The Sliding Scale of Self-Repair in Dennis Haskell's Acts of Defiance

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Abstract
The contemporary lyric's rich possibilities for resituating history and life stories still remain largely unexplored. Lyric poetry and history have always had, understandably, an uneasy relationship; the lyric is traditionally linked to the symbolic, not to fact or even necessarily, as we know from medieval or earlier poems, to a speaker that we can name or authorise. Yet, the instrument and agency of lyric evolve too, like science and technology, making room for strengths previously unexploited, rooted and waiting. Dennis Haskell's powerful body of work, balancing on a delicate and self-referential focus on human language itself, offers us a glimpse into the future. This article offers a critical study of 21st ecosystems of human language, as acts of self-repair, a perspective permeating Dennis Haskell's pioneering and poetic cycle of work, resonant with medical discoveries in our era. As we look ahead through the lens of Haskell's "geographies of time," we also explore lyric legacies of the elegiac, pointing us to update continuously our apprehension of the human body of language among the larger balances, of earth and space, and, then again, with one another, up close.

Keywords
Lyric poetry, elegy, time, self-repair, silence, ecosystem

Unlike narrative propulsion, the lyric impulse, predicated in modern English on the prosodic line, does not paradigmatically look forward. As James Longenbach suggests, the defining "line" of English "syntax urges us forward" to the next line" while the prosodic sound pattern equally "pulls us back" (20). From this perspective, lyric poetry can be said to shape the experience of a tense temporal chord, staging at once a backward-gazing and forward-looking feat, performing an uneasy temporality. Jonathan Culler maps the push-and-pull of lyric temporality into the present: "If narrative is about what happens next, lyric is about what happens now" (202). Yet, many critics and historians tie a closer knot

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between English lyric and, so to speak, what comes before. For example, Mutlu Konuk Blasing writes of "lyric signature": "The 'I' sounds the status of the 'human' itself – an animal *with a past*" (10; italics added). She states the elegiac case for lyric still more bluntly: "Poetry is a cultural institution dedicated to remembering" (3).

The historian Seth Lerer also argues for a lyric perspective with a "pervasive elegiac cast" (133). Focusing on fragments from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Lerer studies the transitions of the Anglo-Saxon and Old English verse, into the post-Conquest period. As I suggested in an earlier article on Dennis Haskell's volume *All the Time in the World*,[2] this period and bandwidth of lyric development have been under intense review. In a period of English lyric earmarked by what Lerer calls the "exile-in-place," he studies the irruption of lyric speakers finding themselves no longer at home, "born," so to speak, in the *already* elegiac act of looking backwards: what I referred to as "born retrospection." As Lerer explains, a seemingly familiar landscape all at once alien flags the condition of "pastness" into the present, tied together with the perception of an already "too late" arrival: "Now your hall shall be built with the spade,/ And you, wretch, shall be brought inside it;/ Now all your garments shall be sought out,/ Your house be swept and all the sweepings thrown out" (ctd. Lerer 143). Even the very material of stone, for instance, can dislodge the familiar timber of home, and along with it the speaker's self-recognition. As Lerer suggests, this emerging lyric voice of dislocation-at-home is identified as a discursive attempt at "architectural control" on an elegiac note of immediate loss (128).

I

If we carry this trope of born retrospection forward, we find key updates of English lyric in Dennis Haskell's body of work, as I began to venture in my earlier research. Namely, we will be exploring at length a major contemporary shift of weight inside the longstanding ecosystem of the elegiac, where human self-consciousness repositions itself on the sliding scale repair. We begin, here, at the end of Dennis Haskell's volume, *All the Time in the World*, where the title of the final poem, "An Act of Defiance" evolves four years later into the plural and into title of his collection, *Acts of Defiance* (2010). As we can now identify a lyric radius, the opening of the poem constructs a speaker "born" into the estrangement of self-recognition. Yet, this role of lyric utterance and born retrospection performs self-alienation at the global scale: the speaker is retrospectively born (too) late, upon arrival, to a world-game that he has already and ultimately "lost." The speaker irrupts, "Life is a game in which/ we are all given/ the role of losers/ eventually" ("An Act of Defiance" 97). To cope with this act of born retrospection, at the moment of the self-conscious awakening, the speaker

[2] See "The Lyric Impulse in Dennis Haskell's *All the Time in the World*."

leverages a verbal *as if*, as we see just below, in relation to his father's death. It is noticeably constructed, inside a tense present, on a contraction of present tense ("It's"), locating a door, upon its making, not open to him. It is a door, however, that is architecturally and verbally staged *anyway*, on the temporal chord of an uneasy future and the lyric's born-elegiac pastness:

> It's as if he turned with a grin
> and a wave, then disappeared
> behind a door irrevocably
> marked 'No Entry'
> and took off into air
> were we, stuck to
> the earth, can't follow ("An Act of Defiance" 97-98)

On the legacy of English lyric, we are witnessing a new kind of geography at work. It is categorically different from the Norman and Anglo-Saxon post-Conquest landscapes of physical materiality. A speaker can emerge, as we have seen, lacking control, materially self-alienated, in a house made of wood, once made of stone. Here, we witness the emergence of a global "geography." That is, "stuck to/ the earth," the speaker identifies himself already unrecognisable in a geography of time, "eventually" taking him, and his family, out. On this new global experience of self-alienation, he finds himself at once on earth and unable in time (literally) to find his father or himself. Indeed, the constructed door of "as if," seemingly separating the two of them in time (and marked "No Entry"), paradoxically, and parenthetically, loosely suspends them on a self-made construct for one moment. The speaker hereby builds "into air," if futilely, an attempt to arrive in time. On this new and bewildering geography of time, however, human language's earthly constructions of "as if" are self-alienating, born looking back, already constituting a leaking and self-articulated "loser."

Yet, before the elegiac articulation confirms its status, always born into a condition of already losing, the speaker proceeds with language to carve out further acts of earthly *unable-ness*. The figure has already anchored himself verbally, that is, at the outset of the poem, as a self-aware outsider to time's eternal landscape. In an act of (unsustainable) articulation, he has set himself "back" at home with his father, waving, yet unable to feel his body, "the feeling of him/ gone from the tips/ of our human fingers" (97). The artifice of the present (and of human "presence") including the *as-if* touch of his father's body, immediately hits the elegiac note upon articulation: "Already his presence/ is falling out of us/ like dust" (97).

This update of material born retrospection constitutes time as the global landscape of self-alienation. Further, the self-conscious human tongue also irrupts, now, as the ever-arriving late-to-the-game disruptor. As the writer and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno framed the outcast: "Man, by the very fact of

being man, of possessing consciousness, is, in comparison with the ass or the crab, a diseased animal." Or, as he declares, now famously, of the human condition, "Consciousness is a disease."

A high degree of the elegiac gaze, on this updated global landscape, can be seen to fall on prospection too. The awakening of human language to self-consciousness and death frames the field, an uneasy geography of self-alienation on earth. The poetic "pen" no longer seeds the soil, for example, which we heard shored by Seamus Heaney next to his father's spade, digging into Ireland's richness, and seeding the future:

> The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
> Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
> Through living roots awaken in my head.
> But I've no spade to follow men like them.
>
> Between my finger and my thumb
> The squat pen rests.
> I'll dig with it. ("Digging" 4)

As we see in the poem "An Act of Defiance, "[p]icking up the pen," the speaker admits, in an act of both defiance and defense, "is like picking up a stone" (97).

This instrumental shift of analogic instrument, from a *spade* to a *stone*, is telling. We recognise, first, a fundamental shift of agency, i.e, a perspectival redistribution from en-abling acts of seeding and growth, toward the un-abling or dis-abling acts toward human silencing and death. The "loser" is born of the lifting. Secondly, the perspectival change retrospectively and categorically reframes the act of "digging." A spade of digging, planting and rebirth may also be seen under this new lens equally, to produce "losers," born *ad infinitum*. Under this prospective endpoint, the "dead weight" of body/stone, or the human consciousness/lyric "pen," arrives to this geography not digging but self-dissolving in language. The stone of human language, on these new registers, recognises not its agency and ability, but its heavy and self-limiting alienation of articulation and "home," situated on an enduring geography of global time.

From this more obtuse angle, the earth's (many and nonhuman) silences and languages, belonging to "the ass or the crab," so to speak, accrue unexpected new valences. In brief summary, the heavy weight of human and self-aware articulation already signals the elegiac "loser," immediately upon its birth into the geography of time, as we have seen. Yet, its own anomaly and construct of self-consciousness also widens, in a temporal push-and-pull, under conditions of prospection. Anticipated human silencing, already present in the father's death, identifies the immediacy of the speaker's own demise and self-unrecognisability.

Thus, a condition of global time, joined to the human condition of language, must be borne at once. The act of verbal defiance erupts, which appears to push

back the born retrospection and status of perpetual "loser," destined to a conclusion of silencing: "each attempt/ at meaning is an act/ of defiance of *death*" ("An Act of Defiance" 97-98; italics added). Yet, if we look more closely still, in view of these larger historical plates, and loosen the tight weave across Haskell's own body of work, we can now read the lyric revisiting of "born retrospection" more largely and as including something more accurate. We discover the human attempt at "meaning" more often arises not as act of defiance of death, as the line states, but an evolving pattern of negotiations with *silencing*. That is, how the noun "death" itself may be said to arrive too early to the tongue of his body of his work, so to speak, can initially mislead on "born retrospection," where human self-consciousness demonstrates repeatedly its arrival of self-alienation inside its "home" of time. Over the course of his poems, another demonstrable pattern of weight, spent on this topos of irruption, alienation and elegiac self-construction, instead, yields to a degree to a late *release* of control, by this historically resonant lyric voice. But this major shift, taking hold especially in the latest work, as we will track, accrues over the duration of his work.

What stands out on the emerging pattern of braids of born retrospection, therefore, constitutes a slow but deep shift of weighting. Again, to be clear, under earliest conditions of born retrospection in English lyric, we see the human *body* of the speaker arriving "late" to an immediately unrecognisable home-at-home, where domestic abodes of material estrangement can immediately dislocate and alienate. In Haskell's initial updates of global perspective, however, we see human *language* arriving already as "late" to the controls. As soon as human language self-consciously demarcates death, it equally frames itself the "loser" in this earthly game of time. In plural acts of defiance, it articulates its own demise, where the silences of global space and time will "win."

Yet, we see up close how Haskell's body of work noticeably hangs the heavy "stone" and prospection of death, first, to bear upon human shoulders. We can see human articulation of defiance proliferate, that is, on attempted parenthetical raids on the alienating landscape of non-human time, as we hear, for example, inside this elegiac frame of his father's funeral:

> 'He's so cold' the words entered
> the air from a voice
> achingly unlike her own,
> 'so cold'. And I, the eldest son,
> the reliable one, was lost
> in that moment, forever.
> Sincere words were as pathetic as silence.
>
> ("Temperatures," *All the Time in the World* 86-87)

The human attempt of essentialised meaning-making, an act of counting, also attempts its own architectural control of time on earth:

I have been counting days
dumbly since your departure
but the numbers make sense
only inside my head.
("Counting the Days," *All the Time in the World* 89)

"Outside" the human head – in a geography of day and night – nonhuman time is raided, framed by the tongue's self-conscious attempted control *saying* and, thereby, framing its own self-alienation on the land:

I could say that dawn breaks,
the light marches toward evening,
night moves toward dawn,

but there is no reality on the clock
of the heart's grief, alone (89; emphasis added)

Here, again, nonhuman time, of "indivisible wind" frames the divisible and human passing raid. The born retrospection of human time is for a moment divided and controlled, parenthesised "as if":

A huge moon shone
as if time would be inclined
never to move us on;
lemon-scented gums
half-way to heaven
rocked on their axes,
bounced and bowed like Japanese gentlemen
paying their respects
to the indivisible wind.
("Lemon-scented Gums," *All the Time in the World* 58)

As we will soon see, however, a third tact will be taken, to resituate once more the human condition of "born retrospection," where self-consciousness defines but then negates its own need for control over time, its self-alienating home. Lyric literary history deeply sets the stage. We can already scour it for scraps of "meaning" attempted by articulate raids of the inarticulate, for example, of the "wind" and the "sea" in Wallace Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West." Spearheaded recognisably by the human "imagination," the poem scores the path:

Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

> For she was the maker of the song she sang.
> ("The Idea of Order at Key West" 128-29)

We also hear the human imagination double tapped again, at the end, on a close self-referential parody and residue of its absence, in Stevens's "The Man on the Dump":

> Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
> Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
> Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
> *Invisible priest*; is it to eject, to pull
> The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone?*
> Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the. (203)

Or, here, we see the re-making of human history, ritual and "meaning," in William Carlos Williams's poem, "Burning of the Christmas Greens,"

> At the thick of the dark
> the moment of the cold's
> deepest plunge we bought branches
> cut from the green trees
>
> to fill our need… (1196)

The emphasis in these examples remains, again, largely on the work of human imagination, invention and mythologising, at the site of human language. Human "meaningfulness" is sought not only juxtaposed with sensuous "grinding water" but in the reinvention of liturgical history as well, framed by human beings "to fill our need." Yet, in the new and global eco-systems that Haskell's replacement of "pen" with "stone" punctuates, the human parenthesis of "the the" (self-bracketing eternal time) is no longer synonymous with elevating the imagination or even "winning," at all. Haskell's lyric geography of time ultimately requires no spade, no pen, not even human speech, begging the question of human agency. The pattern of articulated suspension, on passing acts of defiance, will defer to the human time-traveller.

We see the central bridge to this appearing as an increasingly *open* parenthesis of its own making, where language cries and thrives in its simultaneity of self-construction and self-estrangement. For example, an abiding of image of human flight from earth, an open risk of death, serves as an abiding lead across his works. In flight, the human mind registers the apprehension of death, contrasted with its temporary seat on earth. In that moment, as in "Evening Flight," it separates itself from "a world outside," that is, the identifiably nonhuman "flesh of clouds" (*Acts of Defiance* 80). As Haskell writes, "… suspended/ everybody's mind is lined

death" (81). Among the clouds but still forever separate, the human "imagination" is here construed as rarely if ever deeply instrumental for carving out "meaning," or even our most human experiences: "… I wondered/ what could give meaning/ to the insistent/ inadequacies of flesh" (80). The human flesh of mind is left stranded at the door of its making, "as if" human language could do something, yet also forever fastened to what W.B. Yeats named the "dying animal" ("Sailing to Byzantium" 193), or here, "diminutive lives" (81). On that bridge of the time-traveller, however, lined with death, we find something else sparking: human language as ripe for coping.

On this important recalibration toward management, we hear Haskell's increasingly abiding emphasis on liv*ing* and dy*ing*, rather than the diction of life and death. Yet, part of a pattern, it has early roots. As early as the poem "Abracadabra," for instance, we already begin to see the seed of this perspective. No human "stain of history," including ages of human myth-making in the English imagination, is seen to interfere with the Australian landscape; we hear, no human imagination stains or "debunks its landscape" (*Acts of Defiance* 17). Instead, paradoxically, the "empty, eternally present, endless ocean" benchmarks and, finally, punctuates, the speaker's own arrival, catapulting him into the arrival of his own nonrecognisability. In this immediate loss of history, language and human self-recognition, the speaker pares himself, not his language, into a suspension of time. Himself a mimicry and speck of time, a "moth" of time, passing eternally, he also begins to manage the parentheses, the familiar acts of raiding by human language, rather than stage them in defiance: "Who here could not/ feel fluttering inside/ the immense, tawny/ moth of happiness,/ *one great day after another/ sunset-flush'd upon the yellow sand*?" (18). Strangely, here, it is not the immensity of language, or its powers of the spade, or the human imagination, or even its articulation that carries the speaker here; nor is the speaker a maker, a secularised god, an aesthete. This speaker does not, finally, suggest that language is defiantly *doing* anything, given the half-rhetorical question, of "who could not…" make a moment out of eternity? Perhaps that, too, is out of reach, framed now on the act of coping. The rhetorical power of language has shifted into language's own self-management, from which the human being can beg or borrow. It is a moment's management, in a newly designed game, so to speak, that does not "end" in, but is never anything but, eternal human silencing.

When we look to the etymologies of "cope," we find a clue. Wedged between the Old French "coper" and "colper," from "cop," "colp," a "blow" via Latin from Greek, and the Flemish and Germanic more recent history of "cope," suggesting "to traffic or bargain for," the modern act of coping, as we know it post 18th-century, indicates a slide rule of perspective. On Haskell's own sliding scale of geography of time, to cope, in effect, is to move increasingly away from the life-defending position: away from the "blow" of discovering oneself the "loser," in an ongoing repeat, which closes *All the Time in the World*. Instead, the

reopening and plural and titular *Acts of Defiance,* with no title poem to speak of, points ultimately to a new momentum, picking up and collecting these earlier signals. To cope is increasingly to bargain and predicate management of language, rather than to stage a resistance.

Such a perspective and pattern woven throughout his work, but pooling in his latest and moving collection *Ahead of Us*, suggests a deceptively large-scale change. Haskell's fingering and change of diction in lyric history of *language* as temporary (toward an ultimate *silencing* of voice) rather than *life* as temporary (toward the body's ultimate *death*) is a larger shift than may first appear. It offers a contemporary stance in our ongoing shift of perspective of ecosystems. It finally shoves, into the foreground, after resistance, human language as the appreciable anomaly of potential *global self-repair*. All life, including the nonhuman, becomes the wider "winner," no longer prompting life-and-death acts of human defiance or even of human language after all, on earth's "geography" of time. A focus on human *life* as short in the Middle Ages, and subsequently on the *day* of *carpe diem* in the Renaissance, eventually contracts under the microscope of our era toward a focus on the minutia of a moment: human language, and its parenthetical claws, at first attempting to defy but then manage, in a parenthetical instant, the wider global "silences." The mouth can for a *moment* pick up and enclose the very stone of death that, paradoxically, marks its own exclusion from the earth, but can do so in a newly understood act, inclusively, of *human self-repair*.

Importantly, a relevant medical analogue also weighs in. In ongoing medical challenges to death, or an increasingly vested interest in "life extension," the field of aging "management" has come to define cutting-edge medical exploration, as a possible replacement for a model of "curing" illness and disease. In the late 20th century, and early 21st century, we are seeing this shift of medical focus: that is, a change of emphasis from finding or identifying the "cure" for any given illness, toward the study of *continuous management* of the body's plural and ongoing propensities for "self-repair."[3] From this perspective of aging, where aging itself is investigated as constituting a "disease" in its own right, the "death" of the body does not know itself except as, ultimately, a final lack of self-repair. Until that point, the body seeks nutrients for its self-extension, substituting wherever possible ongoing repair for any oncoming disrepair, where disrepair, not the act of aging itself, to a larger-than-imagined degree leads to a multitude of diseases.[4]

[3] There are many scientists on the cutting-edge of "life extension" research. David Sinclair and Matthew LaPlante, among others, put it bluntly in *Lifespan: Why We Age,* when writing about cellular death as an inversion of self-repair: "To become young again, he writers, we just need to find some polish to remove the scratches."

[4] A new shift in thinking is again under way," Sinclair and LaPlante argue. "Aging is a loss of information over time that can be replenished to the cells." As explained, in more detail *Lifespan,* if we can "keep undifferentiated cells from tiring out, they can continue to generate all the differentiated cells necessary to heal tissues and battle all kinds of diseases." On this hypothesis, at the limit, regarding the body's capacity for self-repair, the following conclusion marks a sea-change

Just so, in Haskell's emerging ecosystem, staging plural "acts of defiance" can, first, reposition the focal point from life (paired with death) to language (paired with silence), stretching out defiance to acts of coping. From there, we discover a key to the human body's self-repair in Haskell's body of lyric.

Upon an awakening to death, language (not life) generates strategies of ongoing repair, as long as will last, appearing in the face of ultimate and enduring silence. "All that we have ever said and done// seems less than what we meant," the speaker opens in "No one Ever Found You," as self-repair in language and deed diminishes. Yet he adds, "it matters little where we go,/ how little we know/ and how much our lives have passed,/ our days will be filled with green/ and we grow together like grass" (*Acts of Defiance* 19). This growing shift of balance positions language as a temporary but essential nutrient of self-conscious acts of self-repair: an act of "coping" that stages management above losing or winning, and, finally, above curing or conceding. It is a focus on how a 21st century body manages "between" an opening parenthesis of born retrospection and a future parenthesis where the "loss of the game" marks a death.

When observed through the lens of history, this high order of pragmatism is theoretically not as dependent as it may first appear on linking acts of self-repair with any measure of "utility" (that is, under conditions of life "losing the game" to death). The "management" of human language, bracketing and suspending silence temporarily, can transition, therefore, into an act of rhetorical self-repair. Self-repair, ironically, can position its own defiance. Namely, it is not at odds with human silence, which is no longer conceived as an early stand-in for death. Silence will, newly, like the grass, offer a range of registers plied with human language from time to time.

Plural acts of defiance, reconceived as ongoing management of limited self-repair, unlike a single and defensive act of defiance, make loud the very quiet of silence itself; language temporarily repairs its own tears and tears that it makes. Again, self-repair in the context of medical studies now theoretically seeks less to fix the "illnesses" of mortality than to extend the reach of the body's self-repair (until the parts eventually erode beyond the nutrients of self-repair). So, too, Haskell's lyrics *of* human language (rather than of the human body) can instead seek not to compete or win the "game" of life, as originally measured against "death." The benchmarks change. Instead, the lyrics increasingly re-examine human language as one of the many ongoing acts of life-extension and self-repair.

> On the air floats only
> the land- and metal-eating
> synchronicities of salt.
> Leaves tremble like strange birds.

of perspective: "Scientists have settled on eight or nine hallmarks of aging…. Address all of them, and you might not age."

> And soft light may be found
> on the next headland
> or perhaps the next,
> or is it the next?
> There is no Eden without expulsion.
> ("At Middleton Beach," *Acts of Defiance* 110)

The growing registers and layers of silence in Haskell's work offer a new taxonomy on a field highly covered in lyric history. The lyric "inexpressible" in English, derived partly from prayer combined with self-declared human adequacy, in the face of the liturgical call to God, has a stronghold.[5] Yet, to reposition time in terms of *human self-repair*, in contrast to conceiving "silence" as a layered act of *human inadequacy* in the face of perfection, shifts important power relations. In Haskell's lyric, human language, finally, for instance, increasingly disassociates itself with even that residual parenthetical of reclaiming silence from death. It serves no longer as potential correction or cure to the world's bewilderments, where words, if accurately uttered, could touch upon eradicating the "human stain." The suspension of silence by human language, those very acts of defiance, are instead built on multi-tiered rings of self-repair, necessary for managing the living.

One of the earliest poems, "The Call" (5), for instance, in *Acts of Defiance*, prompts this possibility and pattern into motion, where a human voice, as we saw first in Lerer, irrupts onto the landscape, in which dislocation defines awakening. The speaker hears a young human call, blended into the perpetual-motion machine of the world of the bush: "A stilled room to which I am called/ by an unknown voice, not knowing/ because of its great stillness, that it calls from my son's sleep." There are more registers of silence into which this speaker's suspension of silence is "born." First, a human voice finds itself already out of place among the non-human ecosystems of sound. An articulation of language is born into the father's act of "looking for meaning," upon hearing a human call; the speaker's own arrival, onto a now suspended silence of the scene created by the call – all may be said to attempt to "cure" the human call of its apparent nightmare.

At the same time an attempted "cure" would risk either infecting the non-human silence, or interrupting the son's acts of self-repair, where the voice has already "sunk back into the body":

> In the bush nothing stirs. For once
> no breeze grabs hold of the curtains.
> Sunk back into his body the voice quietens.

[5] I have extensively researched this topos, tradition and history in *Distancing English: A Chapter in the History of the Inexpressible*. See especially 32-48.

> I shift his legs, twisted in the sheets,
> grateful that this sudden nightmare
> has crept back into its own beginnings.
> …
> How we look for meaning in such actions,
> as if God's voice called from the centre of our sleep,
> but there is nothing: only a silence so complete
> love itself might become a sickness.

To move from an identified act of defiance into plural acts of defiance, after all, is to move in time from hearing a son's call as a need to rescue and cure, to hearing the same boy's call as a potential act of self-repair. It is to move from *apprehension* (daring and fear), echoed in a long history of reverence for silence (i.e., closest to God, and its associations with prayer and poetry), into plural and parenthetical piece-meal of management. There is, of course, very great risk. The human "call" substitutes for an earlier deference to the totality or "completeness," a human awe of silence. The human call stages a temporary suspension of silence even if at the limit unnecessary, where "love itself might become a sickness." But it also responds to, and responds as, the articulation of human voice and self-repair, managing the silences of the human and nonhuman which dying as much as living, or living as much as dying, joins together.

Such apprehensions of silence throughout Haskell's body of work, therefore, are not drawn from the perspective, say, of the proverbial "still point" of lyric. They come from a dynamic silence: a perspective of physics and motion, the human body in space, itself a perpetual motion machine of attempted and ongoing self-repair. The body in motion, figured on a plane, for instance, appears regularly as it does here in "Night Flight" (*Acts of Defiance* 21). A speaker utters, and suspends, the immanence of silence, upon entering a non-human world of sound and space: this time not the bush, but technology. The speaker at first seeks to "make meaning," recognisably, of such apprehensions of silence, speed and space:

> Entering this symmetrical hulk of metal which will fling us
> into the realms of absurd distances, leaps across continents,
> through time zones, which will heap
> our bodies into the peculiar lassitude
> of barely comprehensible speed in barely comprehensible space,
> has us looking out to find
> immense knowledge, the perpetual ingenuity of humankind.

Yet, even an attempt to make meaning of human ingenuity yields, aggressively, another layer of silence but barely suspended by the human tongue:

> to take off is to forfeit your perspectives

> to technology as epic as the passivity
> it foists upon us.

That aggressive silence of the non-human is textured. It is made from the utter "absence" of the human body, along with its human and inaudible self-reflections: "absence of shapes, of space,/ absence of relationships, absence of light." In this dark take-off of a suspension of silence, the absence of human light (and, along with it, the expectations for human comprehension) prevails. The world is predominantly visual, non-verbal, though barely. We but see "near transparent faces, in the twitching light." Silence, sometimes suspended by the human voice of articulation in acts of defiance, suggests here the connective tissue of a visual framework. The human tongue, notably, recedes unexpectedly from suspending the silence. Those acts, of articulated suspension of silence, depended upon the nouns "life" and "death" continuing to be set out in contrast. And it is precisely the anomalous tongue of human language, of course, that framed the contrast in the first instance. Again, we hear that line made of contrast echo, "There is no Eden without expulsion."

Here, though, the human tongue does not carve out the inadequacy of the longstanding topos of the inexpressible; nor does it frame the frame of the "loser," suspending silence through temporary articulation, thereby (still) signalling the body's impending death. Instead, "At Greenwood, A Meditation," where life and death are visually constructed, rather than verbally so, the human call (earlier a suspension and break of the non-human silences of the bush) immediately settles upon its own irrelevance, of the highest order.

Eyeing "occasional cats" (23), the speaker admits: "I never can call to them/ nor fix how they come." In other words, outside the inexpressible, the human voice no longer carries an "illness" of language that needs a (more perfect) cure. It no longer acts to suspend silence temporarily, where that parenthetical deposit, but triggers the temporary nature of its self-constructed non-obliteration, on a road to death. To lengthen the duration of the living acts of wonder, past the polarising and locked life-and-death framework of human language itself, language abdicates the suspension of silence too, changing direction:

> … when I see a mouth
> lick up the dabs of sunlight
> celebrate / what has then begun,
> the twitch of whiskers,
> the startling tongue.

Key to western and liturgical lyric history of framing, and the failed adequacy to "say," the human tongue begins to lose its grounds of contrast. The "tongue" and "call" yield to the "startling *tongue*" of a cat (italics added), rhyming slant across the nasal-guttural, on an inverted angle, on what has "be*gun*" (italics

added). And out of the opening spondee-lapping sound of "humdrum," at the entrance into Greenwood, arises that visual tongue: a non-human tongue that dabs the sunlight. We see the same twitch (of whiskers here) that echoes the night flight's "near transparent faces, in the twitching light." Half-disappeared in the night or half-appearing in the light, the non-human tongue similarly rises and falls, like the light, making motion: startling the human body in kind, part of the same perpetual motion machine of earth.

When the body changes course, it does so by substituting *anybody*'s (and, therefore, everybody's) ending in death for the focus on the single body's ending. The act of the particular, rather than the act of defiance, is beginning to constitute a new reckoning on the entire fluid spectrum: "Beauty always takes place in the particular" (13), Elaine Scarry writes. It does so, therefore, by incrementally refusing to frame death as a polar competitor with life. A single, and therefore now visibly connected body (for what can be connected if not first particularised?) "simply" waits "to enter that time/ when the dark veins/ weave in and out/ bleeding names" (53). The human tongue, therefore, mouths and startles words as passing bits of time.

In this context, the body refuses the parenthetical, premised on endpoints, no longer relevant, once the geography of time itself is no longer staged on a polar time-line of the loser (and winner). Human words may be ironically and speciously "rewarded" by death, carrying past the body: "Death chooses us/ but rewards words" (52). But words now thrive *of* the body, to the degree that they can join with physical and startled worlds of wonder. As Roland Greene argues, "Lyric rituality is at the very foundations both of the genre's transitivity… and its involvement in ideological suspension, where meaning or conviction may become almost invisibly contingent on shared sounds, rhythms, or rhetorical orders" (21), Onomatopoeia, here, so named, offers such transitivity:

> Inveigled, intrigued, liminal, disguised,
> lost deep down in words' seductions of sound
> we spin on their axis apart and grow wise:
> the song they sing is *not* the world going round,
> but those who think this ignore the senses' *allegria*
> and the link to the world, in words' onomatopoeia.
> ("Ars Poetica," *All the Time in the World* 5)

In "A Defence of Poetry," we will hear more: "All poetry's perceptive, pointless pleasures/ In all the horror, a thin piece of light/ Like a weightless parcel adrift on the doorstep" (*All the Time in the World* 12-13). Lyric continues to transform into weightless light, still not a parcel of "meaning," which never (can) arrive, but a visual rebounding with sound, on a "gaze averted," a "looking away" in, here, "inexplicable moments of worth."

II

One register of the particular reaches an apotheosis in this emerging and inhabited spectrum of the human being's living and dying silences. It is a register and documentary of the writer's wife, dying of cancer, that expands this spectrum and range of experience, opening on the elegiac world *Ahead of Us*. We notice immediately, in the title poem "Ahead of Us," the husband's body starting visibly to shake. Trains in motion set the stage, moaning and heading "down those endless tracks/ that once seemed to lead somewhere, that now lead nowhere" (*Ahead of Us* 50):

> Freight trains moan on the line.
> What does *their shaky language* spell
> and carry? What is its urgent load? (italics added)

Here, too, the husband shakes:

> while I stood
> truly pathetic and dumb
> *and shook*, ravished
> from head to foot ("So Much Courage" 67; italics added)

Then, here:

> and something funny
> folds up
> inside me
> and *keeps trembling*
> its flimsy, papery breath ("Renewal" 68; italics added)

And one more:

> all the things to do,
> whatever I do, whatever I think,
> the *unstoppable core* of me
>
> is already grieving ("Six Years" 72; italics added)

In these urgent states of grieving, the body is shaking on the spectrum of living, opened out from "life" into the participial: liv-ing and dy-ing, husband and wife. On this liminal and conjoined space, no longer a parenthetical stay from silence, nor constituted by a contrast with death, the body finds itself negotiating the *other*, and at the limit negotiating the inseparability of itself as other, living and dying. When the *other* is already deemed but barely inseparable from *oneself*, as a beloved wife, where living is increasingly inseparable from dying, there is no anchoring of

language onto the parenthetical. Language itself is asked to make the body technical and *capable* of registering the perpetual combined motions of living and dying. We circle around to a key position, stated earlier, that prefigures this course:

> Nothing
> will be able until
> the unsaid
> becomes the unsayable. ("Still Life," *All the Time in the World* 19)

Of language is asked, increasingly, the negotiations of the "unsayable" – rather than suspending temporarily what it is *not able* to defeat (that is, eternal silence, the "unsaid"). This nuanced and equally groundbreaking shift of register appears, again, on an erosion of separation between living and dying. We move from the non-participial contrast of "life" and "death" that the human tongue articulated parenthetically to stage an act of defiance. Living and the dying stream through the eye, as much as the tongue: registering different notches on the earth's drive on a global act of repair. To "remove the presence/ of absence," there is, thus, little *othering* left: where, residually, a threshold can determine the movement between a diction of life and death, and where "time is only a window/ I could climb through/ and touch you, in life, in death," separate ("Constancy," *Ahead of Us* 41). Yet, we discover on this spectrum of the living husband and dying wife, both "each hour,/ each minute in the expectation of death" ("That Other Country," *Ahead of Us* 52). The tongue can be capable of its *own* suspension, where the unsaid (cancer or death) becomes very precisely the unsayable, and no longer a staged incapability, or blatantly a parenthetical suspension and defiance of death. We see it here: the very word "cancer" is named a "visa, in your passport/ an indelible stamp, and your passport/ now full of pages that you will never use" ("That Other Country" 52). We see the verbal arrival at death ahead of the body's death. Lifting presence from absence, life and death at once, the speaker echoes the body becoming capable of inhabiting the perpetually unsayable, while resisting the parenthetical suspension of the absolute of the unsaid: "He [the doctor] says the word, 'cancer',/ and already you are there" ("That Other Country" 53). So, too, the speaker is there with her. She is not *othered* in an articulation of suspended silence. The living and the dying are there together, liminally, inhabiting both the diction and the absence of living and dying at once.

Human language now deprives its own oxygen of othering, even self-projection. Standing still, in place, numb, dumb and quivering, the speaker says, "I stood beside you/ too terrified to open my mouth./ … I stood truly pathetic and dumb/ and shook, ravished/ from head to foot" ("So Much Courage" 67). At the wording of death, there is no suspension of silence at play possible in

language. There is shaking, the body "ravished" and overcome, where it, paradoxically, has become capable, rather than able, *not to speak* the unsayable.

After the death of his wife, the speaker finds himself, momentarily, dis-abled in front of a doorbell, with names along the side, in which he, alone, among the figures is still alive:

> … I realise your names condemn me
>
> as the only one of us alive, *solo io*.
> *C'è la vita*, what could be more clear?
> But what of what we are could be
> Sadder, more shaking, and more bizarre? ("Gelati Alla Spiaggia: *i.m. SD, GR, and RH, Ahead of Us* 96)

Yet, on language and names that do not point to life or death but to living and dying, the body is now capable of shaking. We see the very force not of the unsaid but, again, of the act of the unsayable, including, here, names that do not have their referent: the "*names* condemn" (italics added). We see, too, engineered, language's capable retrospection and prospection, if not able to change the past or future. We look back again, for instance, and see this course evolving earlier, from the name of woman, and a photo, in the hands of POW in WWII, writing a diary. The speaker contemplates:

> Yet to me
> what carried you through into unimaginable life
> was a woman's photograph and name.
> We don't find meanings. We make them.
> ("'I Am Well, Who are you?'" *Acts of Defiance* 123)

Yet, we notice, "meanings" are immediately qualified by the speaker:

> not as ideas, neither below nor in Heaven above
> but here: fragile and utterly valuable love (123)

And earlier, still, the pattern is set in motion; parenthetical and suspended time is constructed, briefly, by self-conscious retrospection, yet holding open, we notice now, a space for the visual.

> I've ached to think back
> to when I first glimpsed you, or we first met,
> so long and short time ago,
> that wide-eyed look and startling hair
> you keep still, a beauty
> deeper than flesh… ("Reality's Crow," *Acts of Defiance* 65)

Then, the artifice of language, pumping open "enduring" time on the parenthetical, concedes its human engine, its human tongue:

> Surely such happiness, and so enduring,
> Australia can allow neither of us to take. ("Reality's Crow" 65)

The visual also recedes. The speaker is left with human language anchoring the diction of death. Neither is allowed to "take" up such enduring company. Language's interruption of death on the landscape is itself dying, precisely where shaking begins:

> So it can't be true! Shake me,
> break at me silently
> from where nothing speaks
> but this unutterable, fierce,
> familiar need of you. ("Reality's Crow" 66)

The visual gone; a construction of time held open, temporarily, by human language gone; a call of the human voice defiant of death gone; the "smell of you" gone; only the body's physical shaking registers the gap, a now textured silence, between the unsaid ("where nothing speaks") and the unsayable ("familiar need"). "Let me/ hear this white crow, reality/ wailing around our life!" (66), the speaker exhorts. In the environs of the unsayable, a crow's wail encircles the body's living-and-dying, which shakes out of itself a "reality," the absent "you," present as a wail heard, a need that is not "unsaid."

Where we see time entering the body proper, shaking its inseparability from time, the tongue is no longer able to separate itself for parenthetical construction and *self-othering*. We will discover, as fall-out, that the global geography of time will begin to erode on earlier patterns of personification:

> as if time would be inclined
> never to move us on…
> ("Lemon-scented Gums," *All the Time in the World* 58)

> … time is slipping
> over everyone's fingers like money.
> ("Brightly Shone the Moon," *All the Time in the World* 60)

> the days bend, warp, blur,
> stumble on each other, arch back
> where love maintains its own
> idiotically rational maths
> ("Counting the Days," *All the Time in the World* 89)

When on occasion time is still personified, as here, where the speaker complains that everything about the "word" widower is wrong: "Time with his clichéd scythe has cut a vicious way," the self-consciousness of the personification itself balloons. If understood comprehensively, across Haskell's body of work, personification no longer can invent partiality. Instead, the "word," that is, *any* word, any human language of self-consciousness, is found out for its totality of inability, finally, to create a parenthesis of time:

> 'Widower': this pathetic run
> of weak, short syllables
> says nothing about me
> or everything… (*Ahead of Us* 101)

The personification of time, therefore, yields only to an objection, finally, and an objectification. Time will increasingly move inseparably. It will move into objects that measure (like water that runs) what the objects themselves displace, "the mother's love." Time is no longer personified, articulated, temporarily and verbally suspended in its time-tracks. The person, the mother, is fashioned out of time from a "dumb" object, an inarticulateness enabling the speaker's own inarticulateness, letting it stand as an animate shiver:

> … I marvelled
> that his strong, young man's wrist
> could have grown
> from something so small
> and that the miracle
> of a mother's love
> could outlive her
> and all her treasured possessions ("Birthday Present," *Ahead of Us* 103)

Marvelling used to unfold things like a simile, suspended time, and at the limit, constructing company inside the parenthesis of time. Here we see it at work:

> how instincts
> with funny, childish irrelevance
> lie dormant all through
> adolescence's awkward
> years, then blossom
> like purples thistles

Now the ties begin:

> and tie us into what

we once thought were choices,
canny as free will,
instincts that lie
logical as blood ("Why," *All the Time in the World* 80)

Time passing exposes adolescent language, rebutting parents' language. And the rebuttal is but elemental instinct, more elemental than parents' roles themselves, or their seeming ubiquitous authority, "earth, rain and fire!" (80). The purple-blossomed instincts of adolescence can at the moment act like "choices," if now seen, in retrospection, as inevitable as the blood coursing through the body, without verbal direction or even relevant impact.

Yet, that so-to-speak "purple blossomed" moment, etched out in silence, still recognisably surges from a left-over Romantic Imagination, so-named here. "Imagination has me now…" (80), the speaker admits. And that human act of *languaging* has ubiquitously insisted on itself, parenthetically like a teenager, while time unpersonified reveals a moment's relinquishing of articulation and control in the very place of alienation.

III

Thus, across a body of time in Dennis Haskell's poems, what remains of the human act, and acts, of defiance? Such plural acts of defiance – on the heels of the act and cry of defiance, toward a silence that speaks of death – may be observed historically, we saw, through the lyric lens of *born retrospection*. These acts pick up on English lyric's early establishment of the elegiac and dislocation of lyric utterance: speakers born into an awakening of themselves on the very grounds of self-alienation. Yet, Haskell's body of work powerfully updates us. We have seen in his life-work of poems already a crucial and global change of what constitutes "home." His poems push the lyric state of the human voice and its constituent geography. The human voice still immediately enters the scene dislocated, but the human home has been updated from a physical location to a new and global landscape of time. Its inhabitants, those of human language, are immediately dislocated by imminent language and self-consciousness by birth, into the geography of time, where lasting silences and non-human consciousness forge the "native speaker" and survivor:

Five months into life
you have the utter helplessness
of the human, incapable
beyond any other animal. ("Fascination," "Ahead of Us" 106)

In the face of born retrospection and its endpoint of prospection, the human voice sets up initial acts of parenthetical defiance, attempting to disrupt disabling and portentous death, the inevitable acts of eternal silencing ahead. We have seen

articulated defiance, on this global geography of time, architectural and attempted suspensions of death. Speakers, as we see "Writ in Water" (*All the Time in the World* 28-29) or "Threads" ("Acts of Defiance" 20), for example, seek temporary self-reconstruction, between endpoints, defined as such, life and death. Finally, as "life" yields to living, and "death" to dying, we witness a reanimating and taking up again of the inarticulate. It is, as we will see in poem below, the baby, instead, who has attributed to its helplessness the now earlier and seeming enabling story of *as if*. And it is the speaker, almost invisibly, but for the knowledge of Haskell's entire body of work, who is capable of silently cleaving a living embodiment of human language and the dying of the body.

We may first imagine the former as the baby and the latter as the speaker, but indeed, on the living and dying stream of the unsayable, the former is also the speaker, and the baby the latter. Where living and dying are now borne simultaneously through the baby and speaker at once, there is no "as if," no defiant or constructed parenthesis. The baby, as we see, takes over the speaker's earlier stance. In the baby's projected journey of "as if," and ongoing acts of (ultimately limited) self-repair, the speaker himself has grown from the ashes of born retrospection. From the earlier act and plural acts of defiance, into an ongoing flexibility of curl and stance, of living and dying, "fascination," as the title tells us, takes over:

> When tiredness overtakes
> you curl into me
> like a koala bear
> into a tree
> as if every leaf
> were a sap filled with wonder,
> as if I could stand there forever. ("Fascination," *Ahead of Us* 106)

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