of the term into the project (real:possible::actual:virtual). On the one hand, I was enchanted with the plurality of uses and meanings that could be attributed to one

word; it seemed a perfect example of the linguistic space that I discuss in the project. On the other hand, there was still the issue of keeping all the usages straight and presenting them in a way such that each distinct usage was clear.

In Benjamin's case, I felt a deep kinship with his work from the moment I encountered it, when I took Dr. Hamner's REL 600 Religion and Revolution seminar in the fall of my junior year—so much so that I took a Benjamin seminar through the honors department in the spring semester of my senior year. As I mentioned above, most of Benjamin's work focuses on culture and history, and, subsequently, on memory and text. He was writing in Germany in the 1920s and 30s, during Hitler's rise to power. Benjamin sought to deconstruct the narrative, progress-driven conception of history—what he labeled 'Historicism'—that prevailed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because he saw this version of history as culminating, ultimately, in Fascism. Benjamin counters Historicism with what he calls 'historical materialism,' in which the historical narrative is torn open so that the lost moments—those that did not fit into the narrative and were consequently forgotten—can shine through. Benjamin's model of history is, then, more constellatory than linear, and it is a model in which the importance of (and truth within) space is constantly reiterated, whether it is the space among the moment-stars that comprise the constellation or the space among thoughts, or words. I found Benjamin's work very useful in discussing linguistic space.

The Spiritual Value of Poetic Expression is really a lifework of sorts (at least, so far). Poetry has been my best-liked and yet my most fickle companion

since I was about six years old. I never felt as though I had complete command over my writing. It felt instead as though I was a channel or medium through which the poems could come alive and take flight. When I first read Freud's description of the oceanic feeling, I immediately understood it, for it was how I'd always felt toward language—like it was something so vast and enigmatic that all I could do was stand in front of it in awe, and sometimes take a nighttime swim: I pictured words sticking to my skin like bioluminescent plankton. Poetry and spirituality have always been inextricable from one another for me, and this brought me to poets like Rilke and Celan, both of whom write poems that are, in a sense, psalms or sutras. In this project, I wanted to analyze what it is about poetic expression that makes it so conducive to spiritual ecstasy, despair and detachment.