

# distance

## The World and John Wieners

[pdf]

Keston Sutherland

No poet in English was ever so destitute of a world as John Wieners. His destitution announces itself in the almost unthinking, because almost unthinkable, reiteration across his poetry of a simplistic utterance, the simple wish for a world played out in innumerable simplifications. A poem called “Physical Wanting” begins: “I write poems for little children / and imagine a world, fulfilled in reality.”<sup>1</sup> The utterance is catastrophically simplistic, because it could not be further simplified. There is no way for Wieners to make it any simpler; but that very fact, again and again masqueradingly acknowledged, is so difficult as almost to be impossible for him to bear. The simplicity of his poetry shudders with that specific pain. “I write poems for little children.” That line, simplified into a virtual sentence by being broken at the end, must mean that Wieners imagines as his ideal readership a society of little children, the most sexually vulnerable individuals whom it is criminal to desire, and fixes on their image in his mind, when he writes; but it must also mean that he actually does write poems to give to real little children as gifts, and either gives them to those children or does not. The line that follows, “and imagine a world, fulfilled in reality”, irresistibly both is and is not the continuation of the previous line. It is, when what I do as I write poems for little children is to imagine a world; but then a comma appears, as if to ensure at least a minimum of prosody by fixing into the line that familiar device called a medial hiatus, and the comma obliges the reader to notice that what the sentence ought to mean is “I write poems for little children and imagine a world, and I am (therefore) fulfilled in reality.” But the sentence is intent on meaning something different; it wants to mean what it sounds like it means. What it sounds like it means is “I write poems for little children and imagine a world that is fulfilled in reality.” The ambiguity is artificial, because grammar ought to be allowed to dictate one meaning for the sentence, and rule out the other; but in the world of John Wieners’s poetry, punctuation is rarely, and then only scarcely, strong enough to perform its ordinary service to meaning, and often it withdraws that service; the comma only looks like it is there, really it is gone; desire for the world that is fulfilled in reality makes the comma seem like a hallucination; and grammar is

grievous and fragile after that loss, and cannot be relied on to dictate meaning, and cannot always even find a meaning to dictate. 'Cocaine' ends:

One can only take means to reduce  
misery,  
confuse the sensations so that this  
Face,  
what aches in the heart and makes  
each new

start less close to the source of  
desire,  
fade from the flesh that fires the  
night,  
with dreams and infinite longing.<sup>2</sup>

The last line of 'Cocaine' ought to be adverbial. The comma that is really there at the end of the second to last line, which sounds like the last line left before there is only one line left, ought to make dreams and infinite longing the manner in which fading occurs; the grammar is the same as if I said "I fade into the light of common day, with natural tenacity." Reading upward beginning from the last line, the last two lines seem to be a single imperative. Fade with dreams and infinite longing from the flesh that fires the night. But the lines sound like they mean something different. They sound like they mean that the night is fired with dreams and infinite longing, that dreams and infinite longing are the stars of the flesh, or that the flesh causes the dark sky to erupt in flames that are more intimate than stars, since stars are too far away and too tiny to see as fire. But continuing to read upward, as if climbing back up from the bathos of that last line, *dreams and infinite longing*, begins to feel confusing, because the second to last line seems to have skewed out of the sentence just at the point when we are to be told what "this Face" will do if the sensations are confused. Up to the end of the third to last line, we have a sentence, or we think we do. One must take means to reduce misery and confuse the sensations so that this face, which is the thing that aches in the heart and makes each new start less close to the source of desire, will do what? Either the verb, *will* or *can*, is missing, and "fade from the flesh" ought to be "will fade from the flesh" or "can fade from the flesh", in which case the verb expressing potentiality has been amputated, so that the fading that ought already to be possible, or that might even already have been happening, is instead disfigured into an imperative; or else nothing has happened to change this set of lines, nothing has been lost or severed from them, and the poem really is what its grammar obliges it to be, a lament split into two discontinuous, incoherent and unrejoinable parts, the first part running down in the ordinary way across the first four lines quoted here, the second part making a new start with an imperative.

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Face,  
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---

fade from the flesh that fires the  
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The imperative, *fade*, is a new start; the grammatical imperative, singularly, is “less close to the source of desire”: it cannot be rejoined to the promise of an indicative verb. *Fade from my flesh* is an imperative irredeemably adrift in what cannot yet be the world.

To be destitute of a world in this poetry is to inhabit a fragile, impaired, unreliable grammar. The grammar must never be— is never by Wieners—raged at for being unreliable, or punitively coerced into an open confession of its dereliction, because it is too fragile to withstand the force of the reprimand. Its transgressions can seem almost to be discreet or innocuous: nothing worse than a comma out of place, or an agreement hallucinated as if in a dream, or an infinitive infinitely long adrift from anyone to address it to, or a future indicative suspended and abandoned. But in truth they are profound and not innocuous transgressions; they build what Derrida in his seminar of March 26, 2003 called “the absence of a common world.”<sup>3</sup> For Wieners, that absence is, positively and inescapably, a catastrophic destitution. The “irremediable solitude without salvation of the living being”, to use another expression from the same paragraph of Derrida’s tenth seminar, is not, in Wieners’s poetry, capable of being made to resemble anything like a transcendental condition of subjectivity; “irremediable solitude” is the disaster of the flesh, the slow, perfect extinction of its stars. The grammar of this poetry is sometimes so weak that the poet has to carry it, or hold it up. The “inflexible injunction”, as Derrida names it, “*ich muss dich tragen*,” I must carry you, which Derrida says is “like the seal of a love that, at the moment of good-bye, of good-bye to the world, salutes or swears to work for your safety,”<sup>4</sup> this injunction is intrinsic to the relation of the poet, John Wieners, to his grammar. What little remains in this poetry of what Adorno called “the strength of the subject”<sup>5</sup> is then taxed by carrying or holding up its grammar, to stop grammar falling apart completely, or shattering, to the point where the subject, the poet, exhausts itself and falls back at least into the fantasy of a tryst, thrilling with narcissistic deflation.

### Deprivation

Roses, lilacs and rains  
 over smell of earth, freshly  
 turned Saturday morning for  
 lovers' walks down strange lanes.

Never again recaptured  
 never again to find, oh how  
 our mind rebels at this, never  
 again to kiss that girl

with amethyst eyes, or watch  
 sunrise over the harbor, never again  
 to visit the grape arbor of childhood,  
 or remove the memory stain

of these events from our firm,  
 budding youth,  
 mad truth of these trysts to lose  
 in time their hidden passion &  
 meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Here the grammar is carried, upheld, helped to endure the compulsorily lyrical spelling out of the mad truth that the poet is destitute of a world, that he exists in “irremediable solitude without salvation,” and grammar does just about make it, it holds out all the way to the end, and the meaning does emerge and is not split into discontinuous and incoherent parts. But the endurance of the grammar is undisguisably fragile, and the poem makes it clear that it is, and that at any moment the verb that matters might come loose, by its deliberately conspicuous overreliance on a positive *edifice* of internal rhymes. The internal rhyme at the end of “Cocaine”—“what aches in the heart and makes each new / start less close to the source of desire”—is just about free-standing, not a scaffold but a single shaft, and seems for that reason almost capable of bearing itself up without needing to call on the poet to carry it. But in “Deprivation,” the internal rhymes are so prominent and prolific that they become a kind of shadow grammar, an edifice not directly of meaning but of the sound of meaning, a scaffold that will hold the poem up until it can be repaired to meaning. “Never again recaptured / never again”; “never again to find, oh how / our mind rebels at this”; “with amethyst eyes, or watch / sunrise”; “sunrise over the harbor, never again / to visit the grape arbor of childhood”; “these events from our firm, budding youth, / mad truth of these trysts to lose”. What, as Derrida would say, we too easily and quickly, too unthinkingly, call “internal” rhyme, is, in the world of John Wieners’s poem “Deprivation.” decisively, emphatically, irredeemably internal; it cannot be made into a completed scheme of external or outward rhyme, rhyme that can be relied on to protect the edges of the lines, to prevent them from ever breaking meaninglessly, rhyme that makes definite and reassuring limits for single verses, binding them

together, and that defines the poem as a whole, granting it form and stability. When Wieners tries, with catastrophic because insuperable simplicity, to make rhyme work like that, to make it external and definitive, it not only comes out wrong, but the effort to make the utterance of the wish for a world end conclusively, in a decisive meeting, joining, and parity of two sounds, exerts such a terrible pressure of gravity against the wish itself that it is plunged down into irremediable bathos, into the alien embarrassment beyond all simplicity.

### Supplication

O poetry, visit this house often,  
imbue my life with success,  
leave me not alone,  
give me a wife and a home.

Take this curse off  
of early death and drugs,  
make me a friend among peers,  
lend me love, and timeliness.

Return me to the men who teach  
and above all, cure the  
hurts of wanting the impossible  
through this suspended vacuum.<sup>7</sup>

The first quatrain struggles to be concluded with an external rhyme, in which it hears the promise not only of definition and stability, but also of metricality, its own emergence into a conventional and identifiable rhythm, a pair of joined up trimeters; but in the effort to carry the lines to that end, to bear them, and to bear with them, until a decisive metrical identity based on parity in sound can be accomplished, the poem turns into an excessively complete, threateningly perfect epitome of the “poem for little children” that Wieners says he writes, or fantasises that he does, in “Physical Wanting.” “[L]eave me not alone, / give me a wife and a home.” Wieners asserted it as a principle of his compositional practice that he must try to say the most embarrassing thing he can think of, presumably so that the poem can be made into a protectively virtual exposure to, or deliberate memory of, the trauma of shame.<sup>8</sup> But in the light of the poems themselves, even that very candid description of a principle, or of a practice that irresistibly repeats itself, *say the most embarrassing thing you can*, seems like the post hoc justification of a destitute lyric, a way of rationalising destitution, after the fact of its recurrence, as a voluntary test of the strength of the poetic subject to shatter itself. The world of John Wieners is too hostile to be inhabited by a poet in command of the grammatical resources of narcissism; it is a world whose destitution, whose actual, never just speculative or transcendental, failure to come back, whatever might be the hurts of wanting it to, can be sustained at least in the form of the promise of a fantasy of love, the

promise of a fantasy of togetherness, agreement, parity and coherence, only by the mutual aid and bearing, the mutual carrying, *ich muss dich tragen*, of a weak, impaired, fragile grammar and an irremediably internal rhyme.

It is a pitiable lyric that sustains this world in its destitution, pitiable even to such a weak subject as the poet, John Wieners, who makes it; but the lyric is pitiable only in an intrinsic bid for erotic beauty and dignity. Part of its dignity is that it is not anxious about the famous distinction of John Stuart Mill between rhetoric and lyric, that rhetoric should be heard and lyric should be overheard. The grammar in John Wieners is fundamentally in no danger of being heard at all, just as the world it might bring back through the vacuum of its own suspense is in no danger of really coming; the grammar covers up for its inaudibility by improvising the means to endure the sensation of inaudible meaning. The world covers up for its impossibility by being sustained as destitution.

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Irremediable solitude is inescapable but not transcendent. "The irremediable solitude without salvation of the living being," Derrida is careful to specify, is not free-standing; it is a contingency of his destitution; it "depends first on the absence without any recourse of any world, [...] in sum of any common meaning at all."<sup>9</sup> This solitude is irremediable, Derrida temporarily concludes, because I cannot avoid thinking and saying that it is. "I must think and say" that there is no world, "according to the most implacable necessity."<sup>10</sup> But just that very necessity, the most implacable necessity, is never transcendent: it requires an activity of the subject, who must produce in evidence the absence of common meaning. There are two ways that common meaning may be made absent. Either the strength of the subject can be used to abolish and refute it, in defensive rage or, more lovingly, in pursuit of a more truly common meaning than any that yet exists, or the weak subject can let go or lose hold of it. One or the other must be done; but if both are then neither is enough: in a strong grammar like Derrida's, defined by its virtuosic command of indefinitely extensible sentences, the world that is not there is always there, back and gone at once.

Wieners's poetry is more simplistic in its destitution. Its absolute simplifications are the attestations of its powerlessness either to simplify or enlarge, its powerlessness either to let go of any more meaning or to break free in pursuit of more meaning. When just this much world is there, more or less is not an option. But the grammar that sustains that destitution and that is itself sustained by the poet is a grammar of contingently inescapable, not transcendent, unreliability. The difference is important, because the contingency of inescapable destitution is its at least virtual opening to a future world; and that opening makes possible, what may be uniquely possible for poetry in a weak grammar, a quality of uncertain meaning that is radically distinct from the positive ambiguities

and compulsory paralogisms at the disposal of a commanding, strong grammar. The “hurts of wanting the impossible” are breaks from and discontinuities with the world, but they are at the same time (and, I will argue, at many other times too, since they are a form of temporal proliferation) the very condition for the radiantly uncertain meaning that is exclusive to the grammar of destitution.

start less close to the source of  
desire,

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fade from the flesh that fires the  
night,  
with dreams and infinite longing.

The grammatical discontinuity that prevents the parts of meaning from being rejoined in the last stanza of “Cocaine” is a fault-line, or flaw; but it is also a promise. The form of promise belongs exclusively to the weak subject who inhabits a fragile, impaired, unreliable grammar. The grammar of Wieners’s poetry is weak. Its discontinuities cannot be made positive ambiguities, in which the simultaneous manifestation of two or more senses is positively ascertainable. Ambiguities of that order, usually the conscious successes of verbal subtlety, are the privilege of strong grammar.<sup>11</sup> They are definitively a coherent artifice. They do not require to be split off from a sentence; the sentence upholds them. Weak grammar, exclusively, makes possible a kind of *splitting* that is basically different from ambiguity. Splitting occurs along a fracture past which a sentence cannot hold out. Splitting affects the meaning of uncertainty. In the case of positive ambiguity, uncertainty is epitomised in the local, particular uncertainty of the choice between two or more meanings, or senses, for a phrase. When Wallace Stevens writes “One is always seeing and feeling oneself,” the uncertain choice between two meanings—either that one is always sensing one’s own presence, perhaps by touching oneself with one’s hands, or else that one is always inescapably in a kind of good health—is sanctioned in its uncertainty by the strong grammar that upholds it as a positive ambiguity.<sup>12</sup> Strong grammar, the grammar of ambiguities, reassuringly sanctions uncertainty, on the strength of its intrinsic meaning. Weak grammar, the grammar of splitting, makes uncertainty, which it is powerless to sanction, actually perilous for meaning. Splitting is the grace of weak grammar. Meaning in peril and uncertainty without sanction together make possible an indefinite quasi-narrative flexibility, or temporal proliferation. Because they are broken up and split off from each other, the parts of the poem seem capable of being reordered. Every discontinuity that might justify the reordering of lines bears the promise of a new start, something radically *not still this* that must come after, that is to be forced into existence by, a break in grammar. Even the most innocuous break in a weak grammar bears that promise. Poems in a weak grammar have new starts in the middle of sentences, or even in the middle of words, where poems in a

strong grammar have only continuities whose occasional uncertainty is sanctioned as ambiguous in a world already made up of coherence, meaning and agreement.

The discontinuity between the first and second lines in the final stanza of 'Cocaine' bears a promise, which cannot be the promise of coherence, but is at least the promise of the possibility of virtually starting again, as if at the beginning, not only of a sentence whose opening imperative is *fade*, but of a new stanza too.

start less close to the source of  
desire,

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fade from the flesh that fires the  
night,

Because the sentence begun in the previous stanza and carried successfully across the gap between stanzas into the clause "start less close to the source of desire" has been let go, another sentence must be found to complete the stanza, or else the end of the poem will not be reached. The subject will not be able to hold on to the poem except by ending it and making it whole. Splitting so near to the end is a crisis that imperils lyric, but it also makes possible a specific grace of lyric. The sentence that arrives at the last moment in a poem to prevent it from forfeiting its end is on that account indispensable. This fact goes some way to explaining the incredible radiance of the last two lines, "fade from the flesh that fires the night, / with dreams and infinite longing," what is infinitely longed for infinitely reached after, a beauty more necessitous even than the indisputable sum of its gravity and its bathos. Splitting has made the last two lines indispensable, in a way that can be heard, indescribably, as a promise kept by lyric, almost any time the line is actually spoken or whispered.<sup>13</sup> The bare minimum of coherence that is granted to any poem for reaching an end, at once the bathos and essence of coherence, depends in "Cocaine" on finding a sentence able to come in at the very last moment. The poem irradiates in lyric its dependency on what is indispensable.

The indispensability of the last two lines is also, strangely, their prerogative to start a new stanza. A new stanza must be started, because the existing one has broken down; or else, lines that may be imagined, or fantasised, to have started already, elsewhere, in another poem—"fade from the flesh that fires the night, / with dreams and infinite longing" is the end of some other poem whose grammar it unbrokenly, or brokenly, continues—can be brought in to be concluded here, in this poem, perhaps just as Eliot brought in the last line from Baudelaire's "Au Lecteur" to end "The burial of the dead," the first part of *The Waste Land*. The origin of the lines, if they are from elsewhere, is absolutely uncertain, and may never be reached in the world; but they can be imagined to have been taken from a poem that could not hold on to them and



brought into a poem that can and will. If the lines may be from elsewhere, they might be allowed still to conclude, virtually, the stanza they have been split from, a stanza whose beginning we cannot know and whose meaning may be profoundly different from the meaning of the stanza they have been brought in at the last minute to complete.

This is a description not of a collage of overlapping planes, but of temporal proliferation. New starts that would not exist in a strong grammar are promised and made, ends are uncertainly multiplied, and the passages of the middle, detached from one or the other limit, a start or an end, become impossible to completely measure out: it is senseless to try completing or ending them. For how long might the sentence that continues into the last stanza have gone on, past the splitting after its latest clause, “start less close to the source of desire,” giving its instruction in oblivion, if its grammar had not been too weak and unreliable to carry it? It is the grace of this poem to ask this radically uncertainly answerable question. Even the reality of the new start seems doubly uncertain, first, because it is impossible to avoid suspecting, albeit defensively, that the grammar is just meaninglessly wrong, a mere aphasic slip, and that no separate category of grammar is required to contain it, but it can just as well be conceived as a momentary evacuation or suspension of the one already general grammar that all poetry has in common, irrespective of subjects; and second, for the more complicated reason that the split running laterally through the stanza and bisecting it to promise a virtual new start (the line that I have violently drawn in above, paralysing lyric into a diagram) emphasizes, to the point where it is unavoidably prominent, a vertical symmetry between the sentence that has been let go and the sentence that is brought in. The symmetry is between the old sentence that cannot now be ended and the new sentence, possibly from elsewhere, that allows the subject to hold on until an at least minimally coherent end. The splitting of “start less close to the source of desire” from “fade from the flesh that fires the night” is also what matches the lines together with a new, abrupt necessity. The monosyllabic imperatives symmetrise the lines into a virtual couplet.

start less close to the source of  
desire,

—————

fade from the flesh that fires the  
night,

On the strength of an uncertain but logical resemblance, the couplet can almost be conceived as an *heroic* couplet. Both lines strain to make up the syllables of a decasyllabic verse, and if “desire” is given three syllables then the first line achieves what it strains after. The limitation of both lines to four beats is irremediable, but that mutual curtailment at least guarantees their metrical similarity, since the lack is identical for both. The grammatical rhyme at the beginnings of the lines, the

symmetry of imperatives, makes a kind of external rhyme in reverse. The symmetry of imperatives is an internal rhyme, perhaps the most decisively and irremediably internal rhyme possible, with both rhyme words pressed against the left margin, as far from the end of the verse as they can get. It is a rhyme almost barren in sonic resemblance, or at least, the resemblance is uncertainly phonetic and nowhere near irresistible: *start / fade*. But it is at the same time an external rhyme, precisely by virtue of being as internal as it possibly could be, as it turns out, since the rhyme words are both at the end, even if it is the wrong end. Words pressed against any limit are by definition external: they define the outer edge of the subject.

The necessity of matching together the first and second lines of the last stanza into what is not and will never be quite acceptable as, but what can logically enough be made to resemble, an heroic couplet, puts the very last line at risk of coming singly adrift. It is extraneous to the couplet that leaves it. Then its isolation transfigures the two previous lines: what is not acceptable as an heroic couplet is an irrefutable erotic couplet, each line straining to fill out the other. The last line is not irresistibly an adverbial account of how fading must be done, but, because it is extraneous to the virtual couplet comprised by the two lines that thus detach themselves from it, it can be a free line, mobile, capable of being fixed on to either one of the previous two lines and of completing either of the sentences equally well. “[S]tart less close to the source of desire, with dreams and infinite longing” and “fade from the flesh that fires the night, with dreams and infinite longing” both work: both agreements are within the gift of the last line. Both sentences support the same grammar and can uphold it. Neither sentence is certainly the right one, but each comes gradually more and more to require the other. This might be the duplicity of grammar, its crude fundamental equivalence, its keenness to be shifted and duplicated; or it might be the promise, indistinctly heard, of the eventual generality of grammar, and even the promise of a world in which a single agreement might be extensible across every distance intrinsic to the division of poetry into sentences. The version of that promise that is at least deeply implicit in every line of poetry in a weak grammar, however difficult it may be to compel it to manifest at the surface of the line, is that every line might yet come singly adrift, so that every line could be attached coherently to every other line, anywhere in the poem. That promise of a grammar of indefinite generality holding together every part of the poem is the extreme promise deeply implicit in every line of poetry in a weak grammar. It is not a promise that strong grammar can make. Indefinite generality of agreement is unimaginable in strong grammar, which is the very principle of its disallowance. Neither is this promise to be heard in poetry which, dispensing with grammar altogether, makes an ironic, because voluntary and easily repeated, spectacle of destitution. The lesson of that poetry is that the actually exercised freedom to put any word next to any other

word is a cynical parody of the strenuously desired freedom to make every line agree with every other line.<sup>14</sup> As Wieners knew, grammar is not reducible to adjacency or to a form of proximity; it must be a reaching out in default of moving forward, to find the other who, equally weak, singly adrift in the same irremediable solitude, is identical to the one who speaks and can be held.

By the Five Dollar Bill

Oh Bo-Bo  
 what are you up to now,  
 I'm in the deserted hotel ballroom  
 and afternoon neighbor-hood cafe;

painful love is never pleasant  
 after the distance and death  
 poetry is the only way we  
 can keep in touch though not  
 enough

love, as you know it in fame and  
 politic's  
 success has not been mine / on the  
 toilet  
 as now you rise from it,  
 in Hindu yoga and Tibetan LSD.<sup>15</sup>

Even the most indistinctly heard, or meaningfully inaudible, temporal proliferation in a weak grammar, its dissemination of new starts, disorders the sequence of futures, so that the very logic of the promise is disarticulated; then as now, its value is no longer determined according to whether it should be kept or broken, but instead, only according to how extreme it is: how far it can reach.

*Keston Sutherland is the author of many books of poetry, including Hot White Andy, Stress Position and The Stats on Infinity, and of Stupefaction: a radical anatomy of phantoms, a book about Marx, poetry and the uses for philosophy of speculatively constructed idiots. His next book, The Odes to TL61P, will be published by Enitharmon in April 2013. He lives in Brighton, UK and is Reader in Poetics at the University of Sussex.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Wieners, *Selected Poems 1958-1984*, ed. Raymond Foye (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1986), 189.

<sup>2</sup> *Selected Poems 1958-1984*, p.76.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign*, vol.II, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

2010), 266; *Séminaire La bête et le souverain II (2002-2003)*, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud (Paris: Galilée, 2010), 366.

4 *The Beast & the Sovereign*, vol.II, p.258; *Séminaire La bête et le souverain II (2002-2003)*, 357.

5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), xx; *Gesammelte Schriften Band 6* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 10. Cf. ND, 277 / GS 6, 274, where Adorno speculates that it is only the subject who can use “his own strength, which he owes to identity, to cast off the façade of identity” who “would truly be a subject.”

6 *Selected Poems 1958-1984*, 158.

7 *Selected Poems 1958-1984*, 125.

8 The statement is from an interview with Raymond Foye collected in John Wieners, *Cultural Affairs in Boston: Poetry and Prose 1956-1985*, ed. Raymond Foye (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1988), 15. For a comment on this practice of composition, see Andrea Brady, “The Other Poet: John Wieners, Frank O’Hara, Charles Olson,” *Jacket* 32 (2007) [online: np.] In an invaluable article that presents material from a number of archives containing Wieners’s notebooks, diaries, letters and drafts of published and unpublished poems, Andrea Brady quotes from a letter Wieners wrote to Olson on the May 21, 1957. “Early in their correspondence, Wieners shamefacedly recounted to Olson a dream in which “Last night, you in a gray silk suit, sitting, very long legs, and someone on my right (smiling, encourage, Duncan?) as I climbed onto your knee Danny Boy. Now that is the most embarrassing six words I have ever had to write.” “Making Use of This Pain: the John Wieners Archives,” *Paideuma* 36 (July 2010), 171. The early appearance of this description in a letter to the poet whom Wieners long worshipfully regarded as his infallible mentor and guide might suggest that its later formulation into the fundamental aim of writing was the conscious repetition *as a poetic principle* of a traumatic bid for intimacy with the master.

9 *The Beast & the Sovereign*, vol.II, p.266; *Séminaire La bête et le souverain II (2002-2003)*, 366.

10 *The Beast & the Sovereign*, vol.II, p.266; *Séminaire La bête et le souverain II (2002-2003)*, 367.

11 The skewings and malpunctuation that Shakespeare put into the mouth of Peter Quince speaking his prologue before Theseus and Hippolyta in Act V of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are not in a weak grammar, because they are underwritten by a strong grammar, the grammar of Theseus condescending to be entertained by these lines that are “extremely stretch’d and conn’d with cruel pain / To do [him] service”, as Philostrate, the master of revels, or “manager of mirth”, warns him in advance (V.i.11.80-81; l.35) Speaking of the weak subjects who are about to perform for them “a tedious brief scene” before they go to their royal wedding bed, Theseus tells his new wife: “Our sport shall be to take what they mistake.” (l.90) Every ludicrous error in the mouth of Quince can be indulged and explained in a grammar that is unimpaired and invulnerable, first by Theseus, Lysander, or another aristocrat at court, then

by the editor of the Arden edition, whose indisputable principle it is that Shakespeare always intended the mistakes he wrote into the speech of poor people. The irony of this underwriting of the weak subject, Quince, is that the strong subject, Theseus, underwrites on behalf of the audience, who will note together with him that “[t]his fellow [Quince] doth not stand on points” (l.118), after reading the footnote (fn.118) in which the editor of the Arden edition of 1979, Harold F. Brooks, explains, in a professionally lucid grammar, that the sentence means both “this man does not take much stock in punctuation” and “this man does not stick at trifles.” *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London: Methuen, 1984),105-110.

12 ‘Prelude to Objects’, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A, Knopf, 2008), 195.

13 The reading of “Cocaine” by J.H. Prynne that is available to be heard online on the Archive of the Now ends in a whisper, not as if to summon the listener into a present intimacy that the poem is incapable of bearing, but as if meaning could be vocally intensified almost to the point of its inaudibility.

14 For a luminous comment on this fact, cf. ‘Her pan click / elb’, J.H. Prynne, *Poems* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2005), 392-3.

15 *Selected Poems 1958-1984*, 187.

world picture 7