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Preliminary Notes // The Architecture of Experience

Writing to me in July 1972, Veronica copied out a sentence from [Max] Jacob's Le cornet à dés on the back of the envelope: it said "Une œuvre ne vaut pas par ce qu'il contient mais par ce qui l'environne" ("The value of a work lies not in what it contains but in what surrounds it"). Apart from introducing the idea of the poem as container, and of the container as poetic form, this posits a further less definable limit. How can we know the limits of what surrounds it? Are there limits? If the surrounding is where the work's value, and therefore its politics, is to be found, we might want to work out what form this surrounding, which we could call the not-poem has.

- Ian Patterson on Veronica Forrest-Thomson (in an essay that discusses two of VFT's elegies: "In Memoriam Ezra Pound" and "Le pont traversé")

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The "impulse to epitaph," Barbara Johnson observes, is "the same as the impulse to write: to mark something that can communicate to any passer-by."¹ Discursive language and materiality are, in such an instance, inextricably connected through the desire to figure a presence that persists despite physical dissolution and the failure of recognition – as a totemic gesture against forgetting. Another version of this "impulse," which exceeds language, occurs when the source of the desire is no longer explicitly locatable. This particular type of source is, then, closeted through some *other* form which would "propose a complex interaction of the senses and imagination, [...] encompass[ing] space, time, and performance."²

Such a form is what we might designate a "reliquary" – an "encompass[ing]" framework that contains some kind of "relic," a word that derives from the Latin *reliquiae*, meaning "remains," and from a version of the Latin verb *relinquere*, to "leave behind, or abandon." In this sense, the reliquary is, by definition, an additional or secondary form, akin to a protective layer or surface. Yet to push back against a too-limited conception of reliquary as merely container or addendum, without integral meaning, the reliquary-form is also, arguably, essential in that it facilitates an experience of what may not be seen or touched. This form, in other words, has an unsurpassed potential to *mediate*.

¹ Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), Pg?

² Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400-circa 1204* (Pittsburgh: The Pennsylvania State Press, 2002), 8.

For Cynthia Hahn, the reliquary, more specifically, possesses an inherently metaphorical, as opposed to metonymical, quality. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of metaphor, she contends that "reliquaries themselves work against the power of a particular presence." Many early medieval Western reliquaries, she notes, "obscure rather than clarify the presence of the relic and relentlessly point elsewhere to indicate a primary locus of meaning."³ An essential characteristic of the reliquary, for Hahn, is therefore the fact that it is an insistently *material* form that nevertheless purports to contain – often despite a clear lack of evidence – the *immaterial* or intangible. It is a form that invites and yet categorically evades the certainties of vision, unsettling the beholder-beheld / subject-object relation:

While their metaphorical quality insists that we look "through" [reliquaries], as Ricoeur insists, it also requires that we "look at" them, and in that looking our senses are engaged. The senses here are not, as one might think, bedazzled by the jewels and thereby distracted by their glittering presence—as I have already argued, such "looking" is also a rewarding experience.⁴

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In a similar sense, I would argue that both *books and individual poems* are often experienced as receptacles of projections and remains that alternately foreground and, in other cases, work to dissolve their own artifice or fictiveness (or, indeed, alternate capriciously between these two extremes of self-presentation). Take, for example, Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, a collection of ballads and popular songs published in 1765, which later inspired both Wordsworth and Coleridge. Sourced from various places, the book itself served as a textual repository for poetic "remains" that were not initially recognized as such at the time of the book's conception. The basis of the volume, more specifically, was a manuscript, later known as the "Percy Folio," found in the house of Percy's friend Humphrey Pitt of Shifnal; as the story goes, Pitt's maid had been using the leaves to light fires.

In this most literal case, then, it is explicitly the poem that is the "relic" and the book that is the "reliquary" – although I do not necessarily think that the mapping must be so over-determined; one of the things I am interested in is the way in which a more modern poem might itself be

³ Hahn, 110.

⁴ Ibid, 110.

understood as a container (or, in a less heavy-handed sense, as a form that *induces* a certain quality of “surrounding”), which I will get to a bit later – and maybe you can help me with this.

This idea of the poem as “relic” is perhaps most notably taken up in the late 18th century – as I have learned through some of my more recent reading. The Welsh poet and antiquary Evan Evans describes poetry as “specimen” in the title of his 1764 collection *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Ancient Welsh Bards*. In 1784, Edward Jones emphasizes the word “relick” in his publication *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards*, which not only champions the Welsh bards but defends even their historical forgeries, by reading them as a patriotic resistance to English occupation. I quote:

Hence much uncertainty prevails concerning the genuine remains of the sixth century, great part of which has descended to us mutilated and depraved: and hence that mysterious air which pervades all the Poetry of the later periods I am describing. The forgery of those poems, which are entirely spurious, may, I think, be presently detected. They were written to serve a popular and temporary purpose, and were not contrived with such sagacity and care as to hide from the eye of a judicious and enlightened scholar their historical mistakes, their novelty of language, and their other marks of imposture.⁵

Katie Trumpener touches on these texts in her book *Bardic Nationalism*, in which she seeks to “develop a mode of literary-historical analysis in which literary form itself becomes legible as a particularly rich and significant kind of historical evidence, as a palimpsest of the patterns, transformations, and reversals of literary, intellectual, and political history” (xv). Her project – which is entirely outside my scholarly purview, although I sympathize with it – is to redraw our picture of the origins of cultural nationalism by linking the literary and intellectual history of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Britain’s overseas colonies during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries. Her book is, therefore, a concerted effort to explore important extranovelistic developments of the period. And one of these developments is ballad collecting, which is precisely what Percy engaged in by compiling the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. What I find most suggestive in Trumpener’s work is her assertion that controversies around the problem of bardic memory recapitulate “a specific history of debate around the politics of cultural memory” (xv), as well as her observation that the “activities of nationalist antiquaries represent a continual attempt to join the realm of materiality to the discursive realm” (27).

⁵ Jones, *Musical and Poetical Relicks*, p. 20-21. Trumpener notes: “Ironically, Jones was known as the King’s Bard (Bardd y Brenin), because he stood under the patronage of the crown prince. And Evans, ironically, was a correspondent and an associate of Thomas Percy and of Samuel Johnson; see Lewis, ed., *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy and Evan Evans*” (294n.9).

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Trumpener's focus, in the end, is on the novel. But this intertwined nature of materiality and the discursive realm as explored by 18th century antiquarians (i.e. through their thinking of individual poems as "relics") is something that poetry continues to probe, instrumentalize, and unsettle far beyond the late 18th century – indeed, through the present.

To continue, then, with the idea of the poem as relic or reliquary, I would also observe that poetry has for centuries explored the liminal or "relict" spaces of thought through the figurative, fugitive operations of speech most often associated with lyric, including apostrophe, transumption, metaphor, and catachresis. Susan Howe, in an interview (with Maureen McLane) in the *Paris Review*, explains that her attempts to describe the allure of now-obsolete interleaves in old books helped her to connect the elements that went into her collection *Bed Hangings*. She elaborates:

Interleaves used to separate the title page from the engraved portrait or color illustration following. The interleaf is a relic, fragile but tough. It's blank and semitransparent at once, like a scrim—always between. A bridge between intuition and the law. The paper relic rustles when turned. It could almost be a wing. [...] *Relic* is itself a beautiful word. The archaic *relict*—a widow, a survivor—from Latin *relictus* is even sharper."

Certain less ephemeral forms, moreover, like an urn, which often serve as sites of inscription and remembrance in the "real world," become doubly significant when they engender poetic meditations on desire and the impossible "time" of its fulfillment. That is, although this "time" is impossible in "real" life, it is nevertheless realizable within the immortal fantasy of, for instance, Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn": "For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd, / For ever panting, and for ever young." These lines suggest the speaker's willingness to embrace a slippage between appearance and being, memory and forgetting, and his desire to escape into what we might characterize as a more fluid and indeterminate "reality."

But what would it mean to argue that the form of the reliquary and its implications could persist, *through poetic language*, beyond belief and beyond the sacred?⁶ My preoccupation is with how

⁶ It is possible, perhaps, to think of a modern "reliquary" as a kind of *transitional object*, to shift Winnicott's term into a broader cultural sphere. For Winnicott, the "transitional object," associated with early childhood, is exemplified by the "smelly blanket,"

more modern poems – particularly in the decades following World War II – suggest a certain reading potential as “reliquaries” or “relics” while simultaneously calling into question their status as “artifice” or “illusion.” Both interpretations are, I think, suggested by *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, through its form (its titular framing and fragmented composition) as well as its peculiar narrative of formation (the highly contingent act of collecting “throwaways”). And I want to explore the significance of these readerly polarities.

Understood as that which remains despite abandonment, the reliquary’s belatedly emergent (or, alternatively, latent) power, also leads me to Johnson’s characterization of the “uncanny,” which she describes as “the awakening of a system of belief that one thinks one has surmounted.”⁷ The reliquary is arguably a referent or index that persists precisely through this kind of “awakening,” which could perversely occur despite one’s best (i.e. most logical, rational) intentions. Johnson also quotes Victoria Nelson, whose work on puppetry derives from her scholarly investment in understanding forgotten or repressed senses of transcendence. “These invented creatures of our imagination,” she argues, “still carry for us, below the level of consciousness, that uncanny aura the unacknowledged ‘holy’ characteristically assumes in a secular context.”

My dissertation takes as its premise the possibility of a “theory” of modern poetry – and of a poetics itself – that could both probe and enact the fraught negotiation between the “artifice” of specific poetic texts (and associated intimations of the *desacralized* reliquary) and the “uncanny” that seems to persist despite certain “systems” of thought that we imagine we have “surmounted” or moved beyond. This dissertation would explore the limits of poetic language and the limits of poetic artifice, as well poetry’s relation to more explicitly visual and material forms, like the reliquary itself. This dissertation would draw, for instance, on other relevant artistic models, like Eva Hesse’s “eccentric abstractions” and Paul Thek’s *Technological Reliquaries* of the 1960s.

in that, for the subject (baby) possessing it, such a form can be related to or, alternately, simply used. In the essay ‘The Use of an Object and Relating through Identification’ Winnicott distinguishes between object relating and object use. Object relating is contrasted with object use in that object use “involves the trust that separation can occur without damage” (Johnson 101).

⁷ Johnson, 85.