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“Whispers Out of Time”: Memorializing (Self-) Portraits in the Work of John Berryman, John Ashbery, Anne Carson, and Nan Goldin

Andrew D. King

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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“WHISPERS OUT OF TIME”: MEMORIALIZING (SELF-) PORTRAITS IN THE WORK OF JOHN BERRYMAN, JOHN ASHBERY, ANNE CARSON, AND NAN GOLDIN

By

ANDREW D. KING

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York 2019
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Andrew D. King

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

“Whispers Out of Time”: Memorializing (Self-)Portraits in the work of John Berryman, John Ashbery, Anne Carson, and Nan Goldin

by Andrew D. King

Advisor: George Fragopoulos

This thesis documents four distinct post-WWII North American writers and artists—the poet John Berryman, the poet John Ashbery, the classicist and writer Anne Carson, and the photographer Nan Goldin—who expanded traditional definitions and practices of portraiture. Their works—*The Dream Songs*, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” *Nox*, and *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (and “The Cookie Portfolio”)—developed new ways of representing human subjectivity and the self that integrated the influences of Romanticism, Modernism and Postmodernism, but were not defined by these movements. In an era when notions of autonomous art and human identity became fractured, they picked up the pieces and rearranged them to make portraits (within-self-portraits) that put personhood and mortality at the center of their art.

In addition to close readings and comparisons of the poems, texts, and photographs, this thesis will situate the above and related works in their literary- and art-historical contexts. It will also reference relevant theoretical frameworks applied to these works and genres by critics and scholars.
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INTRODUCTION

In the years and decades following World War II, North American literature and art responded to cultural and political upheaval by questioning the epistemological and metaphysical claims made by the “masters” of Romanticism and Modernism that came before them. Although mid-century American prosperity was taken for granted in popular culture, beneath that sunny narrative were seething inequalities, trauma, and fear of nuclear war. The civil rights movements of the 1960s and the Vietnam War further exposed the fissures and broken promises of the “American Dream.” Writers and artists confronted a new reality that destabilized the aesthetic and ontological foundations of their traditions, while influential thinkers like Michel Foucault theorized the dissolution of the self and subjectivity. Neither the Romantic notion of Truth nor the Modernist myth of individual self-creation would stand on their own as authentic modes of address anymore. In this Postmodern era and into the 21st century, the author lost much of their authority, and works of art were critiqued as social constructions, not just interpreted as self-contained objects—and the very notion of the subject-object distinction was called into question.

What, then, did this mean for human subjectivity in art? How could poets or artists address personhood and mortality through the traditions of portraiture and elegy in the absence of the sublime?

This thesis explores the work of four distinctly different artists spanning five decades—John Berryman, John Ashbery, Anne Carson, and Nan Goldin—who nevertheless shared a common drive to rescue human subjectivity from oblivion in a Postmodern era that tended to deny the possibility of a coherent self. By creating innovative forms of poetic, visual, and hybridized portraiture, they attempted to reconstitute individual identities without succumbing to
the orthodoxies of a mystical Romanticism, a depersonalized Modernism, or an ironized Postmodernism—even while negotiating all of these influences.

In a time when notions of religious and artistic transcendence had evaporated from serious discourse, it was as if these artists answered Wallace Stevens’ confounding question in “The American Sublime”—“how does one feel?” (Collected 130)—by imbricating their own lives with others in discursive portraits that experimented with the distinctions between subject and object, self and persona, and revived human contingency as a subject worthy of art, empathy, and praise (if not answerable prayer). These intimations of mortality show lives disappearing or already gone—memorialized in poems, collages, translations, and photographs that celebrate life and mourn its loss by jumbling pronouns and re-configuring the lyric “I”. In these ways, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” The Dream Songs, Nox, and the photographs of Nan Goldin become self-portraits-within-portraits that put personhood at the center of art.

Chapter 1 looks at the strange case of “Henry” in John Berryman’s Dream Songs, who performs the poet-persona of Berryman, distorted through shifts of register and masks that create a shape-shifting self-portrait. Berryman and his contemporary Robert Lowell came of age in the shadow of the high poetic tradition of Modernists like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot and were schooled in the New Criticism, which emphasized an academic allusiveness and depersonalized approach to poetry. Berryman’s early work demonstrated a mastery of formalist construction, but by the 1960s he moved to a radically personal style that drew upon self-analysis and psychological crisis, and which he called “Dream Songs.” Berryman’s epic poem of self-representation was a collision of the need for liberation and the need for cover—he could not simply sing like Whitman, nor maintain the constraints of an out-of-touch Modernism. Breaking free from that tradition did not mean, however, that Berryman fit into what we have come to
know as the Postmodern—even though *The Dream Songs* experiment with syntax and ironically call attention to its own making. Rather, Berryman’s project was intended to be an aesthetic autonomous whole, where the sum of its parts would somehow materialize into a (self-)portrait. At times the language reaches back to Romantic diction in bursts of feeling, only to recoil in shame and self-loathing. Albert Gelpi calls this impulse in the work of certain mid-century poets like Berryman and Lowell “Neoromanticism”, marking the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism (Gelpi, *American Poetry* 8).

Like the other portraits in this thesis, the *Dream Songs* are written in an elegiac mood, as the self-portrait excavates crushing personal losses (a father’s suicide, the deaths of friends), and personal mortal worry, which the poems both rehearse and try to resolve.

In Chapter 2, we see another poet who approaches his self-portrait sideways through discourse with an imagined interlocutor; but this time the wild mood swings of Berryman’s Henry give way to the introspective musings of John Ashbery in his ekphrastic poem of Parmigianino’s painting “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” from which Ashbery’s poem takes the same name. Here, Ashbery contemplates whether poetry and art can ever capture the soul, and whether we even know what the soul is. By asking such questions, Ashbery speaks in a lineage of Romantic and Modernist influences like Keats and Wallace Stevens, but his approach brings this lofty subject down to earth, as it considers with chagrin that perhaps “the soul has no soul, / Has no secret, is small and it fits / Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention” (69).

In analyzing the ways in which Ashbery’s poem demonstrates the Postmodern method of flux and open stanzas, this chapter will suggest that Ashbery goes beyond mere deconstruction or
pose, toward creating a new form of authentic self-portraiture that integrates the fragmentary nature of consciousness and a conception of self. By questioning the authenticity of portraiture—of whether it is a form of representation or reflection, real or fake—Ashbery’s self-portrait begins to merge with Parmigianino’s in an “accumulating mirror” (72) of references.

“Self-Portrait” is emblematic of the Postmodern for the way it calls attention to the inauthenticity, even the folly, of trying to create a definitive self-portrait. And yet, Ashbery resists this very resistance throughout the poem as it meditates on the loss of the self in the hope of establishing some metaphor for meaning (Edelman 103). Contrary to Ashbery’s reputation for lightheartedness, there is personal risk in this poem and, as with Berryman, a sense that a deep examination of his own mortality is too powerful to view head-on in the flat mirror of one’s own reflection, but instead refracted through someone else’s convex mirror.

One of the most powerful forms of portraiture is the elegy. Chapter 3 takes the elegiac mood of Berryman and Ashbery deeper into the grief-work of Anne Carson’s Nox. With the interrogative rigor of a classics scholar and the obsessive creativity of a poet, Anne Carson constructed an intertextual portrait of her deceased brother that uses precious few extant artifacts and memories to express the inscrutability of loss. Carson calls this work an “epitaph” in the form of a scrapbook, and its material objecthood bring a physical, tactile experience to reading this work. The nearly 200-page “book” is printed on a single sheet of paper folded up like an accordion that sits in a box, which symbolizes a coffin.

As a translator, Carson realizes her portrait will be inherently incomplete—“as close as we could get.” And that is the feeling that pervades this work—the approximation of a life in scraps of torn pages, old black and white photos, and enigmatic lines of poetry and prose, which
all sit heavier for their scarcity and careful curation that uses negative space to convey meaning. It is the sorrow of absence and the vexations of distance that shape this work of shadows and caesuras and missing pieces.

Like Ashbery, Carson’s method breaks new ground in aspects of Postmodernism while also risking self-disclosure, this time by blending the techniques of pastiche and collage with deeply personal expressions of grief and personal artifact, including the use of family photos and letters as a focal point of ekphrasis. She also deploys her training as ancient historian and translator, as if to establish academic distance in order to modulate the flow of personal, familial pain that threatens to overwhelm the work. With so little of her brother Michael’s life to draw from, Carson centers Nox on her own “stingy” obsession with his death, embarking on a kind of archeological field work to gather the pieces of his existence and “translate” him into a full human subject that can be mourned.

Her companion along the way is Latin poet Catullus of the late Roman Republic, whose own elegy for a dead brother Carson translates along the way, as the two elegies merge in an unbroken scroll that has the effect (and even the appearance) of a palimpsest. Finally, Carson’s patchwork of fragments and translations form only a partial portrait of Michael in which sometimes, as in life, “He refuses…he disappears”, but which creates a place for him to rest, in her memory and in history, because “A brother never ends…He does not end.” (7.1)

Chapter 4 moves from literary to photographic portraits. Portraiture is conventionally understood as painting or photography, but this thesis examines how even literary portraits draw on references of visuality such as ekphrasis to set up a dialogue with the past or to “speak” to the dead. This chapter moves to a body of photographic portraits by Nan Goldin that were created as
her own form of dialogue with the past. But these too fall outside of convention, rejecting the 
notion of a singular portrait that captures an “essence” in favor of snapshots in the open flow of 
life as it is lived, largely unposed. The dramatic movement has the effect of film and, in the case 
of Goldin’s seminal work, The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, was often shown (and still is) as a 
slideshow set to music that corresponds to themes in the photographs.

Like Berryman, Ashbery, and Carson, Goldin complicates the distinction between artist 
and subject. Her subjects are her friends and herself, as Goldin appears in many of the pictures, 
fully or sometimes just partially—but her presence is always there. The intimacy and readability 
of her pictures resembles a family photo album more than art or documentary photography. The 
reason her pictures follow a familial theme is that Goldin, like Carson, was driven by the loss of 
her sister when she was young (and her subsequent alienation from her biological family), 
although she does not explicitly refer to her photography as grief-work. Goldin’s “re-created 
family” lives on the fringes of society, where gender and sexuality are fluid, and the “roles aren’t 
so defined” (Ballad 6). Her goal was to “preserve the sense of peoples’ lives” so that she could 
ever “lose the real memory of anyone again” after the death of her sister. Unfortunately, she 
would lose many more “family” members to AIDS, to which her work bore witness.

This chapter will examine how Goldin’s apparent no-frills candids are actually more 
complex and self-reflexively Postmodern than they may seem at first. Like Ashbery, Berryman, 
and Carson, Goldin crosses artistic and cultural boundaries to find new ways to represent lives in 
flux, lives that won’t sit still for their portraits. Many of her portraits are forms of elegy, which 
show her, in reverse, how much she’s lost.
Chapter 1

A Matter of Life and Death: The Voices of John Berryman’s Dream Songs

“These Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand.
They are only meant to terrify & comfort.”

—“Dream Song 366”

When John Berryman, through the persona of Henry, writes that The Dream Songs are meant to “terrify & comfort,” he is addressing the reader, but also himself. And although the Songs are “not meant to be understood,” this statement suggests its own kind of understanding (“you understand”)—of a language, a world, in the form of a long poem, that expresses the despairs, dreams, and desires of a single man (John Berryman), refracted and distorted through so many masks and shifts of register that something more complex and less stable than mere autobiography results.

Like his contemporary and friend Robert Lowell, Berryman was considered a “confessional” poet because the main subject of his best-known work was his own experience—not just his personal biography, but the probing and urgings of his inner life and inner voices. But Lowell, Berryman came of age in the shadow of the high poetic tradition of Modernists like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and was schooled by New Critics such as Mark Van Doren and R.P. Blackmur, from whom he learned the allusive, depersonalized style of the age. And like Lowell, Berryman—whose early works The Dispossessed (1948) and Homage to Mistress Bradstreet (1956) demonstrated a disciplined ability to write in formal meter—found that he needed to break free of this formalism to create a new poetic mode that would allow him to express the vicissitudes of his own psychology without giving up all that he’d learned. The imperative for poets moving into the confessional mode was to find a way to make art out of chaos, to
command poetry out of a life in a mid-century world that seemed to be lurching toward self-destruction. To that extent, *The Dream Songs* are a form of self-mythology and self-portraiture intended to reconstitute (and comfort) the self, as ballast against personal ruin in a time of fear. However, Berryman’s song of himself would lack the naked liberty and honesty of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” written a hundred years earlier. There was no way back to such an unbridled American Romanticism for a poet schooled in Eliotic Modernism. Yet Whitman’s great epic of the self was likely a seed for *The Dream Songs*. In his 1957 essay “Song of Myself: Intention and Substance”, Berryman approved of Whitman’s stated goal for writing *Leaves of Grass*: “to put a Person, a human being (myself, in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, in America) freely, fully and truly on record” (qtd. in Heffernan 232).

The drift away from Modernism in American poetry can be attributed to a weariness of the highly aestheticized stature it proclaimed, which seemed indifferent to human subjectivity and suffering, especially after the atrocities of two World Wars. For Berryman’s generation of ambitious poets trained in New Criticism but still influenced by the Romantics, there was both the anxiety of influence and the anxiety of reality to contend with. Albert Gelpi describes this period in the 1950s and 1960s as a precursor to what would later be called Postmodernism:

> The poetry of the Cold War period set out the defining features of Postmodernism before critics introduced the term: a deepening sense of the mind’s alienation from nature and of the world’s alienation from reality; an intensified experience of material randomness and temporal flux, of moral relativity and psychological alienation, of epistemological confusion and metaphysical doubt; a drastic scaling down of expectation and aspirations; a questioning of language as a medium of perception and communication; a shift from hypostatizing poetry as a completed work to investigating it as an inconclusive process of provisional improvisation. (“Geneology” 3)

This shift away from the rigid pretensions of American Modernism toward a poetry of
improvisation and flux began with the Beats and the New York School, particularly Allen Ginsberg and Frank O’Hara, respectively, but also John Ashbery, whose experimental poems, as we will see in the next chapter, seemed to un-spool or randomly shuffle their contents rather than fit them together into a monumental, unitary object. Observing this change, Lowell compared the two opposing modes to “the cooked and the raw.” To Berryman, Lowell, and other confessional poets who followed, it was the bohemianism of the Beats and the “everydayness” of the New York School that gave them permission to attempt a more personal, less formal style, beginning with Lowell’s landmark Life Studies in 1959.

Debate about the merits of the confessional poetry that followed hinged on whether the poet merely discloses autobiographical material in verse form or creates a new version of the self that transcends facts and suggests something like “truth.” For Berryman, the stakes were high because not only was the life that was also his subject so fractured, but the lyric “I” of his masters—Shakespeare, Hardy, Yeats—had become fragmented too. Once, in his thirties, when mocked for taking poetry too seriously after reading Hardy and Yeats, Berryman responded, it’s “a matter of life and death.” Believing art to be his life, Berryman upped the ante by resolving that his life was also his art, and to that extent he welcomed turmoil. “...I do strongly feel that among the greatest pieces of luck for high achievement is ordeal,” he told Peter Stitt in an interview for the Paris Review in 1972, echoing an even darker musing by Henry in “Dream Song 26”: “I had a most marvelous piece of luck. I died” (Dream Songs 28, spacing original). Indeed, there is magical thinking from beyond the grave (see the self-elegies of “Opus Posthuminous” in section IV of The Dream Songs). Berryman’s obsession with death calls to mind Roland Barthes’ concept of the “anterior future” (96)—which we will revisit in Chapter 4 in the
photographs of Nan Goldin—the painful foreknowledge of death that is inscribed in every portrait.

Because The Dream Songs are autobiographical, it’s helpful to keep in mind some important facts about Berryman’s life—though even a comprehensive knowledge of his biography will not be sufficient to explicate The Dream Songs, which draw on dream logic and are peppered with distancing mechanisms. Probably the most significant event in Berryman’s life was that his father, John Allyn Smith, committed suicide when Berryman was 11 years old. This is no doubt part of the “irreversible loss” that Henry has suffered, and which resurfaces like a ghost throughout The Dream Songs.²

Berryman’s mother remarried after the husband’s death (the boy took his stepfather’s surname), and she maintained a powerful influence over Berryman for the rest of his life, vying for his affections. By the late-1940s and early 1950s, Berryman was an eccentric teacher and scholar, but was also suffering from severe alcoholism and depression, for which he was frequently hospitalized (Haffenden, Life). His reputation grew as he began to publish poems and hold teaching appointments that took him to Princeton, Harvard, Wayne State, Berkeley, Iowa, Brown, and ultimately to the University of Minnesota, where from 1955 until the end of his life he taught in the Humanities department (not the English department, which didn’t seem to want him). Berryman was married three times, with two children, but had extra-marital affairs and was tormented by guilt, which became a source of self-reproach throughout the Dream Songs. His time in psychoanalysis deepened his curiosity about subconscious drives, particularly dreams and the id, which would become its own kind of persona in the Songs. His enthusiasm with literary greatness was matched only by his obsession with death—his father’s suicide; the deaths of friends and fellow poets such as Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz and Theodore Roethke,
whom he elegized along with many others; and eventually with his own pull toward that end. Berryman’s health continued to deteriorate from the effects of addiction and mental illness, and on January 7, 1972 he committed suicide by jumping off a bridge near the University of Minnesota campus (Haffenden, *Life*).

So how does one describe a life that seems unlivable—unlivable but also irresistible? How does a poet in love with the beauty of language express the absurdities and humiliations of personal catastrophe without taking himself too seriously, or not seriously enough—without making a fool of himself or profaning his art? He invents Henry, “a white American in early middle age...who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second”, as Berryman explains in the introductory note to *The Dream Songs* (vi). Henry, then, is an imaginary character who very much resembles John Berryman, but, as Berryman insists, is “not the poet, not me”—and therefore licensing Henry to express anything that might be too painful or taboo for John Berryman to say. So Henry is Berryman’s mask; but even Henry needs masks—he is “sometimes in blackface.” And he is not alone—he has a “friend,” an interlocutor, “never named, who addresses him as Mr Bones and variants thereof” (vi). Berryman’s use of blackface and minstrelsy as a device in *The Dream Songs* is problematic for a number of reasons, and has rightfully been the subject of much critical and cultural assessment. Whatever Berryman’s intent, the racist “representation of a representation” (Maber 134) toxifies the poems for many readers.

With these personae then established, the stage is set (and in some ways it is a stage) for the radical shifts of register that make *The Dream Songs* such a perplexing, original work of self-portraiture. Henry goes by different names (Henry Pussycat, Henry House, Henry Hankovich, Sir Henry, Mr. Bones, Sir Bones) and speaks in different voices—in somber elegy, nursery rhyme,
blues-speak, lofty Romantic verse, and often in neologisms and disordered syntax. Having mastered, and obsessed over, the formal elements of poetry and prosody, including scholarly studies of Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays, Berryman enjoys experimenting and juxtaposing different genres.

Henry puns and jokes and chases women, but he also panics and falls into existential despair about death and the absence of God. He seems to have been blighted, and “hates the world” (Dream Songs 81). Sometimes his sidekick looks after him and offers rational counsel, but he’s more of a Job’s comforter, an end man in a minstrel show. Through its multiplicity of voices and extreme shifts in register, The Dream Songs go beyond autobiography to create a brooding self-portrait-within-a-portrait that is part elegy, part escapism. Like dreams, they can “terrify”, but like songs they can “comfort”.

This chapter examines several poems that demonstrate Berryman’s style, focusing primarily but not exclusively on the first 77 Dream Songs, which were first published independently in 1964, followed by His Toy, His Dream, His Rest in 1968, and then The Dream Songs in 1969, which collected both volumes. Although Berryman insisted that The Dream Songs comprised a single long poem, the first volume proves to be the most experimental and complex, and most potently demonstrates the radical disjunctions and inventions that had become Berryman’s style. The later Songs became looser, quotidian, more transparently autobiographical. Critics have exhaustively analyzed The Dream Songs for ideological or cultural themes, but all clues lead back to the self-dramatization of Henry’s “plights & gripes” (16). It is an epic poem in the sense that is shares with Whitman the head-first desire to put one’s life into a long poem, or with Pound the ambition to create something no one has ever seen before. But what Yeats said about Pound’s Cantos could also be said of Berryman: “…he has not
got all the wine into the bowl…” (xxvi).

We are introduced to Henry’s world in “Dream Song 1,” a lament that announces Henry’s vulnerability and agitation but suppresses some of the more specific autobiographical references to come later:

Huffy Henry hid the day,  
unappeasable Henry sulked.  
I see his point,—a trying to put things over.  
It was the thought that they thought  
they could do it made Henry wicked & away.  
But he should have come out and talked.

All the world like a woolen lover  
once did seem on Henry’s side.  
Then came a departure.  
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.  
I don’t see how Henry, pried  
open for all the world to see, survived.

What he has now to say is a long  
wonder the world can bear & be.  
Once in a sycamore I was glad  
all at the top, and I sang.  
Hard on the land wears the strong sea  
and empty grows every bed. (3)

In the first stanza, Henry is speaking in the third person, but the alliterative, onomatopoeic “Huffy Henry hid” mimics breath, followed by the held breath of the caesura before “the day,” as if the speaker has paused, second-guessed himself. He is there. Then the voice shifts to the first-person, “I see his point,” before returning to the third person in a sharp but ambiguous complaint that intensifies on the tongue, rising to the angry declaration: “It was the thought that they thought / they could do it made Henry wicked & away.” Those last two words are so odd and memorable, and so descriptive of Henry’s unhappiness and remoteness. As a correction, a sign of moral self-consciousness in the poem, Henry concedes that he “should
have come out and talked.” Only by reading a detailed biography of Berryman’s life would the reader know that the “they” refers to colleagues at the University of Minnesota with whom Berryman quarreled (Haffenden, *A Critical Commentary* 81). The autobiographical material, for now, is almost invisible. Instead, we begin to see a multivalent personality. In chapter 2 will see a similar deferral of direct personal disclosure that is working beneath the surface John Ashbery’s “Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror”, a concept that its very title ironizes.

The second stanza of “Dream Song 1” begins like a different poem from a different century: “All the world like a woolen lover / once did seem on Henry’s side.” This is a sublime, nurturing world—motherly but also loverly—that is upended in the next line by an ominous turn: “Then came a departure.” Paradise was lost, from which point nothing “fell out” as it “might or ought.” Henry has been “pried / open” from a protected place and hideously exposed “for all the world to see,” a phrase that hints at nursery rhyme. It is unclear what this “departure” is, but we can guess that it coincides with the cataclysmic moment of his father’s suicide, and consequently destroys all associations of innocence thereafter.

At this point in the poem, Henry might be dreaming or fantasizing about a better place. The third stanza begins with a syntactically confusing construction with the Shakespearean ampersand that Berryman favored: “What he has now to say is a long / wonder the world can bear & be.” But then the speaker shifts to the first person, reminiscing about singing in a tree, envisioning himself as a bird; followed by what sounds like a quaint philosophical poem that has ossified into a maxim: “Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed.”

We have been given almost no actual information about Henry in this opening Song, but we understand that he has been thrown from innocence, and begin to see that his reality cannot be addressed directly. This first Song introduces themes that will continue throughout the Songs:
wickedness, departure, survival, fantasy and death. When Berryman read the Songs aloud, he usually enunciated the last word of a poem as if it was placed in the middle of a sentence, implying that it goes on into the next in a sequence, ever how unlikely that seems to be when, for example, we turn the page to “Dream Song 2.” The use of disjunction or non-linear narrativity is a distancing device Berryman and other artists in this thesis use to “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant—” as Emily Dickinson so famously wrote.

Although “Dream Song 2” is not one of the most robust of the collection, it is notable for the dizzying change of voice it invokes after the first poem and for introducing Henry’s interlocutor. Subtitled “Big Buttons, Cornets: the advance,” it was written in Boston on Thanksgiving Day, 1962 (Election Day) when all the bars were closed (Haffenden 82)—but the strange allusiveness of the language scarcely explains what’s going on. It begins:

The jane is zoned! no nightspot here, no bar there, no sweet freeway, and no premises for business purposes, no loiterers or needers. Henry are baffled. Have ev'rybody head for Maine, utility-man take a train?

Have we walked in on Henry doing a skit? Is he drunk? This delirious, folksy grammar of odd rhymes and rhythms (“no premises for business purposes”) and the slangy contraction “ev'rybody” resembles a wild mood swing, a manic high, when compared to the temperament of the first Song. This is another aspect of Henry’s personality, Berryman seems to be saying. “Henry are baffled” is not just bad grammar, it implies that Henry is more than one. As it turns out, he is in blackface, an end man in a minstrel show:

Arrive a time when all coons lose dere grip,
but is he come? Le’s do a hoedwon, gal, 
one blue, one shuffle, 
if them is all you seem to require. Strip, 
ol banger, skip us we, sugar; so hang on 
one chaste evenin.

—Sir Bones, or Galahad: astonishin 
you legal & you good. Is you feel well? 
Honey dusk do sprawl. 
—Hit’s hard. Kinged or thinged, though, fling & wing. 
Poll-cats are coming, hurrah, hurray. 
I votes in my hole. (4)

Many readers in 1964, at the height of the Civil Rights movement, would have found this language objectionable, and many more would find it unacceptable today. For Berryman, it is yet another mask, a crude one—likely intended as self-parody—that is exploited by an all-encompassing ego that dare not show its real face. This Song is dedicated to Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, an early originator of minstrel shows; and Berryman got the idea for this construction from Tambo and Bones by Carl Wittke (Haffenden, A Critical Commentary 82). This would seem to confirm that whenever Henry is addressed as “Mr Bones,” it is the other end man in an imaginary minstrel show who’s speaking to him.

Again, it’s important to note that fragmentary nature of Berryman’s self-portrait, and the effect of the shifting pronouns and personae. In Berryman’s The Freedom of the Poet, he writes “the ‘I,’ perhaps of the poet, disappears into Henry’s first and third persons (he talks to himself in the second person, too, about himself)” (qtd. in Gelpi American Poetry 48).

This jarring performance continues in “Dream Song 4,” where Henry is lusting after a woman at a restaurant who is “Filling her compact & delicious body / with chicken paprika” (6) and appears to him only as an anthropomorphized body, something to be consumed. Henry faints with desire then “hunger[‘s] back” (6) and is prevented from pouncing on her only by “the fact
of her husband & four other people” (6). In the second stanza the interlocutor responds in a child-like voice and broken syntax that produces an uncanny wisdom: “—Sir Bones: is stuffed, / de world, wif feeding girls” (6). But Henry broods on, unsatisfied: “Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law against Henry”—to which his friend delivers a chilling response: “—Mr. Bones: there is” (6). This would seem to signal Berryman’s suicidal angst expressed here as a “law” against Henry’s urges and even his very existence. This dramatic turn could not have been achieved without the discursive relationship between Henry and the unnamed man who seems throughout the Songs to become some form of conscience (the superego to Henry’s id).

Such a “law” against someone could only be enforced by God or Satan or, in Berryman’s case, the deceased father—and the question of which has more power over him sets up the psychic tension in the Songs. Berryman grew up Catholic and took an interest in theology, but during the years he wrote the Dream Songs he seems to have felt an absence of God’s presence (which was later to return). Henry’s complaints against God may be a denunciation or a cry for help. The critic Christopher Ricks went so far as to call The Dream Songs a theodicy (336). Sometimes Henry is ambivalent, as in “Dream Song 13”, which opens with “God bless Henry,” only to come to the conclusion in the last stanza that “God's Henry’s enemy,” which strikes his friend as “ornery.” By “Dream Song 17”, Henry has conjured Lucifer, who says: “—I smell you for my own, by smug,” a line echoed in “Dream Song 36” during one of Henry’s most anguished laments about death (by then he had already elegized Theodore Roethke):

The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who’s there?
—Easy, easy, Mr. Bones. I is on your side.
I smell your grief.
—I sent my grief away. I cannot care
forever. With them all again & again I died
and cried, and I have to live.
—Now there you exaggerate, Sah. We hafta die.
That is our ‘pointed task. Love & die.
—Yes, that makes sense.
But what makes sense between, then? What if I
roiling & babbling and braining, brood on why and
just sat on the fence?

—I doubts you did or do. De choice is lost.
—It’s fool’s gold. But I go in for that.
The boy & the bear
looked at each other. Man all is tossed
& lost with groin-wounds by the grand bulls, cat.
William Faulkner’s where?

(Frost being still around.) (40)

This is an exemplary Song both in content and form. What looks like a satirical exchange
between two characters is actually a densely packed, seductively metered poem (with almost
perfect A-B-C A-B-C rhyme) about a man’s crushing sense of alienation from God and the
deceased. Here, Berryman cleverly employs his personae and their odd diction in order to
address vexing ontological questions. A lesser poet might reach for abstraction or sentiment, but
Berryman sustains a folksy levity that accents the dark subject-matter. In the first line, the
maddening repetition of “die” leads to a question that can be read a few ways: “You look up and
who’s there?” could mean that you look up to the Heavens and expect to see God, or the dead
father, or dead friends; or it could mean that when you lift your head, no one’s left alive. Henry
sends his grief away, tired of caring, doomed to live. His friend, his Job’s Comforter, offers the
not-so-comforting truth that we “hafta die”—it’s our “‘pointed task. Love & die.” But Henry’s
stuck in the purgatory between love and death, after the “departure” that banished him from the
sycamore in “Dream Song 1.” Not that Henry will respond in religious terms: “But what makes
sense between, then? What if I / roiling and babbling and braining, brood on why and / just sat
on the fence?” This is Berryman in full command of another voice, both self-conscious and
uninhibited, capable of pressing a cliché (sitting on the fence) into extremis. Man has “groin-wounds” from his battles with “bears” and “grand bulls”—fathers, masters, gods, rage, lust.

Then, out of nowhere comes the question: “William Faulkner’s where?” At the time the poem was written, Faulkner had just died (Connaroe 123), as had Hemingway; so Henry is referring back to the first line: “The high ones die, die.” The naming of the dead has begun, and continues in the next volume, *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*. The parenthetical comfort expressed in the unusual extra line “(Frost being still around.)” doesn’t last for long. By the next Song, “Mr Frost has left” (41). For Berryman, the loss of literary fathers must have echoed the abandonment of his real father, and may have caused him to fantasize about joining them, and also undermining them to win back some self-confidence.

As the first volume comes to a close, the next to last Song, “Dream Song 76, Henry’s Confession,” suggests that Henry may indeed wish to join his father, somehow, “in a modesty of death.” This is one of the best examples of Berryman’s ability to address autobiographical material behind the mask of personae—Henry the end man, Henry the poet, Henry’s interlocutor. The effect builds tension between the comic and the tragic, in which the playing out of a minstrel act contrasts with a tormenting recognition:

Nothin very bad happen to me lately.  
How you explain that? —I explain that, Mr Bones,  
terms o’ your bafflin odd sobriety.  
Sober as man can get, no girls, no telephones,  
what could happen bad to Mr Bones?  
—If life is a handkerchief sandwich,  
in a modesty of death I join my father  
who dared so long agone leave me.  
A bullet on a concrete stoop  
close by a smothering southern sea  
spreadeagled on an island, by my knee.

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1 Again, the minstrel act itself may not be accepted light-heartedly in the first place; at a minimum it is estranging.
—You is from hunger, Mr Bones,

I offers you this handkerchief, now set
your left foot by my right foot,
shoulder to shoulder, all that jazz,
arm in arm, by the beautiful sea,
hum a little, Mr Bones.
—I saw nobody coming, so I went instead. (83)

Henry challenges his friend to explain why “nothin very bad” has happened to him lately, as if maybe this were even a disappointment. We learn that Henry is sober—a “bafflin odd” condition for Henry to be in, given his excesses—and that he is abstaining from more than just drink, but also “girls” and “telephones” and other temptations. He is cut off from the world. So what could happen to him now? The stressed “If life is a handkerchief sandwich” initiates what would seem to be the opening line of a dark joke, but then in the second stanza Henry’s voice shifts to highly poetic language, a kind of ballad, that refers to a father’s death “close by a smothering southern sea / spreadeagled on an island, by my knee.” The contrast of elevated diction with bluesy jargon implies different states of consciousness. The term “spreadeagled” may be a rather cartoonish way to describe a dead person, but Berryman is making a subtle reference to the local newspaper report of his father’s suicide, which described his body “lying in a spreadeagle fashion” (Haffenden, Biography 28). It is a key to the autobiographical core of the poem, and suggests that Henry the poet may be the nearest voice to John Berryman the poet.

As if that memory from “long agone” were too much to bear, the interlocutor releases the pressure and steps in to take Henry away from his dark musings in a way that mirrors but mocks the previous stanza. The result is a sort of anti-poetry, a down-home revision in which the tear-sodden “handkerchief sandwich” is replaced by a dry one; instead of a religiously evocative bent knee, Henry is told to get up and put his left foot by his friend’s right foot, as in some
hoedown dance; the “smothering southern sea” gets reduced to “the beautiful sea;” and then Henry’s told to “hum” a little as if to calm himself down. The two end men are physically and, we might intuit, symbolically, united—two aspects of the Dream Song world reconciled. But there’s no way to prepare for the closing line: “—I saw nobody coming, so I went instead.” The line cleaves from the rest of the poem, the words cast a void. Has Henry joined his father? The question lingers.

Perhaps *The Dream Songs* are not meant to be understood, but we may understand what they mean. They are a life, a real life known only to John Berryman, but re-imagined to fit a form that expresses it, on the move, unpredictably. On the surface, there is no one voice of the lyric “I”, but a cast of voices; no language but languages—all of them related and dependent on each other. Facts emerge, but smudge into dreams; lucidity gives way to delirium. There is no narrative to hold the Songs together, just Henry—and that is quite a burden. Out of the urgencies of his own life, Berryman created a world of feeling and contingency to outlive his own, one not to be understood but shared.
Chapter 2

The Distance Increases: Elusion and Illusion in Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”

T.S. Eliot wrote that “genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood” (206), which on one level might reassure readers of John Ashbery’s often opaque poems. However, in the personal and philosophical investigations he undertakes in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” Ashbery considers whether poetry and art, when referring to the self, ultimately can communicate what is understood. Like the other artists discussed in this thesis, Ashbery is trying to return human subjectivity and finitude to art, even if that means creating a new paradigm of portraiture that eludes both sentimentality and cynicism.

With shifting perspectives, an ironic mirroring stance, and a discursive style, “Self-Portrait” remains an influential example of Postmodern poetry that calls attention to its own premises as it bounces between self-reflection and self-denial, revelation and concealment, art and artifice—“pathos vs. experience” (Ashbery 69)—in an open-textual format that critiques the pretense of a unified identity. By choosing another artist’s self-portrait—and a distorted one at that—as the focal point for what we can interpret as his own tentative self-portrait, Ashbery creates a doubleness and a strangeness that interrogates the act of self-portraiture itself, casting doubt on whether self-representation is possible. This doubt is the source of pathos that imbues “Self-Portrait” with a sense of loss and mortality similar to what drives the works by Berryman, Carson, and Goldin. As such, Ashbery’s “portrait” is a working-through of this dichotomy toward a form of representation that is, ironically, formless but has substance—like water (a favorite Ashberian trope) (see Gelpi, American Poetry 48). Thus, his self-portrait begins to merge with Parmigianino’s in an “accumulating mirror” (72) of reflections. By using the famous
Renaissance painting as an ekphrastic device, he taps into a tradition that serves as a metaphor and a distancing mechanism. This hall of mirrors has in common with *The Dream Songs* a mistrust of straight autobiography in favor of dialogue and mask; but Ashbery’s approach has less angst—more a meditation than a lamentation.

“Self-Portrait” was a breakthrough in the experimental, Postmodern poetics that emerged in the 1970s. With enough distance from his Modernist influences like Stevens and Eliot, Ashbery could try something new. And although he may have inherited Stevens’ “rage for order” (Stevens 130), he treated the Modernist faith in aestheticism “nostalgically,” according to Albert Gelpi. “[H]e can no longer summon and channel its energy because for him the fissures and slippages of language make order, even aesthetic order, unattainable in the old way” (Gelpi 77). The poem calls attention to the inauthenticity, even the folly, of traditional self-portraiture.

Contrary to Ashbery’s reputation for deadpan humor, the stakes are high in “Self-Portrait”, which, like Modernist and Romantic poetry that came before it—asks fundamental questions about the self, the soul, and whether the artist has the power to transcend his thrownness long enough to capture something that will last. As the beholder of Parmigianino’s mirror image (painted onto a wooden globe), Ashbery already complicates the concept of what a portrait does—questioning whether what we see in ourselves or the image is an authentic representation or merely an empty construction—“a convention” (Ashbery 82).

The convexity of the mirror distorts perspective such that what it reflects appears circular, drifting “toward or away,” almost alive. And just as a circle has no beginning or end, Ashbery’s poem begins in *media res*, “As Parmigianino did it, the right hand / Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer / And swerving easily away, as though to protect / What it advertises” (68). This introduces the pivot-point on which Ashbery’s poem turns: Whether the portrait—through its
apparent accuracy (because it’s trying to show things as they appear) but also its conceits (because it is constructed)—advertises or protects its subject, which is the self and the soul, but also the object of the portrait.

The poem anguishes over the problem of fixity in art—whether the act of portraiture captures or ossifies whom it seeks to represent. And this is where Ashbery himself begins to protect what he advertises, by introducing an academicized analysis of the painting, quoting 16th century art critics—and, himself an art critic, offering a description of the painting that distances himself from it through lyrical passages that paint their own picture, as when the face, in such “density of light,” projected through the round mirror, remains “lively and intact in a recurring wave / Of arrival” (68).

The painting is alive in the present, as one might hope vital works of art to be. But an idealized representation so powerful that “the soul establishes itself” (68) gives way to a surprising change of tone when the poet asks: “But how far can it swim out through the eyes / And still return safely to its nest?” (68). This question has multiple implications for what’s at stake in a self-portrait: its limits, its risks, its trappings. When we view someone else’s self-portrait, what do we see? The subject or ourselves? How much is taken for oneself from the “soul” of the other and never returned? This encounter with Parmigianino’s painting—which Ashbery saw in Vienna in 1959 with his boyfriend, but didn’t write about until 1972—seems to have inspired a fascination with the liminal space between the observer and the observed, the writer and reader. If the soul is what’s displayed, Ashbery says, then it is held “captive” within the surface of the painting; within the museum; “treated humanely” (68), like a wild animal in a zoo; suspended like a soul in limbo; and cannot advance past the point when someone looks at it and “intercepts” it. To “intercept” a picture merely by observing it implies that its meaning is
limited to the interpretation of others—that, whatever the artist may have intended, the painting remains static in time, flattened into an object of consumption, contingent\textsuperscript{9} The fear is that the soul displayed in a self-portrait may not be a soul at all but merely a false representation of a soul, animated only by the subjective, intermittent gaze of the passing observer, and then forgotten.

The notion of a mirror image as an accurate index of reality rather than a representation has parallels to photography, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. Of course, photography did not exist when Parmigianino painted his portrait, but what he intended was a “copy” of himself and everything he saw in the mirror—much like the mirror reflections that bounce onto film when a camera shutter clicks. Setting aside the fact that a painting of a mirror image does not occur in a fraction of a second and therefore cannot capture the same exactitude, the concept of this painting has similar aims, and it gets to the heart of all the examples of portraiture discussed in this thesis: to what extent is it possible to represent someone’s—or one’s own—truth accurately, and to the extent that this is possible, does it not just as strongly invoke their death as their life? Ashbery says early on in his ekphrasis that the painting “embalmed” its subject (68)—a term often used to describe the act of photographic portraiture as well. The pathos, which Ashbery expresses with Keatsian passion, is that:

\begin{quote}
\ldots The soul has to stay where it is, 
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind, 
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay 
Posing in this place. It must move 
As little as possible. This is what the portrait says. (69)
\end{quote}
This would read like a Romantic poem with uninhibited long lines were it not for the hesitation in the enjambed lines: “It must move / As little as possible”, which enacts the constraint imposed on the subject, whose soul will not fit within the frame, even the alluring globe that seems frameless but whose contents disappear in the distance; and it plays on the ambivalence between the sense that the painting is both alive and dead. This turn in the poem seems to express concern that Ashbery’s own art of poetry may lack the power to convey meaning—that it, too, is caught in a mirror-house of self-speculation that it cannot escape. “One would like to stick one’s hand / Out of the globe, but its dimension, / What carries it, will not allow it” (69).

For the poet who puts so much faith in the power of words, there is moment of resignation, for he can hear the music but it’s untranslatable: “That is the tune but there are no words,” Ashbery continues wistfully, perhaps hearing the music of Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / are sweeter”—or Mendelssohn’s lyrical “Song Without Words”. Similar to Anne Carson in Nox (Chapter 3), Ashbery draws on his scholarly and art-historical knowledge to put all of this in a broader context through analogy or translation—as a way of withdrawing from passages above that threaten to be overcome with emotion, making “hot tears spurt” (69). Here, Ashbery associates language with both visuality and translation:

The words are only speculation
(From the Latin speculum, mirror):
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
Riders of the motion that swings the face
Into view under evening skies, with no
False disarray as proof of authenticity. (69)
Still, the self-portrait has the capacity to mesmerize and invoke the magical possibility of permanence in a world of happenstance, boredom, wonder, inattention, love, and pain. Ashbery’s uncanny but fascinating metaphor for the painting is as a “whole…stable within / Instability, a globe like ours, resting / On a pedestal of vacuum, a ping-pong ball / Secure on its jet of water” (70). How then, by the end of the stanza, does he conclude that the “affirmation” the painting puts forth affirms nothing in the end? It’s as if he has to deconstruct every doubt in order to know if anything is true.

What makes Ashbery’s self-portrait-within-a-self-portrait so compelling is the bewildering ambivalence between a Romantic wish to believe that art (painting, poetry) can transcend its moment of creation and connect one soul to another, combined with a bitter countervailing doubt that this is even possible. It is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett’s angst over the contradiction that “there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (139). For Ashbery, this polarity between doubt and hope is worked over in a kind of internal monologue that shifts registers between detached, almost clinical assessment (summoning the words of Parmigianino’s 16th century critics); to the elevated diction of Romantic poetry; to what would seem to be ordinary, everyday observations that have the effect of casual musings when compared to such higher states of mind—a Postmodern mood that ironically mocks the earnestness of Poetry and Art.

The second stanza of the poem breaks from the philosophical meditations of the first when “The balloon pops” and “the attention turns dully away” (70) from the portrait toward reflections on the other, “real” world outside the englobed one, as though one became distracted just as he was about to compose his self-portrait—interrupted by memory, daydreaming. It is this
inability to sustain one thing, this struggle to stay still, which draws attention to the vitality of life outside the frame—of friends who “became part of you” (71); of “turning seasons” (71) and thoughts that whiz by and are gone, “like the last stubborn leaves ripped from wet branches” (71). This moment of self-reflection further loosens the pronominal fluidity that has begun to merge throughout the poem, as Ashbery’s lyrical “I” enters the sphere of Parmagianino’s portrait, where he sees the objects of his life—“desk, paper, books, / Photographs of friends, the window and the trees / Merging in one neutral band that surrounds / Me on all sides, everywhere I look” (71). But nothing stays in its place, and he can already “feel the carousel starting slowly” (71).

Can a self-portrait account for all this? The poet addresses “Francesco” directly, as if the answer hangs somewhere between the two of them and determines their shared fate. “I see in this only the chaos / Of your round mirror which organizes everything / Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty / Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing” (71). The discourse Ashbery sets up imagines a mutuality and a sympathy between the artists, in recognition of the elusiveness of their efforts to represent their lives in any way that will endure over time: “Impossible now / To restore those properties in the silver blur that is / The record of what you accomplished by sitting down / ‘With great art to copy all that you saw in the glass’” (72).

But it would be unlike Ashbery to maintain such earnestness for long. He critiques “great art”, however nostalgically, with the acknowledgement that it simply can’t keep up with the flux of life, and that the artist’s intention is undermined by the most ordinary contingencies. Any attempt to to capture the “mute, undivided present” (80) is bound to “turn into a caricature of itself” (80):
This always 
Happens, as in the game where 
A whispered phrase passed around the room 
Ends up as something completely different. 
It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike 
What the artist intended. (80)

Jennifer Ashton sees this distinction between the artist’s intention and the impossibility of achieving that intention as the poem’s indeterminacy and its source of tension:

…it should be clear in this passage that the principle that “makes works of art so unlike / What the artist intended” is identical to the principle that makes meaning “impossible to restore.” Both claims follow directly from thinking of the work of art as an effect of someone’s “moment[s] of attention,” whether the beholder’s (in the first instance) or the artist’s (in the second). Indeed once the work becomes such an effect, it can only be “unlike what the artist intended” because “what the artist intended” can never be identical to who the artist was and what he was doing when he produced it or who the beholder was and what he did in the act of beholding.” (18)

This has resonances for all of the works discussed in this thesis, which in various ways both acknowledge the slipperiness of intention versus effect, and nevertheless try to push through these barriers to create portraits that will not only withstand this scrutiny, but will achieve a certain kind of authenticity for incorporating those doubts.

Through the middle and later sections of “Self-Portrait,” the intimacy between the observer and the figure in the painting intensifies to the point where “you could be fooled for a moment / Before you realize the reflection / Isn’t yours” (74). This illusion is significant in a couple of ways. On a visual level, Parmigianino’s painting triggers the human instinct to look at oneself when passing a mirror, which the painting resembles. This seduces the viewer into a moment of narcissistic gaze in which he thinks he sees himself, only to feel foolish when he
discovers that the figure looking back is someone else whose “otherness” in an “other room” (71) supersedes the “whole of you” so that he feels “like one of those Hoffman characters who have been deprived of a reflection” (74). But might this “otherness” also apply to one’s own self-portrait? After all, this mirror image only resembles a reflection, when in fact it is a representation of a self that has since moved on, so that even Parmigianino might be fooled by his own likeness.

The point is that we are always accumulating experiences that are too numerous to retain—in “waves of arrival”—and too numerous to be contained in a painting or a poem. That is the problem and the challenge of the self-portrait, which is “programmed” like a nucleus with its own inalterable DNA. But “it may be that another life is stocked there / In recesses no one knew of” (76), Ashbery contends. And the energy of that life-force might be inherent in its evanescence—as the wave breaks on the rock, “giving up / Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape” (73). We might call this deconstruction as a form or construction, meaning that the point of the Ashberian self-portrait is always shifting and distracted, adaptive to the “everydayness” of life but still moved by it—just as we will see in Nan Goldin’s photographic portraits, which are never singular but show people where they are (were) in discrete moments over time. Lee Edelman believes this honesty and fluidity is the key to Ashbery’s self-portraiture:

His text, then, effectively shores up its identity by thematizing its deconstruction: it reappropriates the knowledge and integrity of its selfhood by acceding to the dispersal of the self… “Self-Portrait” suggests finally that only by adopting this pose of self-exposure can it assert its integrity and claim that paradoxical property: its authentic posture.” (113)
This is not merely the ironic posture of the Postmodernist, but an adaptation of that posture in the mind of an artist who still believes in the Romantic hope that we may preserve elements of self-knowledge, if only “Here and there, in cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers out of time” (83).
Chapter 3

*In Absentia: Elegiac Portraits in Anne Carson’s Nox*

> “What I wanted—as Valery wanted, after his mother’s death—was ‘to write a little compilation about her, just for myself’”

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

> “It is when you ask about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself.”

—Anne Carson, *Nox*

When Anne Carson’s brother Michael died, she didn’t find out until two weeks later, after the funeral was over and his cremated remains had been cast into a foreign sea—incidentally, by the same coastal town of Elsinore, Denmark, where Hamlet met his end. So she made an “epitaph” for him in the form of a scrapbook, which was reproduced by New Directions and published as *Nox*—a nearly 200-page “book” printed on a single sheet of thick paper folded up like a scroll and placed in a box. This mass-produced “replica,” Carson notes on the back cover, resembles her original scrapbook closely, or at least “as close as we could get.” And that is the feeling that pervades this work—an incomplete elegy that is *as close as she could get* to a portrait of her brother (after all, that is the nature of translation—to get as close as you can to the original, knowing in advance that it can never be the same). And yet, it is the sorrow of absence and the vexations of distance that shape this work of shadows and caesuras and missing pieces.

Like Berryman’s and Ashbery’s fragmentary, non-linear self-portraits, Anne Carson’s portrait of her brother gathers fragments and artifacts to put together a pastiche that tries to reconstitute some semblance of his personhood, at least in memory. And her use of photographs,
captions, and repetition will echo in the photos of Nan Goldin’s friends, which were meant to
preserve their memories, but which, like translations, could never speak the language of the
living.

For Carson—whose brother was practically a stranger to her, a mysterious man who
disappeared in 1978 to flee prosecution for drug charges, and died on another continent in
2000—there were precious few pieces with which to assemble this portrait. During those 22
years, he and his sister never saw each other, and spoke on the phone only once. He wrote a few
postcards to his family, but never left a return address. The words from that phone conversation
and postcards, which seemed unremarkable at the time, hover in Carson’s consciousness like
oneiric messages written in a foreign language—in need of interpretation, of translation. Carson
felt “a need to gather up the shards of his story and make it into something containable…an
attempt to contain a person after they’re no longer reachable” (Paris Review).

This need for containment could not be met merely by heartfelt reminiscences and
personal confessions of sorrow—nor could words alone create a portrait of a man who left so
few of his own words behind. What makes Carson’s elegiac portrait so unusual is its use of both
literary and visual means to try to reach an understanding of her brother: poetic fragments, prose,
ancient history and Latin lexicography appear alongside family photographs, collage, paintings
and cut-ups. Pages of text look worn and smudged or retrieved from the waste basket, all
wrinkled up; staples hold together strips of cut photographs or obscure paintings (the
reproduction is so clear that one tends to reach out expecting to feel the rough texture). This
method asks much of the reader: it implies connections between obscure ancient history and
cryptic personal poetry; it interrupts our expectation of what it means to look at a photograph,
because many of them are either ripped, cut or accompanied by text (or floating on an empty
page); it test the reader’s endurance with lengthy lexical entries for each word of a Latin poem; it jars one’s sense of linguistic ownership when private letters or conversations are rearranged, displaced and combined with someone else’s words. Visually, intellectually, emotionally, *Nox* challenges the reader/viewer to enter this nightscape and encounter its mysteries up close and allow the connections between them to materialize slowly, like a procession.

In content and appearance, the scrapbook appears both centuries old and freshly assembled. The material fact of its existence presents itself to the beholder as a sacred collection of *things* piled and stuffed into a box (or a coffin). Were one to mishandle it, it might unfold and pour onto the floor like an enormous paper doll. The metaphor seems suitable to Carson’s project: this is a “compilation” of her brother, an assemblage of all that she could find to make sense of him; and it’s difficult work. *Nox* merges voices from different languages in different times, intertwining several different laments, while at the same time linking images with definitions of words, attempting to bridge the gap between herself and her brother, between the living and the dead.

Carson, a renowned classicist and translator, enlarges the notion of translation to a metaphor, and perhaps even a means, for understanding another person who spoke the same language but whose extant words are so distant they might as well have been written on tattered papyri found in a cave. The ghost here is not only her brother, Michael, but the dead brother of the Roman poet Catullus, who, like Carson crossed a distant sea to elegize a dead brother. Catullus’ well-known elegy, “CII” or “101,” permeates and guides *Nox*. The poem appears in full (but in different form) at the beginning, middle and end of the book; and furthermore, each Latin word of the poem is listed in separate lexical entries on the left-hand pages, accompanied by Carson’s own translations and eccentric usage examples.
The project of translation, then, becomes one of the primary themes in *Nox*. Words are pressed, tested, elongated and referred back to original sources in an attempt to express the inexpressible. We get the sense that Carson wants to know the anatomy of each word so closely that it yields an original meaning that might have been lost over time. To the reader, these voluminous entries may at first seem pedantic or extraneous—an impersonal Modernist construction. But a close reading of both the entries themselves and their location in the greater topography of *Nox* reveals subtle but powerful connections between them. Carson lifts the definitions and uses of each word directly from the Oxford Latin dictionary, but she also slips in her own examples of word usage to perpetuate the theme of night. Each entry corresponds to the facing page in some way, however loosely, which has the effect of layered meanings, quite literally an intertwining of two elegies—one portrait of loss accompanying another.

An elegy is a special kind of portrait—one that looks back, relies on memory and nostalgia to, in a sense, recover the dead from oblivion. In each of their own ways, Berryman, Ashbery, and Goldin join Carson in creating elegiac portraits in a Postmodern era when the very constitution of the human subject in art, and the authorial voice articulating it, could no longer be taken for granted. The goal of an elegy is to tell someone else’s story to establish a legacy that “carries itself” through living history—as a step in processing loss (our own mortality included). But nobody poses for this kind of portrait (or maybe they do, in a way, if you consider the “Opus Posthumous” self-elegies in Berryman’s *The Dream Songs*)—it is created by the act of mourning, the expression of lack among the living. So an elegy has at least these two components: it is a portrait of the deceased and it is also a personal testament of loss—a “work” both in the artistic sense and in a psychoanalytic sense.
In his influential study of the genre, Peter Sacks describes elegy as a “work, both in the commonly accepted meaning of a product and in the more dynamic sense of the working through of an impulse or experience—the sense that underlies Freud’s phrase “the work of mourning” (1, emphasis in original). The result, according to psychoanalytic theory, is a product or trope of substitutive value that allows the bereaved to withdraw her affection for the deceased and attach herself to a replacement for him—thereby completing a “healthy” work of mourning rather than slipping into melancholy. Sacks also identifies the following conventions in elegiac literature: “pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetation deity…repetition and refrain, reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation, and the traditional images of resurrection” (2). Carson employs some of these traditional methods—such as repetition (as well as litany)—but ignores, reverses or reinvents others, and suppresses the impulse toward transcendence or consolation. Particularly, *Nox* does something that is hard to do: it lets emptiness gape and ellipses hover where a traditional elegy might work ever-harder to fill the void with redemptive myth-making. In this way, Carson problematizes Sacks’ and Freud’s binary notion of mourning and melancholia by leaving loss unresolved, by admitting failure. According to another more recent study of the elegy by Jahan Ramazani, Carson is in good company among modern peers, in that “the modern elegist tends not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss” (xi) in elegies that denounce idealization, citing as examples Langston Hughes’ painful meditations about racial violence, W.H. Auden’s imitative or self-elegiac style, and the mock or revenge-tinged family elegies of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath.

*Nox* doesn’t easily fit within one generic tradition, but is rather a collage of various modes of mourning that relies only partially on language, as if to acknowledge that words aren’t
enough. So the pictures speak where words fail—and vice versa. One tradition Carson engages with, as did Ashbery in “Self-Portrait”, is *ekphrasis*. In her prose poetry throughout *Nox*, Carson clings to photographs of her brother in explications, meditations, and ultimately translations of these precious artifacts. The elegy relies on these traces of her brother in constructing an elegy.

Roland Barthes, in his influential *Camera Lucida* (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4), argues that a photograph is a mute “certificate of presence” that produces “the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken” (19). This “pressure” can never be adequately expressed through language because language cannot “authenticate itself”—it is, “by nature, fictional,” whereas a photograph is “authentication itself…Photography never lies” (87). These are bold claims that describe the problems of language as much as the unique phenomenon of photography. But the threshold between what we see and say seems to fascinate Carson as it did Barthes, and if nothing else challenges the reader to interpret both the language and imagery that were used to create this portrait. But just as Carson’s linguistic non-sequiturs force readers to toggle between different voices, so do her manipulations of the visual materials in *Nox* complicate whatever purity one might accede to the photograph, weaving yet another layer of meaning into her portrait.

Carson’s method of interweaving elements in her elegy is an aspect of classical elegiac ritual. Sacks points out, “it is worth noting the significant frequency with which the elegy has employed crucial images of weaving, of creating a fabric in the place of a void,” citing Apollo’s laurel wreath for Daphne in *Metamorphoses*; Pan’s bound reeds for Syrinx in Greek mythology; a cage of asphodel in Theocritus’s “First Idyll”; basket weaving in “Virgil’s Eclogue X”; and Camus’ hem “inwrought with figures dim” in “Lycidas” (Sacks 18-19). In a less literal way, but of similar significance, Carson weaves words and images across many planes to emphasize her
“work” of mourning as a process in motion that creates a new object that does not replace but represents her brother’s memory.

With the interrogative rigor of a classics scholar and the obsessive creativity of a poet, Carson made an intertextual portrait of absence that expresses the inscrutability of loss. Likewise, her use of images, photographs and paintings shows both that her brother existed and conveys the shadows that surrounded him as he receded into metaphorical night. As such, he’s difficult to see, just as it was difficult for his sister to see him. This is a portrait set against the backdrop of darkness, presenting the Michael she knew (and didn’t know). Whereas traditional elegy, like Milton’s “Lycidas,” would focus squarely on its subject and the grief of its writer, Nox gives us only intermittent and obscured views of its subject, choosing instead to take a circuitous approach that, paradoxically, makes each of the few personally intimate reflections about Michael all the more powerful. Carson’s elegy interrogates history, language, genre, imagery, and even herself, through a variety of discourses that subtly weave disparate fragments into a portrait of her lost brother.

**Opening the Box**

There are no words on the front cover of Nox, just the narrowly cropped picture of Michael Carson as a skinny boy in a swimsuit, wearing flippers and goggles with darkened lenses. The negative space surrounding him already seems to have claimed him. On the first page of the book, Michael’s name is written in heavy black magic marker repeatedly, with a pasted note on top reading “Nox / Frater / Nox.”

Nox moves unconventionally as one turns or unfolds its pages. “Form is a rough approximation of what the facts are doing” (D’Agata 13), she once said about her writing.
Indeed, *Nox* is, in addition to a personal elegy, a form of scholarly excavation, and Carson approaches her work with the discerning detail of an archeologist. At least stylistically, she lets the facts do the work, and relies on the reader to learn them, as if this were not only a portrait but a heuristic exercise. If we understand, then maybe she does, too. The book is loosely divided into ten sections with sub-sections (i.e. 1.0, 1.1), but these do not necessarily organize separate themes so much as numerate turns of mind or observation.

*Nox* begins in a way that readers might not at first understand—with a faded (in fact tea-soaked) copy of Catullus’s “CI” in Latin. Not until the next page do we see the first move toward translation with *multas*, the first word of the poem (“numerous, many, many of, many a….*multa nox*: late in the night, perhaps too late”) accompanied on the facing page by Carson’s first prose entry, 1.0, which begins with a kind of apologia:

> I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he’s dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history.²

Here Carson lays out the themes that dominate her elegy: the absence of light (therefore, night); language’s seeming inability to “expend” upon her brother’s life now that he’s dead; and the need to go back in history for understanding.

One of the most haunting and poignant photographs in *Nox* appears in these early pages, and it is a double-portrait of a young Michael holding his baby sister, Anne. They are sitting on

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² Two caveats about quotations from *Nox*: pages numbers will not be cited because *Nox* contains none; instead, I will try to locate quotations within their respective sections. Also, Carson often omits punctuation and retains typos, which are not corrected here.
the family couch, awash in white light coming through the windows which are heavily draped; but almost everything else in the frame is black shadow, and the two children are far away from the photographer, like small apparitions in a field of darkness. The “starry lad” of the first section comes to mind in one of the following page’s examples of Catullus’ *per*, which Carson may or may not have added herself: “*stellae per noctem visae* stars visible at night.”

Then she switches to a scholarly register to address history, citing the Greek definition of that word, which means “to ask.” So *Nox* is a work of inquisition. To make a portrait of a man whom she knew so little about, Carson must ask many questions, go back in time—not only her own time, but to ancient history, to explore original sources in order to find the way forward.14 This approach has echoes of Modernists like Eliot, Pound, and Joyce, who alluded to Greek, Roman, and other ancient histories in their work. What Carson discovers first are two metaphors of resurrection that resound quietly throughout this book about death. Hekataios describes the “sacred phoenix” flying to Heliopolis with an egg he made out of myrrh big enough to contain his dead father: “The phoenix mourns by shaping, weighing, testing, hollowing, plugging and carrying towards the light,” flashed by shadows along his way.

What this historical trope has to do with Michael Carson is not readily clear, but the next picture in the scrapbook suggests a connection, albeit a ghostly one. It’s a strange family photograph of a mother and two kids on a snowy lawn in front of their house, dwarfed by a long shadow of a man in a hat, probably the photographer—probably the father that is never mentioned.

Part of the impact of *Nox* is its surprising juxtapositions. After explaining Herodotus in another historical section, Carson shifts registers again without transition: “When my brother
died his dog got angry, stayed angry, barking, growling, lashing, glaring, by day and night. He went to the door, he went to the window, he would not lie down.” According to her brother’s widow, the dog actually went to the funeral, where, once he could “smell” death at the coffin, his anger subsided. How odd that we meet the dog before his owner—but such is the indirect style of Carson’s work.

Michael is still a peripheral figure in section 2.1, but voices and references are gathering around his memory as if speaking over each other, cacophonous. The ideal (but impossible) way to read these pages would be to read both sides at once, to include the lexical entry, vectus, ("to convey from one place to another by bodily effort, to carry…per noctem in nihilo vehi: to vanish by night into nothing…”); the scrawled words “WHO WERE YOU”, which appear as white indentations on the page made visible when rubbed with a black crayon; and the poetic fragment “Few circles, other lesser circles, but yet circles.” Amidst all this, we meet his mother on her deathbed telling her daughter to retrieve a box of letters, setting aside one in particular she wants to keep: “The one your brother wrote from France you know that winter the girl died.”

Pieces of Michael’s story gradually materialize as Carson “prowls” him like a creature in the night. There is a sense of movement by section 2. One of the most interesting sections, 2.2, demonstrates an unusual form of repetition. Again, multiple voices are speaking simultaneously—one in refrain. It is a biographical text in which Carson recounts her brother’s travels around the world on a fake passport (“seeking something”). This text is accompanied by pieces of his letter from France. Over the course of five pages, 2.2 repeats verbatim while above it, different cut-out portions of Michael’s handwritten letter appear on each page, disclosing more and more of its contents until the sentences come together like pieces of a puzzle—but ultimately it’s an incomplete puzzle: “They are an out to lunch group of head shrinkers” it reads,
“I’ll never know how she met them. Six days later she was dead. I was—” and it cuts off. The next line says “I went crazy.” Meanwhile, Carson’s repeating text moves farther to the right until it goes off the page. Not until much later in *Nox* do other pieces of Michael’s letter surface. His words are scattered far like the wreckage of an accident. In section 3, an embossed, hand-scrawled repetition of the word “LIKE” appears backward, pressed through the other side of the page, which functions like a stuttering voice trying to enunciate the first word of Michael’s monologue, reproduced in bold caps:

LIKE WIND IN YOUR HAIR SHE HAD
EPILEPSY HER LIFE WAS HELL SOMETIMES
FLIPPING LIKE A FISH I GOT USED TO IT
SHE LOST HER FEAR STARTED TO LIVE SHE
MISSED A LOT AS A KID FELT SO
DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS ANNA WAS
TRULY A GIFT SHE DIED MARCH 24TH.

If “LIKE” initiated a repetitious cadence, Carson’s omission of all punctuation in this and other quoted sections has a way of continuing an incantatory mode of address, as if the words—though directly quoted—had been disassociated from their speaker and transmitted into a special elocution of the dead. This also mirrors ancient typography, which did not have punctuation as used today.

Despite its intertextual and visual eccentricities, Carson’s use of repetition is consistent with a standard elegiac practice. As Sacks points out, “repetition of words and refrains and the creation of a certain rhythm of lament have the effect of controlling the expression of grief while also keeping that expression in motion. It is as if grief might be gradually conjured forth and exorcised” (23). In a Freudian context, this repetition may be an act of compulsion driven by repressed, unacknowledged psychic pain. The other notable use of repetition, of course, is
Carson’s subversive insertion of night-themed usages for Catullus’ “CI,” embedding a subtle interpretive translation as she goes.

The whole visual and linguistic shape of *Nox* emphasizes absence, but not always for lack of material. Rather, Carson carefully selects, alters and omits certain artifacts and information when assembling her portrait. For example, in section 3.2, two torn pieces of a photograph are pasted to the page. No one is there—all that’s visible are pictures on the wall and an empty chair in the lower right corner. The middle of the photograph is missing, and whoever or whatever was there has been extracted by Carson. But why? Where the photograph was torn away, her text describes pictures she received from Michael’s widow, including some of “the girl who died, usually naked except for some jewellery, a blonde girl delighted. She was the love of his life, his widow says calmly.” Was this a picture of the naked blonde girl? The omission deepens the mystery but also enlarges the sense of loss when accompanied as it is by the testimony of a widow who wasn’t even the love of her husband’s life—*that* distinction belonged to another girl, who’s also dead—and so another elegy has been absorbed into *Nox*. This visual excision of a photograph, then, may be a critique of portraiture, an undoing of its false images that capture a person’s image but not necessarily who they are. This has echoes of Ashbery’s concern about the authenticity of portraiture and its incapacity to represent the soul. It’s a way of controlling loss by adding to what’s lost.

Anna, “the girl who died,” initiates a flood of associations that leads Carson to an increasingly intimate understanding of her brother’s absence—both before and after his death—including its effect on her mother. Michael’s pasted and excerpted letters about Anna form an elegy-within-an-elegy—a phantom presence that becomes integral to his portrait. Through second-hand accounts of Anna by Michael’s unnamed “widow,” Carson learns more about what
happened to her brother during those 22 years, but she is confused: “…the times overlap, what matters is they each adored him—with his blue eyes and broken front tooth—‘light of my life’ as his widow now says and oddly into me drops this expression my mother used also.” A memory jumps up at her: “I can see her standing at the kitchen sink scraping carrots. For years after he left she would glance up every time a car came spinning along the road.” Such sudden moments of personal reflection are especially moving because they rush unexpectedly out of a series of jumbled associations; and they are rare. This book is hard to follow, but something like an internal logic seems to govern it.

The Latin words to the Catullus poem bear some relation to the material on the facing page; so as tempting as it may be to skim over the definitions, they are vital to the web of associations Carson suggests, and involve the reader in their own translation of the poem. Section 4 introduces a new voice to the juxtaposition of voices. The word is donarum: “to provide…to honour; to present, grant, to give (to)…give as a present…” and on the facing page is a letter from Michael’s mother, telling him that she’s been praying for him, and she’s sorry for Anna’s death, concluding:

...IF YOUR FEELINGS FOR ANNA WERE AS DEEP AND GOOD AS I THINK NO SMALLEST PART OF IT IS WASTED ONE OF THESE YEARS I HOPE I HAVE AN ADDRESS FOR YOU WHERE I COULD MAIL A BOX FOR CHRISTMAS LOVE MOTHER

The Catullus poem seems to address the mother’s need to provide for her son—or at least send him a Christmas present. But she never got an address, we learn in the next section, and, eventually, Michael’s absence became its own kind of death to the family: “Eventually, she
began to say he was dead. How do you know? I said and she said When I pray for him nothing comes back.”

In section 5.1, Carson goes into further detail about the kind of relationship she had with her brother, who was four years older and called her “pinhead” and “professor.” The accompanying Latin definition on the first verso page of this section, *mutam*, establishes an important theme in Carson’s conception of her brother, both living and dead: one who “can only mutter, inarticulate…saying nothing, silent.” The one telephone conversation they had during his time away was devastating to a sister who dedicated her life to the belief that words mean something: “When he telephoned me—out of the blue—about a half a year after our mother died he had nothing to say.” Turn the page and the Latin *nequiquam* carries over this feeling of dejection: “to no purpose or effect…without avail” accompanied by a family portrait of mother, son and daughter. No words. But then Carson recovers their dialogue from that phone call, and the “nothing” Michael said says a lot:

Mother is dead.

Yes I guess she is.
She had a lot of pain because of you.

Yes I guess she did.
Why didn’t you write.

Well it was hard for me.
Are you sick.

No.
Do you work.

Yes.
Are you happy.

No. Oh no.
Three ordinary words “No. Oh no” resound with an enigmatic pathos, an overwhelming sense of defeat. Strewn like detritus on this same page are two pieces of previous letters, a cut-out of the word “soon” in the typewritten Courier font of the mother’s letter, and a torn piece of Michael’s letter to her from France, showing only the handwritten word “mother.”

Carson wants us to see these voices (since they can no longer be heard). Michael’s voice sounded like it had “something else crusted on it, black, dense—it lighted up for a moment when he said ‘pinhead’ (So pinhead d’you attain wisdom yet?) then went dark again.” Two blurred and shadowed indiscernible photo fragments are pasted above, perhaps to represent a visual interpretation of the black density of Michael’s voice. The definition of the corresponding word for this section, cinerem, also relates to Carson’s analogy. It means “the residue from a fire, ashes…”

Themes that are brought up earlier in Nox begin to resurface and connect to the Carson family portraits. The trope of the phoenix carrying an egg containing his father becomes relevant again when Carson recounts the time her brother stayed with her before he ran away, leaving cigarette butts around her apartment, until one morning “he butted a cigarette in a frying pan on the stove, sunny side up.” This is followed in the next pages by a painting of two yellow ovals stapled to the page, which seem like abstractions until abstulit (“to carry or fetch away, (of persons, passive) to be carried away…to remove from life”) introduces 5.5:

What comes to me now, as I kneel in a church in Copenhagen listening to long Danish gospels and letting the sheets of memory blow on the line, is that both my parents were laid out in their coffins (years apart, accidentally) in bright yellow sweaters. They looked like beautiful peaceful egg yolks. I have always admired the design of the egg—yellow circle within a white oval, as
impeccable as Herodotos’ explanation of the old wise saying

*Custom is king of all.*

The consciousness of the elegy works in “sheets” of association, from the specificity of a cigarette butt in a frying pan to the inner meaning of the Catullan poem; to memories of the parents in their surreal but affecting likeness to eggs (a later page shows a sliced photo negative of an egg in a nest); and finally to a passage by Herodotus explaining the different mourning rituals between Greeks and Indians. Personal anecdote, intertextual references, painting, photography, history: this is a fine compilation of Carson’s method in *Nox*.

But the most important metaphor for creating this portrait of mourning is the process of translation. As discussed, the Catullus poem works as an underlying framework for Carson’s elegy—both a formal (stylistic) and spiritual guide. But she doesn’t address this until 7.1, up to which point the reader, reading sequentially, would have been given very little information about Catullus, and no coherent translation. “I want to explain about the Catullus poem (101),” she finally writes, noting that nothing was known about the Roman poet’s brother except that he died, and that he “appears to have travelled from Verona to Asia Minor to stand at the grave. Perhaps he recited the elegy there.” By now, the similarities between his and Carson’s experiences are obvious. But it’s more than that:

I have loved this poem since the first time I read it in high school Latin class and I have tried to translate it a number of times. Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy. No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity, like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind. I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. But over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end.
This remarkable passage links the act of translation—searching for meanings of words—to the search for another person, a process that takes place in the dark: “No use expecting a flood of light,” she says in the following entry. “Human words have no main switch.” There is no direct translation, no on switch that reveals all. But, Carson muses, there are “those little kidnaps in the dark. And then the luminous, big, shivering, discandied, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate.” This must be both the inspiration and the lament for anyone who tries to translate—that the meaning, the feeling of one true thing corresponding to another, can exist in your mind but cannot survive, fully intact, the journey to the page. Instead, to apply Carson’s earlier metaphor somewhat differently, her meta-translations in Nox are like leaves on the trees that merely express the movement of the wind, which itself is invisible, and untranslatable. This goes to the illusive, untenable nature portraiture, and why Carson, Berryman, Ashbery, and Goldin all, in a sense, break down their portraits and self-portraits into pieces, collages, iterations, masks, and multiple voices to convey the the complexity of a human life—yielding, uneasily, to the impossibility of a fully-framed portrait.

Carson’s admission that this process is so vulnerable to failure (and yet still worth trying) applies to the entire elegy, which traces the contours of loss rather than trying to occupy the empty space of that loss. Opposite the word prisco (“belonging to a former time, ancient…men of old, the ancients; having existed a long time…”), Carson at last gives us her translation of 101:

Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed --
I arrive at these poor, brother, burials
so I could give you the last gift owed to death
and talk (why?) with mute ash.
Now that Fortune tore you from me, you
oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,
now still anyway this—what a distant mood of parents
handed down as the sad gift for burials --
accept! soaked with tears of a brother
and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.

We now know that, whatever the merits of this translation (to which there are plenty of other translations from other writers to compare it), it can never quite meet Carson’s satisfaction. And again, it reminds us that even Michael’s words throughout the text, though quoted in English, have the unreachable element of words translated from another language. His portrait, then, in a way lacks perfect fluency, which is perhaps why Carson omits most punctuation when quoting him, as if to acknowledge her hand on his words, and hint that something hasn’t carried over.

And this may explain in part why *Nox* includes so many visual components, as if they have a power of conveyance beyond language. The cliché that *a picture speaks a thousand words* suggests that we inherently trust what we see more than what we say. In the family photos that Carson selects, she seems to hedge her bets about what language can do. But it’s not either/or. What makes this portrait of Michael so unusual and complex is the very relationship between narrative language and visual representation. Take for example a photograph in section 8. At a glance, this black and white picture shows three boys sitting in a large tree house. But Carson’s subsequent text reveals the sadness of the story behind it.

When we were children the family moved a lot and wherever we went my brother wanted to make friends with boys too old for him. He ran behind them, mistook the rules, came home with a
bloody nose, it puzzled me from the beginning, it made my heart sink. I have a photograph of his (taken in the bush behind Bald Rock) about ten years old standing on the ground beneath a treehouse. Above him in the treehouse you can see three older boys gazing down. They have raised the ladder. He is giving the camera a sideways invisible look. Years later, when he began to deal drugs, I got the old sinking feeling— not for the criminality of it, not for the danger, but that look. No one knew him…

To the reader, that “sideways invisible look” really did make Michael seem almost invisible. His figure at the bottom of the photo blends right in with the tree trunk. It’s a heartbreaking portrait of a boy left behind. In an elegy that does make several biblical references, one may think of Jacob’s ladder, denied to Michael.

But it’s another biblical figure to which Carson directly compares Michael. “More than one person has pointed out to me a likeness between my brother and Lazarus,” she writes. But this isn’t a traditional elegiac plea for resurrection. An “historian,” Carson explains, would see Lazarus as a person who “had to die twice,” notable not for rising from the ashes but for his muteness, as referenced in Luke 16 and in the painting by Giotto (not included in Nox), which Carson thus describes, and which refers back to her painting of red, raised hands on the previous fold: “…notice the person with raised hands and no mouth (perhaps his sister) placed behind Lazarus to load his space with muteness.” In a way, it must have felt like Michael died twice—first when he ran away (and his mother’s prayers got no response), and again when he died in Copenhagen in 2000. But without having seen his body or attended his funeral—without having known him better in the first place—Carson cannot seem to find a way to complete her portrait, to say what must be said. So, she plays the part of the sister in the trope of Lazarus from the Giotto painting, “loading his space with muteness.”
Finally, it is this muteness that consumes the portrait as _Nox_ moves toward disintegration and departure rather than clarity or redemption. In section 8.5, a piece of text has been scribbled over with dark chalk or crayon, almost to the point of illegibility, and begins: “There is no possibility I can think my way into his muteness.” This entry is pasted over another that can’t be read—signaling a previously failed attempt of some kind. What follows are shadows and erasures, representations of absence and “overtakelessness,” including an apparent dream in which Carson and her brother race through time amid “light and shadows,” past their childhood home, past their parents’ graves—past their past. They had “rituals to perform at fixed places, certain times,” but they “couldn’t get anything to work,” so they “gave up, frustrated, threw the victims in the sea. Kept sailing.” Even the Catullan definitions begin to communicate a bitter, fatalistic dejection. _Accipe_, meaning “to take in one’s grasp,” devolves into “to come to an end” and “ad contumeliam omnia accipere to read everything as an insult.” A collage cut-up of Carson’s own translation of “101” is disfigured into what resembles a pendulum, with a hanging section of text angled as if in motion.

Her own voice failing, Carson turns to other voices for help, quoting Herodotos, who, when he reached the limit of explaining a historical event, ended with the remark: “I have to say what is said. I don’t have to believe it myself” (and here Carson may be punning on the nature of translation itself). Carson’s deferral may be a form of leave-taking, a depersonalized gesture of respect for the dead. 10.2 is a figurative headstone rubbing with jagged hand-written words beginning Romans 8:36, which was read at Michael’s funeral, according to his widow: “As it is written, for thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter” (*Holy Bible*, 981). Carson doesn’t have to believe these words herself, but as an historian she
must “say what it said,” including the eulogy Michael’s widow delivered, which begins “I do not want to say that much about Michael…” adding yet another layer of muteness to his legacy.

As the famous last words from the Catullus poem go by (ave atque vale, usually translated as “hail and farewell”), Carson offers one final reminiscence, remembering her brother as a boy, huddled on the family stairwell one Sunday with a bloody nose, his mother in tears: “He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears.”

And as Michael disappears, Nox ends as it began, with the complete Catullus “101,” this time in Carson’s translation, which appears on aged, faded paper, blurred beyond readability, just like Michael.
Chapter 4
The Artist is Present: Intersubjectivity in the Photographs of Nan Goldin

I used to think that I couldn’t lose anyone if I photographed them enough. In fact, my pictures show me how much I’ve lost.
—Nan Goldin, I’ll be your Mirror

So far this thesis has looked primarily at literary portraits. And yet traditionally we tend to think of portraits as paintings or photographs. However, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, portraiture can cross literary and visual boundaries, and indeed the work of Ashbery and Carson includes elements of ekphrasis, using paintings and photographs to establish a dialogue with the past or to “speak” to the dead. This chapter moves to a body of photographic portraits by Nan Goldin that also form of dialogue with the past, captured not in a Cartier-Bressonian “decisive moment” but in an ongoing present that chases the past.

These, too, do not fit the conventional notion of a portraiture that centers (literally and ontologically) on a single person to create a unitary identity. Instead, Goldin’s photographs take the form of “snapshots” in the open flow of life as it is lived, and were never meant to be complete, but to keep moving almost like film and, in the case of Goldin’s seminal work, The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, literally to become a slideshow set to music. The title of the slideshow and the book is a reference to Bertolt Brecht’s Threepenny Opera, which signals that, while Goldin is telling a “true” story, it is also a performance that draws on the estrangement effect of the theatrical tradition.

Like Berryman, Ashbery, and Carson, Goldin is a different kind of portrait artist, who interrupts the distinction between artist and subject, subject and object, by memorializing her friends, herself, and even her own photographs—creating an intersubjective, diachronic visual language that unfolds over time through multiple portraits (and portraits of portraits) in the flux
of life. But time will be cut short for many of the people in her pictures, who would die of AIDS or overdose. They lived outside of convention, in spaces, in bodies, and in times that were vulnerable and exposed to danger.

Goldin’s work draws on multiple influences across the art historical continuum and re-configures them into her own style. There are elements of Romanticism reminiscent of Rimbaud or Wordsworth, both decadent and wistful; her camera work often appears seemingly un-artful on the surface but with subtle aesthetic references that work from within; and she demonstrates the Postmodern practices of self-reflexivity and decentering of subjects, but with a personal-emotional candor rather than political ideology.

Goldin’s iterative, unpolished style shows many of the same people over years and decades, creating an intimacy and readability that more closely resembles the family photo album than traditional documentary or art photography. However, this is no ordinary family, and these are no ordinary photographs. The blurred images, tilted framing, and flash lighting are not the result of careless composition, but are inherent in the experiential circumstances in which Goldin created them, and which became her style.

Goldin’s “re-created family” lives on the fringes of society—falling in love, falling apart, crying, laughing, dying, up close—where gender and sexuality are fluid and the “roles aren’t so defined” (Ballad 6). On a social level, Goldin’s photographs from the 1970s and 80s were remarkable at the time (and still are) because they documented the lives of a group of marginalized people whose sexuality, beliefs, and lifestyles were outside American norms, and therefore considered unacceptable or even subversive. And yet the work engages in the alluring belief (or hope) that photography is a tool of intimacy and memory that does not discriminate.
This is not objective, documentary photography like Walker Evans’ famous FSA photographs; it is a form of interpersonal photography, and ultimately a form of elegy. Goldin tries to remove the wall between the photographer and her subjects, which may be one reason she shot in color rather than the conventional black and white documentary that signaled documentary work.

Goldin’s family was torn apart by her older sister’s suicide when Goldin was 11 years old, which became the impetus for her photography. Like Anne Carson, Goldin mourns the loss of a sibling and ultimately her biological family, and although she does not explicitly call her photography grief-work, as Carson essentially does in Nox, this loss was—like Berryman’s (Henry’s) “irreversible loss”—the haunting absence-as-presence that gave her photography such personal urgency. In the introduction to Ballad Goldin writes:

I realized my motivation has deeper roots: I don’t really remember my sister. In the process of leaving my family, in recreating myself, I lost the real memory of my sister. I remember my version of her, of the things she said, of the things she meant to me. But I don’t remember the tangible sense of who she was, her presence, what her eyes looked like, what her voice sounded like.

I don’t ever want to be susceptible to anyone else’s version of my history.
I don’t ever want to lose the real memory of anyone again.

This book is dedicated to the real memory of my sister, Barbara Holly Goldin. (9)

The question of memory is central to Nan Goldin: She sets apart personal memory from “real memory” (9)—implying that photographs contain something more durable and detailed, less abstract, than personal memory. But are photographs “real”?—or does photography’s “evidential force” (Barthes 88) merely trigger personal memory through what Barthes calls the punctum (53), and which is “real” only insofar as it is subjective and specific?
This chapter examines Goldin’s foundational work, including the groundbreaking, controversial *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* and “The Cookie Portfolio”, which memorializes her close friend Cookie Mueller, who died of AIDS in 1989. Like Ashbery, Berryman, and Carson, Nan Goldin crosses artistic and cultural boundaries in an attempt to make portraits that will survive the dissolution of the self—the very impossibility of which gives her photographs their power and pain.

**Notes on photography**

Before looking closer at specific series of photographs, it’s important to establish some of the theoretical frameworks considered in this analysis. Although theories of photography over the past 150 years follow a similar arc as art and literary history—from Romanticism to Modernism to Postmodernism—the ontology of the photograph has been distinctly tricky to define. Although a photograph, because of its rich detail, may appear to have objective, documentary veracity and correspondence to “reality,” it has proven to be just as contested as any other socially contingent medium, subject to critiques of power, politics, technology, and discourse.

This thesis, which explores the subjective experience of making and looking at portraits, will refer to theories that address memory, meaning, and temporality, and the medium’s tantalizing but broken promise to “embody time”, as Andre Bazin once said (8). In a sense, a photographic portrait is always inscribed with death, its subject apparently suspended in animation. So when we look back—even at a cell phone pic of a friend that we took yesterday—we see the image of a person in a moment that has already passed.

As anyone writing about photography knows, the figure of Roland Barthes looms large, particularly his final book, *Camera Lucida*. Both highly influential and debated, its personal
insights and elliptical style address some of the most vexing questions about what a photograph can mean to the beholder—why it moves us and beguiles us—and what makes photography distinct from, say, film or painting or writing. Because Barthes’ approach is both analytical and nostalgic—writing *Camera Lucida* from the perspective of memory and loss after his mother’s death—he is a helpful companion as we look at the elegiac, emotionally charged photographs of Nan Goldin.

One aspect pertinent to the ontology of the photograph is its truth-claim or “indexicality”—which in strictest terms asks: Is a photograph an exact representation of what it depicts? Or is it some kind of manipulative illusion—does it “protect / What it advertises?” to quote Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (68)? Based on the philosophy of Charles Peirce and debated by critics and art historians of opposing views—such as Rosalind Krauss (yes, the photograph is pure index, an empty signifier) and Joel Snyder (no, it is an aesthetic construction)—this analysis will settle on Barthes’ pragmatic view that the photograph is “analogical”, a “resemblance”, or a “message without a code” that nevertheless carries “evidential force” (Barthes 88). Or to put it more bluntly, “the photograph necessarily shows what was in front of the camera” (Michaels 13).

Of greater relevance to this thesis are the meanings ascribed to photographs and how they create an intersubjectivity between those on both sides of the lens. It will be useful to remember Barthes’ distinction between the *studium*—the ostensible, culturally legible subject-matter of the photograph as intended by the “Operator” (Barthes’ word for photographer), and the *punctum*—the “wound”, “sting”, or “cut” (27) that punctures the *studium* and reveals something unintended but poignant. Importantly for Barthes, the *punctum* is by definition an “accident” that can never be intended by the photographer. This subjective and eccentric, but durable, vocabulary for
interpreting photographs is helpful when analyzing Goldin’s work because it addresses the ways in which photographs trigger emotion and memory—especially if we consider Barthes’ extension of the *punctum* to include the latent re-surfacing of meaning sometime well after viewing a photograph (Barthes 53).

Barthes ruminated on the distinction between public and private photographs in a time (the 1970s) when photographic images were ubiquitous, wishing to “utter interiority without yielding intimacy” (98). Famously, Barthes excluded the very photograph that was most on his mind when writing *Camera Lucida*—the “Winter Garden” photograph of his recently deceased mother.

Nan Goldin’s explicitly personal, intimate photographs, including self-portraits, would seem to “yield” the very intimacy Barthes wishes to preserve, turning the private lives of her friends (“family”) and herself into public spectacle or statement. Furthermore, Goldin proclaims in her introduction to the *Ballad* that her photographs are “the diary I let people read.” However, she goes on to hint at a deeper level of vulnerability that gets withheld: “My written diaries are private; they form a closed document of my world and allow me the distance to analyze it.” This underscores the contradiction at play in her photographs—that no matter how authentically “real” they may seem, they are inescapably aesthetic constructions, even if they invite the participation of their subjects: “These pictures may be an invitation to my world, but they were taken so that I see the people in them. I don’t select people in order to photograph them; I photography directly from my life. These pictures come out of relationships, not observation.” If Goldin photographs directly from life (she said the camera was an extension of her body) (*Ballad* 6), then how is she constructing identity from the seemingly fluid, unposed “snapshots”? 
It is a notable paradox between Barthes and Goldin, respectively—the writer for whom the photograph is the “closed circle” of private “truth”; and the photographer for whom the written word is the “closed document” of her own truth. Considering that Goldin’s most well-known photograph is a self-portrait after being battered by the boyfriend who attacked her after reading her written diaries (and then burning them), we may see photography both as intimacy and protection, and ask—do Goldin’s own photographs serve as objects of ekphrasis or even talismans?

An analysis of Goldin’s work will situate it within the subjective, elegiac mode of the writers previously discussed and at the same time reveal that—like Berryman, Ashbery, and Carson—she is working within a Postmodern aesthetic that resists unification and draws attention to its own making. Goldin’s portraits are plural, open-ended, and never complete, even in death. As mentioned previously, Goldin’s motivation to become a photographer came from the very lack of photographs to help remember her sister, Barbara, who died of suicide. She was left only with her “version” of her sister. Although Goldin generally dismisses photography theory (Westfall 29), she comes close to making a statement about the indexicality of photography when she says it promises a “tangible sense” of a person’s “presence”, an authentic record against “anyone else’s version of my history” (Ballad 9). So her pursuit of photography became the pursuit of “the real memory” of herself and those she loved. She pushes so close that her own body enters the frame, and she discovers that there’s always a distance between what photography promises and what it delivers, that in a sense portraits are symbolized by the camera film itself—impermeable, negative imprints of life.

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3 Robert Mapplethorpe’s Arm (Self-Portrait) 1976 is a similar (if more formal) example of a partial body self-portraiture, which draws attention to the arbitrariness of the camera frame and the liminal position of the photographer.
“The Family of Nan”

A closer look at the photographs from the landmark Ballad of Sexual Dependency and “The Cookie Portfolio” demonstrate the tensions and contradictions between art and life that make Goldin’s portraits so innovative and consequential to our understanding of the limits and possibilities of representing interpersonal subjectivity through photography. This analysis will examine Goldin’s approach to portraiture and self-portraiture; the effect of her aesthetic and photographic style; and the elegiac quality that pervades her work.

The punning title “Family of Nan” was first used by Max Kozoloff in a 1987 review of Ballad as both a description of the community of friends it pictured, and as a riposte to the 1955 “Family of Man” exhibit curated by Edward Steichen. That exhibit included work by a wide range of photographers, including Diane Arbus and Robert Frank, but was carefully polished (and censored) to display a universal humanistic message—a message that was criticized for its ideological manipulation and flattening of difference that would become emblematic of Cold War American culture, as seen in popular publications such as Life and Look magazines.

And yet Goldin’s project speaks in some ways to the ethos of common humanity that Steichen’s exhibit tried to promote. “The people and locales in my pictures are particular, specific, but I feel the concerns I’m dealing with are universal...it’s about the nature of relationships” (Ballad 7). However, there are important differences between Goldin’s approach to “universal” concerns and those of Steichen’s and other traditional documentary photography forms. Goldin has no particular ideological agenda, presenting personal, unscripted narratives of a community outside the nuclear family “of man“: “I want to be able to experience fully, without restraint...This is the history of a re-created family, without traditional roles” (Ballad 6).
As much as Goldin’s introductory text provides guidance on how to interpret her photographs, it’s important to consider the complications inherent in publishing a visual “diary” intended to speak to the universal nature of relationships when the community it depicts is so radically outside the norms of mainstream American life (particularly in Ronald Reagan’s 1980s). For example, the photo *Man and woman in slips, New York City 1980* (fig. 1) shows two lovers in bed, their bodies embraced in what appears to be a moment of post-coital tenderness—the man is on top, hiding his face with his arm as the woman caresses his back. However there are two aspects of this picture that would likely shock some viewers—the man is wearing a white slip nearly identical to the woman’s, and the photographer is obviously in the room with them. This tableau challenges assumptions about both gender norms and the relationship between artist and subject. The image is amplified by the contradiction that, on the one hand the viewer witnesses a loving connection between two people, while on the other hand its content and point of view transgress boundaries. In this picture and others we will examine later, Goldin uses titles deliberately to make a statement or set the tone—in this case she made sure viewers knew that person on top wearing a slip was a man. This shock-factor in Goldin’s work is both intentional and beside the point—she challenges viewers at once to accept her and her “family” without judging their drug use or sexuality or identity, and to comprehend their humanity all the more for doing so. The risk is that this level of access may look like voyeurism and exploitation—and the artist has no way of controlling the how the pictures will be received. Art critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes that, despite Goldin’s intentions, there is always the possibility that her subjects could become “object and spectacle….The desire for transparency, immediacy, the wish that the viewer might see the other with the photographer’s own eyes, is inevitably frustrated by
the very mechanisms of the camera, which, despite the best intention of the photographer, cannot penetrate beyond that which is simply, stupidly there” (55).

These are similar to the ways that Goldin’s contemporary Robert Mapplethorpe provoked the art world and risked censorship by turning the camera on himself and “queering” his subjects, taking the formalist aesthetics of high Modernism—such as Edward Weston’s still lifes—and applying them to the erotics of the male body and the practices of BDSM (Adams 16). But unlike Mapplethorpe, Goldin worked outside the studio through her daily lived experience, keeping the camera so close that it was accepted as part of her body—“It’s as if my hand were a camera” (Ballad 6). It’s unusual that a photographer would associate her medium with her hand rather than her eyes, and it speaks to the level of touch and movement in her work, rather than the objective (male) gaze; and it has been noted that despite how often Goldin had her camera in-hand, we seldom ever see it. This “insider status” gave Goldin unusual access to the private lives of others, and the trust implied by that access.

But it goes beyond having the trust of an in-group to a form of self-portraiture and performance. Unlike the shocking images of Diane Arbus or the voyeuristic human theater of Garry Winogrand, Goldin is often in the picture, partially or as an off-frame presence.18 It’s not that her pictures are any less shocking or animated than those of Arbus or Winogrand—it’s that it’s her life. The page preceding Man and woman in slips shows Goldin from behind in her underwear, straddling her lover. This intertwining of portraiture and self-portraiture, of submitting her own experience to the lens, appeals to the viewer’s trust as well as the subject’s.

That camera-in-hand intimacy gives the images a haptic quality. Goldin writes that the pictures are meant to trigger memory and invoke “the color, smell, sound, and physical presence, the density and flavor of life.” Examples include Mark tattooing Mark, Boston 1978 (fig. 2),
where the vicarious sting of the needle and the comforting hand of the tattoo artist are viewed so close that blood and ink can be seen dripping down to the waistline of Mark’s boxer shorts; or in the ecstatic force of colliding lips in *Philippe G. and Suzanne kissing at Euthanasia, New York City 1981* (fig. 3); or the horrible pain of *Nan after being battered, 1984* (fig. 4). The latter image is the most iconic in all of Goldin’s work for its unflinching, dead-center self-portrait of violent assault against women, and for Goldin’s courage to document such a traumatic personal experience.

What does this brutally honest form of self-portraiture say about photography’s evidentiary force, its indexical “truth”—and to what extent does Goldin construct or modulate that “truth” through her own performance of it? This is a similar question raised about the “confessional” mode of Berryman’s *Dream Songs* and the other autobiographical modes of representation I have been examining here. Questions of performativity are central both to the critiques and influence of Goldin’s oeuvre, and *Nan after being battered* may be the most important example. Art critic Larry Qualls writes that Goldin “is not an actor analyzing another’s text, but one of those people like Spalding Gray using their own lives as the canvas”, whose works are “performances of her autobiography” (31). This calls attention to a comparison with another contemporary of Goldin’s, the photographer and artist Cindy Sherman, whose indelible self-portraits (for example her movie-stills) were meant to call attention to stereotypes of femininity and gender in popular culture and reappropriate them, rather than to focus inward at Sherman’s personal biography or clan (although a comparison of Goldin’s and Sherman’s performances of femininity is worth further analysis).

Going back to *Nan after being battered*—the potency of the image lies, of course, primarily on the sheer fact of Goldin’s disfigured face, her bruised and bloody eyes. But if we
consider that Goldin took the intentional steps to apply glossy red lipstick to match her damaged eye, to dress in black satin with decorative earrings and pearls, and that she gives a penetrating glare directly at the camera, then we are witnessing both a document and a performance, a self-portraiture that tells a story, a true story.

“The Scratch and Dust School”

Nan Goldin disliked both Postmodern theory and what she considered a masculinist obsession with photographic equipment and technology: “I have the same aversion to Postmodern theory as I did to technology [in art school]. I don’t think either of them have anything to do with the creative process...And photographers, particularly male, only discussed their cameras and equipment. My response was to not get involved with that at all. Actually, we used to call ourselves the scratch and dust school. [Laughs] ...My students are still shocked by how little I know technically” (BOMB 29). This rejection of a male-dominated tradition in photography made Goldin a hero of feminist culture and a target of misogynists in the photography world.

Notwithstanding the possibility that she is speaking with a hint of irony, it seems safe to say that Goldin’s photography differs from the overtly Postmodernist works of Sherman, or Richard Prince or Martha Rosler—artists who critiqued socio-historical power structures and rejected the idea of an autonomous work of art. Nevertheless, we see in Goldin a cunning self-reflexivity and artistic style that creates a subversive anti-aesthetic (which is its own aesthetic) that calls out its own making—but with the difference that her project is to re-situate “the nature of human relationships” as a universal subject in art photography. And that is the contradiction that unfolds throughout the Ballad: individual pictures that have the appearance of unmediated
reality (“without glorification”) in a body of work that is carefully presented to tell a story in images as well as words and song.

On the surface, Goldin’s pictures are saturated with color and flooded with flash; they are often out-of-focus or blurred and poorly lit, implying a certain verite authenticity—and in that sense they are meant to denote, which is to say, objectively document the moment without manipulation. But there is a larger, constructed visual language and sequencing that connotes meaning (about relationships, gender, popular culture, pain, love, death). The Ballad slideshow, which included nearly 700 photographs, was set to music, and the book maintains the same thematic structure, with sections named for songs such as “Femme Fatale”, “This is a Man’s World”, “Downtown”, and “Memories are Made of This”, which, when juxtaposed with the photographs, oscillate between the sentimental and the ironic.

The first picture of Ballad, Nan on Brian’s lap, Nan’s birthday, New York City 1981 (fig. 5), exemplifies the way a snapshot is more than just a snapshot—that it has the power to draw an emotional charge, even a chill, especially when looked at in the context of all the others in this collection that follow. At a quick glance, it looks like an ordinary off-center, poorly lit, overexposed amateur photo. But the flat flash against a dark background has the “gotcha” quality of creatures of the night caught in the voyeur’s lens reminiscent of the famed photographer Weegee (Arthur Fellig), who took sensationalized pictures of crime scenes, street life, and New York cultural life in the 1930s and 1940s. The severity and honesty of Weegee’s pictures influenced many photographers, including Goldin. However, there is cognitive dissonance between that tabloid effect and the intimate subject-matter of the picture—this is not a lurid crime scene (as in Weegee) after all. But the shadows are also foreshadows. Brian, with dazed eyes and a slack mouth, looks withdrawn, unknowable; and “Nan” offers a mysterious smile that seems caught
between vulnerability and camp. They are physically close and presumably sexually close—she is sitting on his lap with arms wrapped around his shoulder, the bosom of her dress opening out to him at face level, as an offering or a playful taunt. But the couple’s emotional closeness is ambiguous, and the “Sexual Dependency” of this eponymous opening section signals its story. Nan’s same red lipstick, pearls, and earrings will all return three years later in Nan after being battered—only then it will be the violent end to Goldin’s relationship with Brian (the man who assaulted her).

Although the Nan-Brian story is central to the thematic tension between “autonomy and dependency,” it also becomes a performance in which Goldin subverts the literalism of documentary photography to create a multi-layered portrait of Nan Goldin the person; “Nan” the persona; and the art of Nan Goldin. That she deploys playful Postmodern tricks of referentiality while also putting some of her most painful and vulnerable experiences on display is a distinguishing characteristic of this multivalent work.

For example, the portrait Brian with the Flintstones, New York City 1981 (fig. 6) presents her lover in an eroticized pose—shirtless in bed with a cigarette loosely hanging from his mouth, gazing intently at the photographer (and the viewer). The out-of-focus blur could be seen to romanticize the image behind the smoky haze of desire, or to send it back in time, mimicking the gauzy fine art sheen of a Stieglitz photogravure. But the presence of Fred Flintstone ironizes Brian’s masculinity by contrasting him with the loud, temperamental cartoon character. It’s hard not to make a comparison between the two, especially since Goldin explicitly added the “the Flintstones” to the title of the picture.

In a remarkable photograph taken two years later, Nan and Brian in bed, New York City 1983 (fig. 7), the Flintstones picture reappears. This self-portrait that is also a portrait-within-a-
portrait (if such a formulation can be allowed), demonstrates the way Goldin uses her own photographs as an inside reference and a kind of time-stamp, evoking Barthes’ *that-has-been.* Here, in a symbolic morning-after shot bathed in orange light, Goldin lies in bed staring at Brian with a look of what might be despondency or fear or contempt. Brian, expressionless, smoking a cigarette, faces the window. At the edge of the frame, taped to the wall, is a print of *Brian with the Flinstones.* This portrait-within-a-portrait signals the passage of time and invites the viewer to wonder what has happened to Nan-Brian between the two pictures. It’s also a wry visual echo of Goldin’s own art-making, and evidence of her agency in constructing her story.

This is not the “snapshot aesthetic” of the first image in the *Ballad.* In *Nan and Brian in bed,* the cinematic *mise en scene* is so complex and visually captivating, so imbued with a theatrical mood of loneliness and alienation, that it resembles the carefully choreographed work of someone like Jeff Wall or Philip-Lorca diCorcia (who studied with Goldin at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston). But unlike these other photographers’ realistic but fictional constructions, Goldin’s photographs depict real experience, no matter how private or ecstatic or painful—experiences that are contemporaneously mediated and performed by the artist and the subject herself.

“I’ll Be Your Mirror”

As poignant and influential as the *Ballad* was, in many ways its culmination is “The Cookie Portfolio,” which Goldin put together and started showing in 1990 and was published in *I’ll Be Your Mirror* as part of her 1996 Whitney Museum retrospective. The Portfolio comprises 15 pictures taken over 13 years, and includes some of the iconic photos from the *Ballad.* It is a visual elegy and portrait series of her best friend, Cookie Mueller—the actress and writer who
appeared in films by John Waters and Andy Warhol. Mueller was a cult hero of the NYC downtown scene in 1970s and 1980s. Goldin documented her final months before dying of AIDS in 1989. This is what makes “The Cookie Portfolio” so important in Goldin’s work—it’s the most personal and also the most formally potent example of her aesthetic as an artist.

In many ways, Cookie Mueller became the big sister Goldin lost at age 11 when her biological sister died of suicide.4 As mentioned earlier, that loss is what drove Goldin to start taking pictures in the first place. And the photos of Cookie in her prime—laughing, dancing, holding her son, getting married, and comforting Goldin after she was beaten (Mirror 264)—illuminate the “family album” that became the theme of Goldin’s major works. But the wager made by capturing so much of a person’s life is that it also catalogs so much of what is lost when that person is gone—and for Goldin this kept happening throughout the 80s and 90s as many of her friends died during the AIDS crisis, which devastated her community. So she knew, by the mid-80s, that she was photographing people who might not live full lives—and that knowledge informs her work. There is an echo of John Berryman’s brooding over the deaths of his generation of poets in the *Dream Songs*.

All of the aesthetic and ontological signatures of Goldin’s photographic style are at full strength in the Cookie Portfolio, which emphasizes a commitment to an intersubjective mode of portraiture that is both diaristic and performative. These are some of the most ecstatic, touching, and haunting photos in Goldin’s body of work. The first photographs are animated by smiles, which then give way to downcast stares, and finally, death, in a chronological selection of pictures that begin with Cookie holding her young son, Max, and end with that same son as a young man grieving for his mother. It’s a wonder that Goldin could maintain enough artistic

4 Mueller was only a couple years younger than Goldin’s sister Barbara (born in 1947 and 1949, respectively)
distance to continue to tell the story of her friend’s life (and of her own) even as she slipped away.

That story begins, in the Portfolio, with *Cookie with Max at my birthday party,* *Provincetown, MA, 1976* (fig. 8), which establishes Cookie’s role as a mother and as the photographer’s friend. By putting “my birthday” in the title, as she did in the first photo of the *Ballad,* Goldin inserts her own subjectivity into the portrait by memorializing it with her birthday. In fact, it was through the act of picture-taking that Goldin got to know Mueller: “Part of how we grew close was through me photographing her—the photos were intimate and then we were. I was outside of her and taking pictures let me in.” This is the inverse of the typical trajectory of a friendship where people become close and then start taking pictures of each other. It testifies to the level of faith Goldin places in photography—that it is a form of intimacy in her relationships, like touch, like language, like seeing. That is why the concept of family and community is at the center of her work.

At the emotional midpoint of the Portfolio is one of Goldin’s most recognized photos, *Cookie at Tin Pan Alley, NYC, 1983* (fig. 9). It has a similar compositional glow and aura of wistfulness seen in *Nan and Brian in bed*—another example of form and content coming together, as if staged, but in the flux of real life. This photo captures the usually rapturous Cookie Mueller in a moment of reflection, illuminated in the warm yellow light of the bar, vignetted by shadows encroaching at the margins of the frame. The sculpted busts hanging on the wall symbolize both the humor and pathos of Cookie’s life, like the sock and buskin masks of the theatre—life imitating art. Sometimes it’s hard to read a story or look at a picture without reading it backwards from the point of the subject’s death (as in *Nox* and *The Dream Songs*). Barthes called this foreknowledge the “anterior future” (96). Writing in *Camera Lucida* about the
1865 Alexander Gardner portrait of Lewis Paine, who was waiting to be hanged, Barthes identifies “Time” as another form of the punctum: “The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the studium. But the punctum is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been" (96). Looking at this portrait of Cookie, one may feel the same the same sting of the punctum: she is going to die.

In the last pages of “The Cookie Portfolio”, Goldin draws on photography’s relationship to time in order to leave a visual imprint marking the life of her friend, using the same devices of self-referentiality and repetition seen in the Ballad. In Sharon with Cookie on the bed, Provincetown, September 1989 (fig. 10), Cookie has symbolically moved out of the glowing light from the previous photo and into the shadows, where she lies helpless, looking away, almost out of the frame. Sharon, her former lover who returned to care for her when Cookie’s husband Vittorio died of AIDS just a month earlier, sits forlorn and visually out-of-focus in the short depth-of-field photograph. The object of focus in the center of the frame is a picture from The Ballad of Sexual Dependency of Cookie and Vittorio on their wedding day. In previous pictures that included cameos of her own photos, the effect was often subtle—but this time the older image vies for the foreground, as if to plea for a return to another time, like a talisman to ward off death.5

Finally, we see the heartbreaking climax of Goldin’s diachronic approach to portraiture in two pictures taken in the same location, nearly identically composed, but three months apart. The first is of Cookie and Max sitting on their couch at home with their dog (fig. 11)—which, to a casual observer may look like an unremarkably ordinary family photo. But since we have seen

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5 Much has been written about Goldin’s emphasis on the non-traditional family. In this photo, critic Sarah Ruddy sees a “resignifying” of Cookie’s family and a “visual construction of countermemory that creates a meaningful present” (370).
Mueller so vibrant in past photos, her face now appears comparably gaunt, her smile seems to strain against an expression of resignation, and her emaciated legs reveal how sick she has become. But there is also a playfulness befitting a life as unconventional as Cookie’s—the family dog seems to have some taxidermied companions in the raccoon and squirrels seen on the ends of the couch at the edges of the frame. These details constitute the *studium* of the photograph (in a Barthesian reading), but there is one aspect of the picture that may invoke the *punctum*: the cuff of Cookie’s blouse falls too long down her arm, almost covering her right hand as her son hugs her close to him. Cookie’s body, it seems, is leaving this world. That was September, 1989.

The last photo in the Portfolio, *Cookie and Vittorio’s living room, NYC, Christmas 1989* (fig. 12), shows the family couch with almost everything about the room unchanged from the picture taken a few months earlier, only now the couch is empty—Cookie died in November. This is not simply another example of the metaphor of the empty chair honoring the dead—it’s an extension of Goldin’s insistence on continuing to take pictures of those she loves, even when they’ve died. This time, you could say the photo *is* staged. With both Vittorio and Cookie now gone, Goldin returned to this space to take a nearly identical photo—this time taking a step back, and tilting the camera up to reveal, hanging on the wall, what had been cropped out before: pictures of Cookie Mueller.
ENDNOTES

2 Coincidently, this is the same age Nan Goldin (Chapter 4) was when her sister died of suicide—an event that similarly influenced her life and work; and Anne Carson’s Nox (Chapter 3) focuses on the death of her brother, channeling the great Catullus elegy for his brother. Less discussed in his work, but significant, was the death of John Ashbery’s brother due to leukemia when Ashbery was age 12. Chapter 2 will focus on Ashbery’s work.
3 Berryman, in an interview with Richard Kostelanetz in Paris Review, Winter 1972, said of Henry’s friend: “He’s like Job’s Comforter. Remember the three who pretend to be Job’s friend? They sit down and lament with him, and give him the traditional Jewish jazz—namely, you suffer, therefore you are guilty...Well, Henry’s friend sits down and gives him the same business. Henry is so troubled and bothered by his many problems that he never actually comes up with solutions, and from that point of view, the poem is a failure.”
4 Berryman’s elegies of his literary forebears and peers are often tinged with jealousy and criticism; and in the penultimate “Dream Song 385”, Henry digs up his father’s grave “with rage”, where he will “heft the ax once more, his final card, / and fell it on the start” (406).
5 Joel Connaroe notes that a “handkerchief sandwich” represents “a place of no sustenance but many tears” (125).
6 Jennifer Ashton states that “Ashbery’s Postmodernism is the Postmodernism of the open text” (19).
7 In a 1964 review of Parmigianino’s work shown in the Cabinet des Dessins at the Louvre, written well before “Self-Portrait”, Ashbery quotes Giorgio de Chirico in affirming Parmigianino’s success as an artist, which could be seen as an inspiration for the kind of poetry Ashbery was writing leading up to “Self-Portrait”: “It must not be forgotten that a picture must always testify to a profound sensation, and that profound sensation means strange, and that strange means little-known or completely unknown. For a work of art to be truly immortal, it must completely transcend human limitations. In this way it will approach dreams and the spirit of childhood” (Reported Sightings 21).
8 Chapter 4 will discusses a similar problematic to the mirror when looking at photography, and how even the ostensibly documentary style of Nan Goldin’s photography reveals a level of artifice and performativity that someone like Cindy Sherman takes to an extreme in order to critique.
11 Carson noted this in a “Bookworm” radio interview on KCRW in Santa Monica, California, August 7, 1997.
12 The most influential contribution to the study of melancholy is Freud’s 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia”, in which he argues that an incomplete separation from the object of loss leads to pathological melancholia and negative inward drives and self-division
13 Carson, in her Paris Review interview, noted “I also tried to give the book, on the left hand side, a patina of age—because it’s supposed to be an old Roman poem—by soaking the pages in tea, which added a mysterious sepia overtone.”
14 Carson mentions in the KCRW interview that she employs Greek and Latin because it is more “originary” than modern language—it “gets down in the roots of meanings of things.”
15 Goldin began showing the slideshow to her friends (who were the subjects of her pictures) in the early 1980s at small New York City venues like the Mudd Club, and set it to music with song titles and lyrics to accompany the themes of the photographs, including the title song from The Threepenny Opera. Eventually the slideshow grew to 700+ photographs, and in 1986 Aperture published a condensed version of the slideshow.
To bring the punctum into a larger art-historical critical context, Michael Fried applies his theory of antitheatricality to Barthes’ punctum: “In short for a photograph to be truly antithetical for Barthes it must somehow carry within it a kind of ontological guarantee that it was not intended to be so by the photographer...The punctum, I am suggesting, functions as that guarantee.” See, Fried, “Barthes’s Punctum” in Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009).

I borrow the term from film theorist from Christian Metz, who took up Freud’s theory of the fetish and connected it to Barthes’ idea of the punctum. Metz writes: “The character who is off-frame in a photograph...will never come into the frame, will never be heard—again a death, another form of death. The spectator has no empirical knowledge of the contents of the off-frame, but at the same time cannot help imagining some off-frame, hallucinating it, dreaming the shape of this emptiness...which reminds us of the feeling of lack in the Freudian theory of the fetish. For Barthes, the only part of a photograph which entails the feeling of an off-frame space is what he calls the punctum, the point of sudden and strong emotion, of small trauma; it can be a tiny detail. This punctum depends more on the reader than on the photograph itself, and the corresponding off-frame it calls up is also generally subjective; it is the "metonymic expansion of the punctum.” Christian Metz, “Photography and Fetish Christian.” October, Vol. 34. (Autumn, 1985), pp. 81-90.


This practice of adding pronouns is what Rosalind Krauss, citing the linguist Roman Jakobson, would refer to as a “shifter” that codes the otherwise blank indexicality of a photograph to give it meaning (Elkins 27).

The photographer Catherine Opie, a contemporary of Goldin’s who also documented her own marginalized community, used the elegiac symbol of the empty chair as the centerpiece of a nine-foot Polaroid called In Memory/Leigh Bowery, 2000—a lush, Renaissance-like portrait of a chair draped in amber velvet against a rich violet-blue background, in memory of her friend who died from AIDS. The piece was part of series created for the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS.
FIGURES

Fig. 1. Nan Goldin, *Man and woman in slips, New York City, 1980* (Ballad 133).

Fig. 2. Nan Goldin, *Mark tattooing Mark, Boston 1978* (Ballad 77).
Fig. 3. Nan Goldin, *Philippe G. and Suzanne kissing at Euthanasia, New York City 1981* (Ballad 121).

Fig. 4. Nan Goldin, *Nan after being battered, 1984* (Ballad 83).
Fig. 5. Nan Goldin, *Nan on Brian’s lap, Nan’s birthday, New York City 1981* (Ballad 11).

Fig. 6. Nan Goldin, *Brian with the Flintstones, New York City 1981* (Ballad 57).
Fig. 7. Nan Goldin, *Nan and Brian in bed, New York City 1983* (Ballad 137).
Fig. 8. Nan Goldin, *Cookie with Max at my birthday party, Provincetown, MA, 1976* (Mirror 257).
Fig. 9. Nan Goldin, *Cookie at Tin Pan Alley, NYC, 1983 (Ballad 29).*

Fig. 10. Nan Goldin, *Sharon with Cookie on the bed, Provincetown, September 1989 (Mirror 267).*
Fig. 11. Nan Goldin, *Cookie and Max, NYC, September 16, 1989* (Mirror 269).
Fig. 12. Nan Goldin, *Cookie and Vittorio’s living room, NYC, Christmas 1989* (Mirror 273).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


