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IMAGINARY YOU

by

Joshua Ware

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Grace Bauer

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IMAGINARY YOU

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University of Nebraska, 2012

Advisor: Grace Bauer

Imaginary You is a multi-genre collection subdivided into three sections: “Impossible Motels,” “Imaginary Portraits,” and “Writing through *Nightwood*.” One of the manuscript’s main concerns is the exploration of an in-between space formed by the conflation of real and imagined experience. More specifically, the writing puts pressure on Wallace Stevens’ aphorisms, as stated in his *Adagia*, that “In poetry at least the imagination must not detach itself from reality,” and “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.” Similarly, *Imaginary You* seeks to integrate a classical theory of lyric address into its fabric by abjuring the hermetic, solipsistic, and meditative voice fostered during the twentieth-century by poet-critics (such as T.S. Eliot) and championed within contemporary lyric studies. To this extent, the book is, as R.W. Johnson writes in his monograph *The Idea of Lyric*, a collection of “I-You poem[s], in which the poet addresses or pretends to address his thoughts and feelings to another person”; likewise, the speaker of these poems re-creates “universal emotions in a specific context, a compressed, stylized story,” all the while “sharing...these emotions” with an audience. Moreover, these lyric poems divide their “emphasis among speaker, discourse, and hearer,” so much so that the speaker becomes subservient to the other elements in that he forms his identity by carefully considering both discourse and hearer.

For Tina Brown Celona, who raises all to the first intensity.

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Critical Introduction to *Imaginary You*

1. Contextualizing Pronouns through an Homage

To understand more fully the aesthetic, poetic, and conceptual goals of my dissertation *Imaginary You*, outlining the broader context from which the manuscript developed would be helpful. To this extent, I'll begin with a brief explanation of my first book, *Homage to Homage to Homage to Creeley*, whose composition immediately preceded my dissertation. More precisely, examining pronominal usage in my earlier collection (and my subsequent reaction to it) is of utmost importance.

The first-person pronoun appears exactly three times in *Homage to Homage to Homage to Creeley*, and each occurrence contextualizes this part of speech as an aesthetic or linguistic construct. The first instance occurs in the poem “Blushing to a Concrete City,” where readers encounter the lines “earth's art / 'I' / face rusts” (Ware *Homage* 8); readers find the second instance in the lines “the fluorescent / gloss of art / 'I' / facial / lighting” (39) from the poem “You Sure Have Taken A Shine To That Cowpoke”; and “The Semantics of Progression” contains the final instance: “Un / raveled in id / 'I' / ohms” (44). In all three examples, the first-person singular pronoun a) is placed in quotation marks to indicate and call attention to the word as a contingent construct, and b) is embedded phonetically within another word so as to highlight both its complicity with and subservience to a greater semiotic system. Additionally, by embedding the first-person pronoun within homophones of “artifice” and “idiom,” these lines conflate the concept of “I,” both physically (i.e. the face) and psychologically (i.e. the id), with the concepts of artifice and idiom. In short, language play, in the form of punning, strips the first-person pronoun, and thus the author, of its “privileged moment of *individualization*

in the history of ideas, knowledge, philosophy, and the sciences,” and, instead, situates these moments of the “I,” and therefore the author, as relative components of a poetic discourse in an “unfolded exteriority” (Foucault 890) of aesthetics, language, and fragmented literary citation. The author and the “I” cease to be a determinate, ontological identity or “empirical character” and, rather, become a “function” that fills a “space left empty by the author's disappearance” (892). In some ways, the explanatory notes for the poem “A Kiss Less Consecrated” address this disappearance directly by denying a relationship between the speaker, “the poets,” and the author/“I”: “Why would you assume that 'the poets' are us? We have almost nothing in common” (Ware *Homage* 30).

But if the author, as Foucault claims, is now a function, what, in this situation, is that function and how does it fill the now empty space? In the case of *Homage to Homage to Creeley*, the author-function is a movement that does not so much fill, but navigates through this emptiness in an effort to challenge nominal designations of genre, discourse, and self: a protean nexus of relations “*in a perpetual field of interaction*” (Deleuze and Guattari 360); or, as stated in the explanatory notes for “Disintegration Loops V”: “It was the transference, from one form to another, that made / the ashen sunset memorable...Afterward / it was the absence of all the things they thought they had, but didn't” (Ware *Homage* 38): a continual transference of form producing an absence of presence.

Similarly, the second-person pronoun never appears in *Homage to Homage to Homage to Creeley*. In many regards, this second absence signals that the poems in this collection “have no audience,” and, thus, are “experimental” in the sense that the overall project “has no idea whether it will work or not” (Lyotard and Thébaud 13) because it

does not consider readership actively. Perhaps the book “will find [an audience and] will be liked,” but it is just as likely that it never will. One could, then, argue that *Homage to Homage to Homage to Creeley* dismisses audience entirely. To this extent, it is a book without an audience, just as it is a book without an author. Absent of author and audience, it is a book that does not exist.

While a non-existent text produces certain aesthetic and poetic effects worth exploring, as a writer and thinker, I desired to move beyond the ideas found in *Homage to Homage to Homage to Creeley*. This desire sprang from Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, wherein the philosophers speak of a literature that “move[s] between things,” establishing “a logic of the AND” so that the “middle is by no means an average”; instead, the middle is a fluid continuum “where things pick up speed” (25). Their belief that movement between different or contradictory locations creates new and exciting possibilities directly informed what I wanted in my next collection: an I, a You, and a text founded upon the relationship between these pronouns. Such a text would be, theoretically, in direct opposition to *Homage to Homage to Homage to Creeley*, but the importance of creating it would be the poetic, aesthetic, intellectual, and emotive movement between itself and its predecessor. In fact, the explanatory notes to the poem “[un]identifiable origin, distinctive patterns” foreshadow this alteration when they state: “within a Deleuzian aesthetic, the multiplicity of conflicting processes, relations, and transformations which an aesthetic-object continually enters into takes precedence over 1) particular, nominalistic designations and 2) aesthetic-objects that avoid, or attempt to avoid, passing through and between such mixtures” (Ware *Homage* 62). If we consider my oeuvre to be “an aesthetic-object” unto its own, then, adhering to “a Deleuzian

aesthetic” means that I must continually move “through and between...mixtures” that contain “conflicting process, relations, and transformations.” To do so, then, a radically different type of text would need to be produced so as to facilitate this movement and further promote the “logic of the AND”; this text, of course, is *Imaginary You*.

2. *Toward a Classical Theory of Lyric Poetry*

Given that *Imaginary You* focuses on the relationship between an I and a You, the manuscript falls squarely into the realm of lyric poetry. In his monograph *The Idea of Lyric*, W.R. Johnson's primary designation of the lyric is that it must be an “I-You poem, in which the poet addresses or pretends to address his thoughts and feelings to another person” (3); likewise, the “singer” of these poems re-creates “universal emotions in a specific context, a compressed, stylized story,” all the while, as mentioned, “sharing...these emotions” with an audience (4). But twentieth-century lyric studies and modern poetry criticism consider the I-You dynamic problematic and dispute both its use and its function. In T.S. Eliot's still-influential essay “The Three Voices of Poetry,” the poet-critic champions a meditative poem wherein the “voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody” (96), thus eliminating the “You” all together. Of course, as Johnson notes, Eliot's meditative poem had its precursors:

after Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophical warrant to the supremacy of meditative verse, after the brilliant triumphs of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the young Goethe, Alphonse Lamartine, and Giacomo Leopardi, the meditative lyric, the “greater romantic lyric,” becomes the dominant form in modern lyric. The poet now talks to himself or to no one about his experience, which may or may not reflect emotion in a compressed story

—and he finally tends to dispense with both story and emotion, even as he dispenses with the second-person pronouns, singular and plural. (7)

Regardless of whether Wordsworth and Coleridge had “brilliant triumphs” and their meditations became “the dominant form in modern lyric,” Johnson contends that lyric poetry in the form of meditative verse “grew first ashamed and bewildered, then terrified, by the idea of saying I, forgot how to say You, systematically unlearned emotions and their correlatives and their stories” (15). Far from producing positive outcomes, such a move toward isolation and an “absence of a real audience” thus engendered “an anxiety, a kind of bad conscience, a sense of the poet's irrelevance, impotence, and unreality” (16).

Imaginary You and its corresponding reintegration of the I-You dynamic into the lyric necessarily, then, situates itself as a traditional text in the classical sense. By this, I mean, if the meditative lyric initiated by the Romantics and codified by Eliot emphasizes a hermetic speaker at the expense of the second-person pronoun, narrative, and emotion, then the classical lyric attempts to divide “the emphasis among speaker, discourse, and hearer” (30). In fact, the speaker becomes subservient to the other elements in that he forms his identity by carefully considering both the discourse and the hearer, as well as his purpose for speaking. Quoting Johnson further and explaining the relationship between speaker, discourse, and hearer, we find:

By focusing on what he has to say, on why he is saying it, and on the *for* whom—not so much *to* whom—he is saying it, the speaker discovers the exact, the proper, form for his own character as speaker on this particular occasion, in this particular discourse; and, in fact, the purpose of discourse and the presence of hearer furnish the speaker with enormous power and

vitality. In this sense...he learns who and what he is by yielding himself wholly to the act of discourse. (31)

In the classical lyric, the speaker becomes a rhetorical entity predicated upon the discourse he enters into to, as well as who is listening to him. As far as *Imaginary You* concerns itself, the discourse is love poetry in the form of the lyric poem; but who is “the hearer”?

The hearer, in this case, can be understood as multiple entities, but I found my primary audience for *Imaginary You* in “real”-life. On 12 February 2011, the Colorado-based poet Tina Brown Celona read at a Clean Part Reading Series event; thereafter, she and I began a poetic correspondence conducted primarily through email. Shortly after visiting with her during a mid-March trip to Denver, she sent me an email with the poem “First Intensity” attached to it, wherein she claimed she “had put [me] in [the] impossible position” of responding:

What you said about America
really happened

should you touch your body
to make sure it is there

a symmetry
or asymmetry

wandering into orbit
I feel you like the ocean you feel me

like the moon
none of this is real (Celona, *Re: RE: Did this go through*)

The “impossible position,” to her mind, was my response to a love poem from a woman who I barely knew and, moreover, was already both dating and living with someone. The following day, I received a short email from her; she wrote: “And I was thinking, what if

we meet somewhere between here and Lincoln and (maybe) have sex? I might be able to get R--- to agree to it. I can ask anyway” (Celona, *Re: Subject Heading Change* par 4).

She followed this proposition up the next day with a piece titled “Prose Poem”:

Somewhere between here and Lincoln, NE there will be a motel and people will be having sex in it.

-

Somewhere between here and Lincoln, NE, there is a motel and two people are having sex in it.

-

This is an imaginary motel in my daydream. (Celona, *Re: Subject Heading Change*)

Inspired by these emails and poems, I wrote the first eight “Impossible Motels” and sent them to her on 06 April. All of these motels, which are flash fiction pieces, focus on an I-You relationship that unfolds within a motel room that, in most cases, is the scene of a fantastical or imaginative occurrence. For example, in “Impossible Motel: Room 12B” readers discover: “In the corner of a motel room, an apple flowers” and the bodies of both I and You “become trees.”

These imaginative transformations are of utmost importance to the first set of poems because they engage a concept Celona developed in her first collection of poems and, thus, speak to her about her own poetics; but the transformations challenge the identity of my primary audience as well. “Impossible Motel: Room 37A” states as much when we find that the “forearms” of “You” can be transformed into “intensity”: “A motel room cannot transform your forearms because it is a motel room; a motel room can transform your forearms because it is the real motel room of poetry.” The distinction between “a motel room” and “the real motel room of poetry” is the distinction between a motel room one finds in the “real”-world, a motel room in the imagination, and a motel room in a poem (i.e. “the real motel room of poetry”). As previously mentioned, Celona

addresses this difference between an object in the real and that object as “the real [object] of poetry” in her the poem “A Song For the Moon,” which can be found in her first book

The Real Moon of Poetry:

the moon is more beautiful
later
when i have gone to bed
with my poem
about the moon

with my beautiful poem
about the beautiful moon
in my poem

the real moon looks real
too real for my poem

the moon in my poem
is better
for poetry

the real moon of poetry
is better for me (34)

While, yes, “the real moon looks real,” reality does not constitute anything remarkable; realism, to this extent, is not desired. What, in fact, is sought is “the real moon of poetry” because it makes both the moon in the imagination and the moon in the real “more beautiful,” and thus “better for me.” In other words, the real moon of poetry benefits the poem in the imagination because it is aesthetically superior in its ornamentation; it benefits the moon in the real because, through the emotions produced by the poem, it intensifies our perceptions of and emotions attached to the moon in the real; and, finally, is better for an individual because it offers them a pleasure (or additional pleasure) that would otherwise not have been afforded them without the creation or reading of the poem. Moreover, and in reference to “Impossible Motel: Room 37A,” real objects of

poetry (e.g. the moon, a motel, etc.) effect transformations that otherwise could not occur, and these transformations in poetry necessarily have an ability to then effect transformations in the real. Given the heightened attention to the first- and second-person pronouns within these poems, this also begs the question: what kinds of transformations occur between the I of the real and the real I of poetry, as well as between the You of the real and the real You of poetry?

The notion of I and You as real entities was, initially, a problem I needed to work through. At first, because Celona was my direct audience, I thought of the You in these poem as the Celona of the real. She expressed suspicion over this idea and wrote via email:

When you said that the “you” in the poems *was* me, and I said, I'm sure she represents some aspects of me, and you insisted that she *was* me, I didn't know how to take it. Because how could she be me except by a kind of magic? Unless you *knew* me somehow, without my having to tell you. Maybe you meant that you wanted her/me to be real, or as real as possible, as opposed to more imagined or invented. But why? It's funny isn't it how we want the truth—the reality? How it matters? Because the more real it seems, the more the imagination can build on it. What *is* the relationship of the imagination to reality? (Celona, *Re: here you go*, par 2)

Indeed, what *is* the relationship of the imagination to reality and how were they affecting the poems we were writing to one another. I sent my first thoughts on the real versus imagined pronouns to Celona in an email soon thereafter. Of the You in the “Impossible Motels,” I wrote:

That last point about “you,” as you write in your previous email, was troubling to you, somewhat, or at least you “didn't know how to take it” because how could the “you” be you “unless [I] *knew* [you] somehow, without [you] having to tell [me].” I should probably articulate better, to the extent that I might clarify...what I meant when I said that. First, and I think this bears mentioning, I don't believe any of us contain some authentic identity or core self that *is* who we are; in fact, it is my belief that we “contain multitudes,” as Whitman would say, and these multitudes within [us] constantly mutate, alter, move, and become different...depending on always fluid contexts...This, I think, is important to our conversation because you *have* told me something about yourself; in fact, you've told me many things about yourself. And, to some extent, I think the things you *haven't* mention, since you are...by nature, steeped in self-revelation, reveal even more about who you are as a person...or, better stated, such admissions and omissions reveal one of your persons or identities; or, even better stated, what you write/say and what you don't write/say creates a particular composite identity within the context of our letters, poems, and discussions. I believe, in a previous email, I referred to it as a “persona” I was becoming “enamored” with. Is the “you” of the *Impossible Motels* a definitive, all-consuming, or totalizing version of you? No. But the “you” of the *Impossible Motels* is no less real, or authentic, or whatever than any other “you” that you contain. I wonder how you feel about that? Certainly, the “you” I selected to work with

probably says a lot about a particular “I” building these motels, and I would not deny this in the slightest, but this in-and-of-itself does not negate the you-ness of “you.” “You” *is* you, even if you don't want “you” to be you; just as “I” is I even if I don't want “I” to be I...Another manner in which I conceptualized the “you” as you, and this is where I, perhaps, misspoke, is through a rhetorical lens, in that the “you” of the poem is for the you that is a specific audience. Whether or not you see yourself or identify with the “you” of the *Motels*, I'm building the *Motels*, at least immediately, *for* you. [W]ith an audience in mind, the “you” is you in that the “you” is for you[,] and I, as a writer, would like you to identify with the “you” on some level, just as I would like to identify with the “I” on some level. Does this explain, perhaps better, what I wanted to say or how I was envisioning the “you” and “I”? I hope so, maybe. (Ware, *Re: here you go*, par 2)

While the first half of the above email excerpt addresses the mutability of identity, even when a second-person pronoun addresses a primary audience (and, thus, develops tension within the universal-specific dyad), the latter half of this paragraph echoes Johnson's classic theory of the lyric, in that these pieces are *for* a specific audience and filtered through a “rhetorical lens.” Additionally, since the I was “building the *Motels*” *for* Celona, and my primary goal was to intensify the feelings and emotions we were having, my own identity, the “I” I wanted to “identify with...on some level,” necessarily was bound to alter in an effort to create an “I” she would find appealing and work within the discourse of both love poetry and the lyric.

3. *The Exquisite Truth: Reality and Imagination*

Later in the same email titled *Re: here you go*, I incorporated several quotes from Wallace Stevens's *Adagia*, two of which I use as epigraphs in *Imaginary You*. The first quotation was: "In poetry at least the imagination must not detach itself from reality" (Stevens qtd in Ware *here you go*, par 8); the second was: "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (Stevens qtd in Ware *here you go*, par 9). The first of these quotations interested me because, as I mentioned at the time, Stevens "recognizes, rather explicitly, the bond between the two realms," in that "the relationship between reality and the imagination or poetry and the imagination" (Ware, *Re: here you go* par 13) is not a simple, either/or binary. In fact, Stevens's understanding of reality and the imagination within poetry can be conceptualized through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's "logic of the AND," in the sense that there cannot be one without the other if either is to function well: they must both be present and continually modify one another if a poem is to be effective.

The opening motel provides an example of this symbiotic relationship when readers find the following sentences: "You remove your dress, the black fringed one you wear without irony to weddings, and a host of sparrows exits from the space between your breasts." The "black fringed" dress of "You" was worn by Celona to a wedding "without irony" in the real, but certainly, "a host of sparrows exit[ing]" from anyone's chest is purely a product of the imagination. On the level of the image, then, the confluence of the real and the imaginary is evident. Of course, at the time I wrote "Impossible Motels," we had not met in a motel, so the storyline was a fabrication of the

mind; but the emotional register, desires, and passions they conveyed were real. Thus, while I forward a fictional (i.e. an imaginary) plot, the impetus of the fiction stemmed from an identifiable, specific, and very real emotional context.

The latter of the two Stevens quotes in my email, though, further complicates the relationship between the real and the imagination. The complication arises because, in a certain sense, one must not be aware of what is real and what is imaginary. In the aforementioned email, I explained further:

The [exquisite truth] quote is my favorite, I suppose, because it raises to the level of philosophy and life-goal the concept of self-delusion. But, when self-delusion attains a certain primacy in one's life, it is no longer self-delusion or “fiction,” but a “truth” wherein “nothing else” exists. A dangerous thought to be sure, just look at how such “fictions” manifest themselves in the form of religion and nationalism, for example. Yet, within the realm of poetry and art, there seems to be a particular salvation, to Stevens'[s] mind, within that “fiction,” at least to the extent that he writes elsewhere: “The theory of poetry is the life of poetry. Christianity is an exhausted culture,” and “The theory of poetry is the theory of life.”

(Ware, *Re: here you go* par 14)

To the extent that one initiates a “self-delusion,” wherein what is “fiction” and what is “truth” cannot be readily parsed from one another, the “logic of the AND” holds firm.

Moreover, the self-delusion necessary for fiction and truth to co-exist simultaneously speaks to Deleuze's concept of secrecy that he presents in his “Letter to a Harsh Critic,” which I quote in the poem “bringing you closer to what you speed from” in

Homage to Homage to Homage to Creeley; it states: “I believe in secrecy, that is, in the power of falsity, rather than in representing things in a way that manifests a lamentable faith in accuracy and truth” (Deleuze qtd in Ware *Homage* 28). If “truth” and “fiction,” according to Stevens, are indecipherable in that one must “willingly believe” in a fiction for it to become truth, there must be a disavowal, to some extent, of “faith in accuracy and truth,” or at least of a “truth” that is a knowledge-based and empirical; instead, Stevens promotes a “truth” predicated upon the imagination. Of course, as stated earlier, the imagination works best when tethered to the real: reality AND imagination in both cases.

Yet, it would appear, that when considering Deleuze and Guattari's “logic of the AND,” Deleuze's concept of secrecy, and Stevens's relationship between fiction-truth and reality-imagination, anxiety can form within the intended audience, the residue of which can be found in the previously quoted email (i.e. “That last point about 'you,' as you write in your previous email, was troubling to you, somewhat, or at least you 'didn't know how to take it' because how could the 'you' be you 'unless [I] *knew* [you] somehow, without my having to tell you.”). The “troubling” effect Celona referenced manifests itself in a poem she wrote for me during this time period; simply titled “Poem,” it reads:

You want the real me to be imaginary
and the imaginary me to be real

this frightens the real me
that the imaginary me is only as real to you

as the unicorn in the bathroom
and the swallows in our chests

and the apple tree in the corner
and the daggers of my forearms

and the glow of the fluorescent light
outside the door (*Re: IA*)

Certainly, if someone looks for an “authentic identity or core self” within a lyric poem, one that seeks to achieve “more stability, vis-à-vis identity, and make efforts to solidify themselves in some way,” problems may arise, which in turn may “frighten” the audience or intended You. But if we are to believe in Stevens, Deleuze, and Guattari’s concepts, neither the real nor the imagined can escape one another; there will always be elements of both in lyric: “the real me” (or you) will always contain part of “the imaginary me” (or you), just as “imaginary me” (or you) will always contained part of “the real me” (or you).

4. Pronouns Slide Frictionless: Specificity and Universality

In *Imaginary You*, I address the difficulty of assigning a definitive identity to, as well as escaping the identity of a particular pronoun in the third section of “Watchman What is the Night?” when I write: “pronouns slide frictionless among bodies” (*Ware You* 92). This, obviously, acknowledges in a rather direct manner the protean nature of the pronoun, and the tropes of theater and the mockingbird found within “Writing through *Nightwood*” highlight this characteristic further. Take, for instance, the following: “We [*are*] born of bodies bound from birth to theater. In these words, a mockingbird.” While both the actor and mockingbird are “real” entities, both live through an imagined or copied identity such that they both exist by “slicing the imaginary into equal portions of the real.” Another example can be found in the sixth “Imaginary Portrait,” which reads:

You stand in a desert somewhere
west of Reno and rant about cowboys,
nationalism, and murder. But you also lie

in a budget bed in North Platte, Nebraska
 and watch yourself on a computer screen
 as you stand in a desert of grayscales
 somewhere west of Reno and rant
 about cowboys, nationalism,
 and murder. But you are also words
 in this poem, which is to say
 the joyous confusion of pronouns. (Ware *You* 56)

The “You” in the poem's first sentence refers to Roslyn Tabor's (who, in all actuality, is Marilyn Monroe) final “murderers” rant in the Arthur Miller film *The Misfits*; but the “You” in the second sentence refers to Celona watching *The Misfits* on a computer in a motel in North Platte, Nebraska. Of course, up until the ninth line of the poem, no acknowledgment of the alteration occurs. In fact, “you... / ... / ...watch yourself on a computer screen” conflates the identities of Tabor, Monroe, and Celona purposefully. It is not until the final sentence where the complexity of the second-person pronoun reveals itself: “But you are also words / in this poem, which is to say / the joyous confusion of pronouns.” The “words” (i.e. “you”) of the poem (i.e. the lyric) *are* confusing; but this confusion, the poem posits, should not be a source of anxiety that troubles or induces fright. Instead, we, whether “I” or “You,” should immerse ourselves in a “joyous confusion” that affirms mutable identities and disavows “a lamentable faith in accuracy and truth.” What *Imaginary You* champions, then, is a poetry based upon events in one's life that shift through “some strange parallax altering space / between you and I” in the form of “words which are images / images which are imaginations / tethered to the real”

(Ware 71) as stated in the poem “Portrait.” In this sense, the question that the poem “Portrait” poses later is a red herring: “how many representations of / ourselves are necessary / to capture an authentic identity / when authenticity ceased to mean / anything ages ago, ceased / to exist ages ago” (72); it is a disingenuous question because, regardless of “how many representations of ourselves” we forward, there never will be “an authentic identity,” only “multitudes [that] constantly mutate, alter, move, and become different and differently, depending on always fluid contexts.”

In “Go Down, Matthew,” the penultimate section of “Writing through *Nightwood*,” the final conflation occurs. No longer, though, does the text focus on the real or imagined incarnation of You; rather, the texts entwines the I and the You, as well as the “I” and the “You,” into an impermeable chiasmus, thus rendering the relationship in the manuscript all the more complex. One can find the first instance in the first paragraph of the first sub-section:

I and “I” and you and “you” will never “we” outside of these words, which makes them sacred because they are impossible. The impossible may appear to be theater, even to us, but this is only one perspective of the impossible. Another perspective of the impossible resides in the eternal. (Ware *You* 96)

“These words,” which are part of the field of the lyric, become “eternal” in that they conjoin in an “impossible” manner the first- and second-person pronouns, as well as the real and the imagined versions of both. This, then, is the potential power of the lyric poem in *Imaginary You*: if done well, worlds and identities collapse into a continuum; or, as my *Homage to Homage to Homage to Creeley* foreshadowed in the echoes of Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari, the lyric poem is “the process of becoming faceless,”

wherein the first- and second-person are neither “the subject nor the object, but the movement that takes place *between* the subject and the object: a transitive state: a verb that creates ephemeral and conditional [pro]nouns as effects of its action in highly specific contexts” (Ware *Homage* 35). To reiterate, this is not to be a source of anxiety, but an affirmation of a Whitmanesque multitude, such that:

If you are a myth, then I am a myth; if you are a strange source, then I am a strange source; if you are an invention, then I am an invention. We may never know each other, but we will both remember this: our song can be heard from everywhere because we sing our song for no one. (Ware *You* 98)

A song sung by a “singer” to a “hearer” through the lyric, where both the “singer” and the “hearer” are “never know[n to] each other”; but due to this transient capacity, “our song can be heard from everywhere.” In essence, R.W. Johnson posits a similar condition in the lyric when he writes: “The private and the public, the merely personal and truly universal resist one another, yes; but from that struggle comes lyric poetry, both monodic and choral, at its best” (73). And this, then, is what makes *Imaginary You* more than a series of missives from one lover to another: while initially composed to a specific You, pronouns shift so that determinate identities move toward protean and more generalized pronouns; this shifting expands the audience and allows readers to enter the text and empathize with these pronominal-identities (i.e. the universal and the specific held in tension). Far from miring in the solipsistic quagmire of Eliot's “first voice,” these poems encourage an audience to “identify either with the *ego* (“I”) or with the *tu* (“you”) of the song, or [they] can identify with both almost simultaneously” and become “part of the lyrical discourse” while “witnessing this compressed, dramatic instant, listening to the

words and the rhythms that illuminate it,” moving them to ponder their relation to it (Johnson 72).

Given the multiple identifications the poems produce, it should come as no surprise, then, that in the fifteenth “Imaginary Portrait” we discover the lines: “Your voices / shift red to you, you to red shift / back again, coloring pronouns,” which is an overt allusion to Ted Berrigan's poem “Red Shift” and its lines “I'm only pronouns, & I am all of them, & I didn't ask for this / You did” (516). Both “Alone & crowded” (Berrigan 516), the speaker of Berrigan's poem, as well as the I and You of *Imaginary You*, allow “The world's furious song [to] flow...through [our] costume.”

5. Escaping the Mouth: Instrumentality of the Lyric

More than affirming protean pronouns and the “logic of the AND,” though, Berrigan's poem frames the lyric as a powerful and efficacious device when he writes: “I came into your life to change it & it did so & now nothing will ever change / That, and that's that” (516). The lyric's ability to “change” someone's “life” re-conceives the genre as a pragmatic tool, capable of “real”-world effects that literary critics have taken great pains to disavow. In Rei Terada's “After the Critique of Lyric,” she claims that the “lyric zone of electrification is dissipating along with belief in the autonomy of the lyric object and in the specialness of the lyric mode. I'm relieved to see this and would like to see still more of it” (196). In the introduction of his book *Ends of the Lyric Direction and Consequences of Lyric Poetry*, Timothy Bahti doesn't even bother defending the alleged “worthlessness” of the lyric within the world; instead, he dismisses such pragmatic possibilities outright, stating: “I have scarcely anything to say in this study about such 'ends'—application and fates” because he believes “poems end in their reading” (2). But

it is not just scholars who exult in an impotent lyric mode; certain poets have championed it as well, most notably W.H. Auden's claim that:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
 In the valley of its making where executives
 Would never want to tamper, flows south
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
 A way of happening, a mouth. (940)

Just as Bahti believes that a poem ends with its “reading,” Auden forwarded an argument that a poem “survives / In the valley of its making,” which is to say the “mouth” of the poet, and away from “executives,” “ranches,” and “towns” (i.e. the practical places we live, work, “believe and die in”).

One would not, necessarily, be incorrect in classifying *Homage to Homage to Homage to Creeley*, the book with no author or audience, as this very kind of impotent text that Auden laments and in which Terada and Bahti rejoice. But bearing this in mind, I set out produce a pragmatic and affective text, which happened to be *Imaginary You*. With the composition of my dissertation, I wanted to render tangible effects within the world: for poetry to make something happen; for poetry not just to survive but to create and destroy. In many ways, this desire for a book that would affect the world and people living in it resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's sentiments at the beginning of *A Thousand Plateaus*:

There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made...As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs. We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in

connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge...A book itself is a little machine; what relation...of this literary machine to a war machine, love machine, revolutionary machine, etc...which other machine[s can] the literary machine...be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work. (4)

If *Imaginary You* is a book of love poems in the lyric mode, then it was constructed in, while simultaneously fostering, an assemblage of love between I and You: two bodies without organs filled with sensations that sought to flow into one another. It functioned, then, as a connection between actual bodies, transmitting intensities from one to the other so as to convergence and metamorphose them: the literary machine and the love machine plugged into one another so as *to do work*. This assemblage of literary machine and love machine worked, in the sense that it brought bodies together from across a distance, meeting in motels, fucking, loving, creating relationships, and altering the aesthetics, poetics, and day-to-day lives of two poets and others.

But not all of the effects produced by the composition of *Imaginary You* could be consider pleasurable; it gave rise to the emotional and psychological torment of several people. In the sense that the book's composition produced a struggle between competing individuals for the affections of a lover, the literary machine plugged in the war machine, constructing an assemblage that worked as a weapon against an adversary. To the extent that this assemblage moved outside of the poetic, aesthetic, and literary worlds and into the “Raw towns” so as to foster “busy griefs” within individuals; to linger no longer in

“the valley of its making,” but, instead, to enter into realm of the “executives” whose concerns, as the “Bow Down” section of “Writing through *Nightwood*” states, are “politics, \$, and data”; *Imaginary You* existed as an overt response to a world that has relegated poetry to the margins. No longer content to stand aside passively, these poems, through a confluence of the real and the imagined, employed the mindset of “executives” by casting off non-instrumentality and, thus, “seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (Haraway qtd in Ware *Homage* 33). In other words, these poems return to a world they both escaped from and were shunned by in order to produce pragmatic affects.

One could rightly ask whether or not such an approach to poetry is ethical. I would answer that it is doubtful; but a poet is not an ethicist. This is not to say that a poet cannot act ethically, but any ethical word-action is merely happenstance, just as any non-ethical word-action is happenstance. A poet lives beyond ethics, or so says the final verse section of “God Down, Matthew”:

*You
are not just*

*a myth
maker*

you are also a destroyer. (Ware *You* 98)

A poet, in this case “*You*,” is both “*maker*” and “*destroyer*,” but this making and destroying, as previously stated, is beyond ethics; hence, the poet is “*not just*,” for the concept of justice means little within the poem. What matters are the aesthetics and poetics of a poem and whether or not it is able to produce a tangible action outside the “valley of its making,” regardless of what that action is or how people or groups of

people judge that action. In other words, for it to be a success, one must ask of the poem: does it *work*, in that it *works upon bodies in the world*?

Given that I saturated *Imaginary You* with references and allusions to a plethora of twentieth-century films¹, I thought it apropos to close with a scene from a film that addresses the ethical concerns (or, more precisely, the lack thereof) of a poem and a poet. To this extent, one cannot help but be reminded of Alexander and Ismael's meeting in Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny & Alexander*, in which Ismael shows Alexander how one's imagination can escape the mind and enter the world of the living so as to kill his step-father (i.e. Bishop Vergéus). Ironically, it is the bishop who tells Alexander that the “Imagination is something splendid, a mighty force...held in trust for us by the great artists, writers, and musicians” (Bergman *Fanny & Alexander*). But “trust,” in this instance, should not connote a relationship to integrity, expectation, or hope; rather, “trust” simply means the imagination is entrusted, or put in the charge of, artists, writers, and musicians. It is artists, writers, and musicians’ duty to create art, nothing more and nothing less. Vergéus, a religious man, lives his life by a moral code based upon a Christian mythology; Ismael and Alexander live their lives in an in-between world, fusing the real and the imagined into artistic creations. Let the critic (the priests of literature) connect morality to art in the form of criticism; let the artist create.

But the relevance of the Ismael and Alexander scene in *Fanny & Alexander* is not meant only as an example of the manner in which artists function beyond ethics; it is brings to the forefront the fluidity of identity, similar to the use of pronouns in *Imaginary You* (and thus brings this introduction full-circle as well). When Ismael asks Alexander to

¹ Movies referenced or alluded to in *Imaginary You* are: *Jezebel*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Maltese Falcon*, *The Misfits*, *Les Amants*, *La Strada*, *Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, *The Graduate*, and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

sign a piece of paper, the latter is surprised to find that, instead of writing “Alexander Ekdahl,” he has written “Ismael Retzinky.” About this strange transference, Ismael says: “Perhaps we're the same person, with no boundaries. Perhaps we flow through each other, stream through each other boundlessly and magnificently.” It is no coincidence, though, that the site of this boundless and magnificent flow occurs on a piece of paper, in words written by artists attempting to name names, but, instead, resulting in a “joyous confusion” of protean selves, which itself leads artists to a powerful moment of the imagination affecting the real.

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