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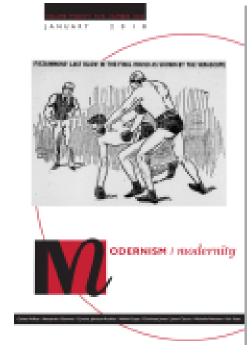

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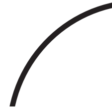

"*Now* someone's talking": Unpunctuation and the Deadpan Poem

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Towards the middle of James Merrill's epic *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982), a spirit first known as 741 has the idea of adding punctuation to a Ouija board, by "passing out [a] kit of tiny tools":

> ' . (!) – , / ?
> *Now* someone's talking. . . .
> Wee scoops, tacks, tweezers, awl and buttonhook,
> Comma doubling as apostrophe
> And dash as hyphen—tinkering symbols known
> Not in themselves, but through effects on tone.[1]

By punning on the biblical admonition that without "charity" one speaks "as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal," Merrill implies that a similar sea-change depends on punctuation: if charity keeps speech from becoming mere noise, these "tinkering symbols" transform the voice on the printed page.[2] In the poem's earlier pages, before the board included such marks, each speaker communicated in unpunctuated uppercase, as if from a distance so vast that tonal variation fell away. A line from the ghost Ephraim typifies that ambiguous tone: "AH MY DEARS / I AM NOT LAUGHING I WILL SIMPLY NOT SHED TEARS" (Merrill, *Changing Light*, 17). Rueful, gleeful, arch, slightly minatory? It's difficult to say.

Although it is evident that unpunctuation alters not only the look but the spirit of any poem, its sources and consequences have not been laid out at length. There are no studies of unpunctuation's workings in specifically modern, comic poetry, my topic here.[3] This neglect may stem from a sense that the effects are

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as varied as the practitioners: what can Don Marquis's satirical *archy and mehitabel* (1916–36) have in common with the wildly allusive quatrains of Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge* (1995)? Although this typographical deviation is used by a disparate array of twentieth- and twenty-first -century writers, the poems they produce are drawn together by the ways that minimalist punctuation changes their voices. It creates a poem usefully described as *deadpan*: it suppresses, plays down, or disguises tone.[4]

This tonal uncertainty first appears at the beginning of the twentieth century and stems from two related concerns, both subjects of recent modernist scholarship. First, the deadpan poem registers what Martin Jay has called modernism's "unprecedented preoccupation with the interior landscape of the subject"; as Tyrus Miller and Justus Nieland have argued, anxieties about a potentially deteriorating or porous self suffuse modernist comedy, especially in the novel.[5] But the undemonstrative, silent poem works in contrast to the "bitter comedy" that Miller has foregrounded as late modernist practice, and to the "inhuman" or "depersonaliz[ed]" comedy that Nieland detects.[6] Similarly, though the deadpan poem shares with other comic modernist modes a "reaction against sentimentality," its allegiances are conflicted. It cannot be readily mapped onto either an humanist or anti-humanist model of comedy.[7]

Instead, the poetic deadpan fuses a nineteenth-century interest in flatness as sign of deep interiority with an early twentieth-century skepticism about depths and subjectivity. Managing simultaneously to imply a self and to avoid dictating its emotions to the reader, it plays a speaking voice against an inscrutable interior. As Lesley Wheeler has shown, voice is often "a metaphor for originality, personality, and the illusion of authorial presence within printed poetry"; dispossessed of the punctuation that helps vivify that voice, the poem is opened to a comic uncertainty.[8] The deadpan poem addresses a bind felt keenly in modernist poetry, as well as in the poetry that will follow: that there are limits to both how one can transcend one's self, and how one can express that self.

Shiftless Modernism

In 1916, a columnist at the *New York Evening Sun* entered his office to find a page of free verse in his typewriter:

> expression is the need of my soul
> i was once a vers libre bard
> but i died and my soul went into the body of a cockroach
> it has given me a new outlook upon life
> i see things from the under side now[9]

Archy, now a cockroach but still a *vers libre* poet, takes up residence in the basement office of the *Evening Sun*. For the next two decades, he reflects on philosophy, the arts, international events, and local gossip in free verse, which Don Marquis—the journalist whose typewriter he borrows—prints.[10] What makes Archy's style distinctive is that he cannot reach the shift key; he has, therefore, no capitals and no punctuation.

(Conveniently for Marquis's purposes, Archy seems not to have noticed that he actually could type commas and periods, which do not require the shift key.) Whether lofty or prosaic, all of his subjects are set in a form that closely resembles the free verse of little magazines like *Others* or *The Dial*.

Archy's creator uses these poems to satirize poetic non-conformism, as Alyson Tischler has articulated: "Marquis offers a parodic account of the invention of the literary modernist: Archy's departure from grammatical rules is not by design and is the result of his misfortune of being reincarnated as a creature who is ill-suited for typing."[11] Through the Archy poems, Marquis makes fun of writers whom he sees as rejecting semi-colons because they want no restraints on their self-expression. In one poem, the *vers libre* bard might complain about the inner lives of his insect colleagues in the basement—"you cant imagine how low down they are with no / esthetic sense and no imagination"—and by its end, might ask his editor to leave some doughnuts behind the typewriter (*Annotated Archy*, 6, 7). The alternately pretentious and literally low topics imply that modernist innovation is a veneer, prose disguised by jagged lines and typographical irregularity. Archy's laborious production of free verse ridicules the experimental movements of the preceding two decades.

The first modernists to slough off punctuation, writing about twenty years before Marquis's satire, did so to expose what seemed pure, vital, and immediate. Almost as soon as punctuation became standardized in nineteenth-century Europe, Stéphane Mallarmé began leaving it out, first from his charged, erotic "M'introduire dans ton histoire" (1886).[12] In an 1898 monograph on the poet, Albert Mockel paraphrased Mallarmé's view:

> [L]et's not make the poem bristle with parasitic full stops and commas. They bother the eyes, they slow the momentum of the stanza, and above all they take away from the lines' appearance of being an absolute thing [*son aspect de chose absolue*].[13]

For Mallarmé, and many of those who would follow him, punctuation compromises the sense of verse as "an absolute thing," a distinct and complete entity. This repudiation goes hand in hand with what Miller has characterized as early modernism's impulse towards the "heroic subjectivity of the innovating artist; the organic convergence of form and content in a symbolic unity set down by the artist on paper, on canvas, in stone" (*Late Modernism*, 45).

The desire to move past compliant, logical marks of grammar to something more essential persisted as practitioners of Imagism, Futurism, Vorticism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and other early twentieth-century movements began to omit punctuation. In May 1913, the militant Italian Futurist F. T. Marinetti, who repeatedly demanded the abolition of punctuation, published a statement predicting that "The rush of steam-emotion will burst the sentence's steampipe, the valves of punctuation, and the adjectival clamp. . . . Sole preoccupation of the narrator, to render every vibration of his being."[14] Marinetti's directive suggests that punctuation has calcified into a set not only of rules, but of stoppers. As Gertrude Stein put it years later, what had "colons and

semi-colons" to do with the vital, continuous process of "writing going on which was at that time the most profound need I had in connection with writing"?[15] In November 1913, Guillaume Apollinaire burst those suppressing valves by removing all punctuation from the proofs of *Alcools*. The omission caught the attention of Anglophone writers, and in June 1914, Richard Aldington approved cautiously in *The Egoist*: "M. Apollinaire has decided to dispense with punctuation, except in certain places. The result is rather pleasing."[16] Mainstream attention followed, such as a 1917 headline announcing "The Passing of Punctuation in a New School of French Poetry"; the article noted that "we are not to conclude that this chariness of commas is due to war-time economy. The passing of punctuation is merely an integral part of a revolutionary program to create a new literature."[17]

American modernists, in turn, found that removing punctuation could heighten a sense of immediacy or of unboundedness; it could jolt as free verse itself could jolt. When Mina Loy leaves all punctuation out of the ecstatic "Parturition" (1914), the absence implies that words alone are essential: "I am the centre / Of a circle of pain / Exceeding its boundaries in every direction."[18] Poets of varying degrees of unorthodoxy followed Loy's example. In "Prison Weeds," published by *Others* in 1916, Adolf Wolff drops the punctuation that could interrupt the unending incarceration he depicts. In the same year, the twenty-two-year-old E. E. Cummings wrote, a little wryly, that "about the end of Sept., I definitely denied myself all punctuation. . . . When I'm strong enough maybe I'll come back to the cute little commas and silly colons."[19] His first experiments in the 1917 *Eight Harvard Poets* anthology reach for the sublime by leaving out niceties like commas: "I will wade out / till my thighs are steeped in burning flowers / I will take the sun in my mouth / and leap into the ripe air."[20] And the title of June Jamison King's collection *Soul: Verse Without Punctuation* (1920) equates freedom from typographical convention with what is most inherent to human identity. Elevated far above mundane talk or rhyme, this kind of unpunctuated line announces itself as the unique creation of the individual, unhampered by custom even in its smallest form.

By stripping away the minute signs of convention, these texts not only convey their seriousness to the eye, but also eliminate minute signals of pause and inflection. Refraining from the slight pauses, rises, and descents of conversation, unpunctuation asks the voice to suspend its natural contours. Whether one conceives of "Parturition" as spoken quietly or at full volume, rapidly or gravely, its lines make a point of rejecting normal, spoken cadences. Instead, they tend towards a monotone, a style of reading that would be increasingly contentious by 1900.

On the one hand, the monotone has a long association with the ordinary, uninterested, and lifeless. The eighteenth-century writer Robert Dodsley, for example, advises his readers to avoid "a *Monotony* in Pronunciation, or a dull, set, uniform Tone of Voice," and Colley Cibber warns against the "dangerous Affectation of the Monotone, or solemn Sameness of Pronunciation."[21] The monotone criticized by Dodsley is so unrelieved even by slight variations as to be dull—and the tediously grandiose style condemned by Cibber seems to be a failure through its very artificiality and solemnity.

But the monotone is also associated with the lofty and forceful: it is the "natural expression of voice when the feelings are under the influence of awe, adoration, sublimity, grandeur, or horror," as one late nineteenth-century elocution manual told students.[22] In this elocutionary tradition, a monotone lifts words out of the ordinary speaking voice into something more powerful and more profound. Katherine Bergeron, studying how French actors read verse around 1900, argues that the neutrality of monotone "gave words the freedom to make their own sort of noise"; monotone became, at the turn of the century, "the basis for a new kind of expression and, more importantly, a new sincerity effect. The poem ultimately became more sincere as the goal of declamation itself shifted from the expressive to the merely expressed."[23]

This neutral way of reading coincides with the rise of impersonal poetry, which was gaining traction in the early decades of the twentieth century. As Mark Morrisson has pointed out, the concept of a "pure" voice was central in "modernist literary circles"; for modernist critics like Harold Monro, "bad reciters—often equated with actors and elocutionists—are faulted for imposing their personalities onto poems, and for not having the faculty of 'self-repression.'"[24] Bergeron, similarly, relays how Léon Brémont, author of a 1903 treatise on the reading of poetry, cautioned his readers to avoid the *manie d'extérioriser*, the *acting out* of every emotion with theatrically varied tones.[25]

While turn-of-the-century practices of reading aloud varied widely in actual performance, the principle behind them seems similar: to resist letting any seemingly external gesture or interpretation impose on the poem. When W. B. Yeats, in a 1907 essay on the reading of poetry, praises the "subtle monotony of voice which runs through the nerves like fire," he likely has his own chanted, extremely stylized readings in mind; his recitations, which used pronounced rhythmical units and a limited range of tones closer to song than to monotone, were nevertheless worlds removed from the cadences of realistic, expressive speech.[26] While disparate in subject and broader style, these aesthetically forceful turn-of-the-century performances—whether a student declaiming Milton in 1880, Sarah Bernhardt reading François Coppée in 1903, or Loy reading her own work in the 1920s—shared a turn to manifest neutrality over anything that might be construed as acting.[27]

In his study of the pure voice, Morrisson quotes a letter (from Francis Macnamara to Monro) that speaks of "actors turning verse into prose."[28] Such a phrase—in which effusion deforms poetry into something more ordinary—confirms a sense that a poem must not be eclipsed by any individual human emotion. This style of recitation seems to stem from a belief in the power inherent in words chosen by a creator and needing no supplement: for these authors, personality can and should defer to what is set on the page. The conviction implied by this monotone recalls how early modernism valorizes "heroic subjectivity of the innovating artist," to return to Miller's phrase; the ideal of a neutral, flat, pure voice entails a kind of confidence in both the art and the artist. Its aspirations also recall Gillian White's description of a slightly later but equally idealized objectivity, a "vision of writing's release from the subject's controlling presence and, as a result, of the subject's release from the mess of self-involvement, inattention, and instrumental uses of the world in its alterity."[29]

Before the experiments of the early twentieth century, an audible gulf of registers reliably separated the powerful, pure monotone from its duller, unintentional relatives. But around 1900, generalist magazines begin to allude to a poetry monotone less favorably. One account of an earlier salon reading pointedly remembers John Ruskin "enunciating every line [of a poem by Scott] in a way which many of our fashionable unpunctuating reciters would do well to imitate."[30] The archly deflationary tone of that comparison can also be detected in a 1917 union dispatch's passing mention of "the poetic monotone in which that verse is chanted by the elect."[31] We can sense in these remarks an opposition to the ambitiously neutral, unrealistic way verse is being read. In the mainstream consciousness, it seems, the stirring monotone has begun to approach the dull, disparaged, accidental one, at least at moments. Perhaps uneasy with its own attempts at potency, the monotone subsides and flattens; what is initially seen as a way of escaping the self—or of capturing the self's most profound words—comes to seem an affectation. A pure voice, like an integral self or an objective self, may not be as sealed off and impermeable as one hopes.[32]

These opposite poles of monotone share a lack of control over affect; both are without the conventional ability to move up or down a register. The vatic cannot descend, the flat voice cannot rise. The monotone of these readers, dryly referred to by the lay publications I quote above as the "fashionable" and "the elect," may be taking to an extreme a version of the "sincerity effect" Bergeron mentions ("Melody and Monotone," 48). A refusal to dramatize is not far from a refusal to entertain one's audience, which in turn is not far from a refusal—or failure—to communicate.

Flat Voices

I have dwelled on the doubled seriousness of early unpunctuated texts—of revolutionary manifestos and seer-like utterances—because their monotones continue to hover around the comic unpunctuated poem, creating an iridescence between the oracular and the bathetic. Even manifestly chatty poems call up the ghost of an unvarying voice. On the one hand, the unpunctuated lines that Marquis published in *The Evening Sun* look like Loy's and sometimes briefly evoke a similarly lofty monotone. On the other hand, their syntax and diction, which resemble that of prose, invite a less impressive, less sonorous style of reading. One post, sent from an ocean liner, explains how a shipmate overwhelmed by "a paroxysm of vers libre . . . from his very / solar plexus" knocks the cockroach into the ocean:

> and
> knocked me overboard as i
> fell i screamed loudly poet overboard
> but either the voice of one small
> cockroach was not heard in the
> december breeze or else
> everybody was glad of it (*Annotated Archy*, 156)

That tiny scream of "poet overboard" is lost even on the page; it is deprived of the quotation marks that would set it off from the narrative and of the exclamation point that would make it resemble an actual scream. Such deprivation is crucial to the poem's comedy. No matter how outraged, despairing, or exultant, Archy has no exclamation points; no matter how reflective his mood, he has (according to Marquis's conceit) no commas with which to pause and none of the implications of logic or nuance signaled by colons. Expression may be the need of his soul (he mentions his soul twice in the first three lines of his first dispatch), but his means of expression have been severely limited.

Bereft of the notation of realist speech, the expressions of this soul—the voice of a lyric or vatic *I*—jam up against the constraints of language. Archy's poems materialize only with great effort, as the poet leaps from key to key, butting his head against each letter. His soul's need to express itself is comically bound up with textual production: "my ego in finding a voic[e] / is making my cranium sor[e]" (7). Every pounding of a key is a physical feat, and a comic blow to transcendence: "i have to / hit every letter so hard that i / am afraid i will get / concussion of the brain and / my literary style will suffer" (143). This resurgence of the physical recalls Henri Bergson's theory of the comic in *Laughter* (1900); we laugh when we see "something mechanical encrusted on something living" or when something "*calls our attention to the physical in a person, when it is the moral side that is concerned*."[33] In playing the pretensions of the ethereal soul off the mundane act of hitting twenty-six keys over and over again, Archy's verse taps into Bergson's corrective laughter, the laughter that has dominated much of the terrain of comic theory. Marquis and his conservative readership laugh at the aspirations and ineptness that they feel are inherent to minimal punctuation.[34]

The idea of the free verse poet trapped in an insect's body is emblematic of how the voice is trapped on the unpunctuated page. As minimalist punctuation makes its way into comic territory, it exploits the several monotones described above, evoking both their seriousness and their lack of control over inflection or affect. Marquis's burlesque, though grounded in animus, has come to be funny in a way that is not contingent on mockery; much of the pleasure in these lines derives from something more elusive and more wayward. It stems from uncertainty: how does one read these lines, whether aloud or in one's head? Does one supply the exclamation points that Archy cannot reach despite his best attempts, or does one respect the flatness implied by typography? What tones lie behind these stripped-down words?

The uncertainty of such a run-on monotone animates Cummings's "nobody loses all the time," first published in *is 5* (1926). Cummings tells of an uncle who "was a born failure"; as its third and fourth stanzas relay,

> my Uncle Sol's farm
> failed because the chickens
> ate the vegetables so
> my Uncle Sol had a
> chicken farm till the
> skunks ate the chickens when

my Uncle Sol
had a skunk farm but
the skunks caught cold and
died and so
my Uncle Sol imitated the
skunks in a subtle manner

or by drowning himself in the watertank[35]

Rather than having line breaks support the syntactic units, Cummings throws his clauses into a chaotic series of enjambed run-ons. Insignificant parts of speech appear where they would usually receive stress: the lineation works against phrases' natural expressive contours. Digressions become level with main points, each clause and phrase demanding the same weight.

The elocutionary challenge of "nobody loses" brings up a concept important to unpunctuated poems: the absence of punctuation is not simply an absence of notational cues, but a signal announcing that the reader is being actively deprived of such cues. Punctuation is far from a crystal-clear means of transcription; it generally signifies an impression of or gesture towards speech. Its verisimilitude allows the reader to speak or imagine the expected contours of a voice. By contrast, a lack of punctuation does not simply leave us without cues; it tells us to read in a monotone. This command is difficult. It is almost impossible to read Cummings's lines without occasional inflections, pauses, and emphases. While vatic poems have already renounced a realistic speaking voice, and can therefore sustain an approximation of a monotone, unpunctuation is a challenge for poems that would usually be spoken more conversationally, such as Cummings's, where skunks "c[atch] cold."[36]

Comic unpunctuation creates a skirmish between the ideal monotone indicated typographically and the reality of the intonation-seeking human voice. Beyond serving as a reminder that a spoken poem is never quite the same as what is on the page, the lack of neat correspondence between typography and sound encourages us to *make up* a way of reading: failing each time to read in an actual monotone, we must seek, each time, a compromise. Lisa Siraganian's interpretation of Stein's attitude toward commas is relevant here: "Because commas make 'you stop and take a breath but if you want to take a breath you ought to know yourself that you want to take a breath,' [Stein] decides to eliminate commas in her prose. . . . Commas, in other words, unnecessarily attempt to dictate the literal experience of reading by telling you exactly when you need to inhale more air into your lungs."[37]

This idea—that by eliminating commas, a writer refrains from dictating—draws us nearer to the essence of comic unpunctuation, interpretive uncertainty and freedom. Nonexistent punctuation, to draw out Stein's assertion further, leaves much of one's reading undictated. Inhalation, inflection, and pacing are left open in "nobody loses all the time," too; whoever reads it must keep moving along, like the unlucky uncle, until the poem's end. Although the final stanza's narrowing lines do seem to ask the reader to slow down (in a comically visual enactment of a ritardando), the ending remains so casual as to happen in parentheses:

> i remember we all cried like the Missouri
> when my Uncle Sol's coffin lurched because
> somebody pressed a button
> (and down went
> my Uncle
> Sol
>
> and started a worm farm) (Cummings, "nobody loses all the time," 237)

To see what is gained by losing punctuation, we need to put it back in: a period just after "started a worm farm)" would signal a definite conclusion. It would say, *here's the joke; you have all the information you need; now your voice can round off this story*. That directive, in turn, would deaden the openness of the poem, the inability to be certain whether this voice is jaded or garrulous, knowing or naïve. A concluding period would seem nearly sententious, when compared with Cummings's printed text, which makes no production out of ending, and does not underline its final joke.

Tonally unstable, unpunctuated texts like "nobody loses all the time" deploy several forms of comedy at once. They can imply comic ineptness, or incompetence: *I'm writing a run-on sentence because I don't know how to punctuate*, or *I'm talking in a monotone because I can't make my voice expressive*. These texts can also suggest comic unruliness: *I'm flouting every rule about commas*, or *I'm speaking in a monotone despite every elocutionary precept telling me to do otherwise*. They can flout critics who wish that "[Louis] Zukofsky would more often give us the minimal guide of punctuation, since nothing seems to be gained by dispensing with it."[38] And under these intermingling categories of comic unpunctuation lies a category that encompasses them: that of comic inscrutability.

Blank Faces and Bottomless Interiors

The facial equivalent of a monotone is a deadpan look. After the term *deadpan* came into existence in the late 1920s, the two modes were repeatedly linked with each other in film reviews, literary criticism, and guides to public speaking. One 1949 handbook on air traffic procedures makes a still more overt equation:

> A mechanical voice is as dull as a deadpan face. You can make your voice warm and human by thinking of what you are saying, saying it clearly and pleasantly, meaning it, and above all, by wanting it to be understood and well received.[39]

These modes still accompany each other in comedy across genres, where a blank face is often accompanied by a flat voice; voices that don't change pitch or pace, and faces that maintain one neutral expression, have renounced two of the most prevalent forms of nonverbal language. The monotone's lack of any variation in pacing or pitch declares itself to have no emotion, no reaction, and perhaps no regard for communicating at

all; in this declaration it echoes the deadpan's lack of interest in being "understood and well received." Sometimes the deadpan's indifference to expression tilts towards insouciance or dissimulation; at others, it borders on the louche.

We can now begin to articulate how deadpan—as a broad category that encompasses theater, narrative, poetry, and film, among other genres—evolves at the beginning of the twentieth century. Initially, its withholding of signals was a defensive strategy, useful on the precarious nineteenth-century frontier. Randall Knoper has laid out deadpan's early value as "a protection, a shield for [one's] inexperience, ignorance, fear, or gullibility" or as "a weapon, a tool of deceit that might enable one to win at poker, or to trick another, or to shame him."[40] And even before the affect had acquired a name, Constance Rourke had described it in her figure of the Yankee peddler, whose "mask, so simply and blankly worn, had closed down without a crack or seam to show a glimpse of the human creature underneath."[41] That impulse—to have the better of one's interlocutor by suppressing any sign of what one feels—turns from defensiveness to playful aggression in Sacvan Bercovitch's account of humor in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). For Bercovitch, deadpan "denies all claims of the normative, and so refuses to indicate how the listener is supposed to receive the story (except as funny in *some* way). No signals are given—no winks or smiles . . . no changes of attitude, bearing, or expression."[42] Moreover, deadpan can take the reader as its foolish object:

> [A]ll clues are repressed, strategically concealed in the flow of humor. Thus the narrative centers on the listening or reading audience rather than on the gull in the tale. Or more accurately, *we* are the gulls in the tale; the larger text, so to speak, includes its reader or listeners as the suckers. (Bercovitch, "Deadpan Huck," 91–92)

The reader as someone who has purchased a lame horse, or been cheated in cards, is here deceived and made the eventual butt of a joking tale; in Bercovitch's memorable reading of deadpan, the reader's cluelessness is itself the primary target. Similarly, Nieland's study of *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) brings out a mode grounded in authorial refusal and readerly bewilderment: because Nathanael West "regularly refuses to provide the affective codes that might give his reader a clue about how to feel," "our laughter . . . is foreclosed—stalled by the scene's suspended presentation as neither fully proximate, inviting sympathy and pity, nor sufficiently distant, allowing a consoling disidentification" (*Feeling Modern*, 196). Jane Arthurs suggests that deadpan continues to be a defensive or even aggressive technique in standup today, when it is "used by male comics to establish their authority" over the audience.[43]

These readings speak to a deadpan that is not simply neutral but motivated by the desire to shut out, disconcert, or confuse. But as Knoper's exploration of popular and literary performances goes on to show, by the late nineteenth century, deadpan on the stage developed a nearly antithetical component. Although it continued to "echo its origins" in, among much else, "status rituals and humiliation anxieties,"

> it grew to embody a quite different meaning as it became a privileged mode of psychological spectacle, "revealing" through states of unselfconsciousness a quiet subjectivity suited to a domestic drama, and thereby reaffirming a version of integral interiority and psychology against the disseminations of masking and calculated posing. (*Acting Naturally*, 57)

Knoper's analysis of deadpan's transition focuses on how the comically expressionless mask began to shift its meaning "from the signs of calculation to those of sincerity" in later nineteenth-century American domestic comedies (58). But "the pockets of trouble and difference" that he discerns in these deadpan performances—those of stoic dissimulation and stoic authenticity—became even more vital in the twentieth century, at a time when traditional conceptions of the self were threatened (73). We can see this change both in the unpunctuated poem and in the face that has defined modern deadpan, that of Buster Keaton.

In James Agee's memorable description, Keaton "was by his whole style and nature so much the most deeply 'silent' of the silent comedians that even a smile was as deafeningly out of place as a yell."[44] Although his body often registers preoccupation, confidence, or surprise, no emotion is *announced* as an emotion on his grave, stoic countenance. The camera returns again and again to a face at odds with what is happening around it, or even to it. Keaton's blank expression presents a pointed contrast to the virtuosic but relatively exaggerated smiles, glares, open-mouthed stares, or winces of other early film actors.

Deadpan parts ways with comic modes in which a moment of danger produces a look of terror, a stroke of good luck translates into a broad grin, or the sight of an attractive person elicits a simper. Those manifestations risk reducing the performer to an automaton that produces a predictable visual reaction whenever data is fed in. At the same time, explicitly demonstrative comic modes (and their later developments, like the laugh track) risk reducing the audience to a similarly automatic consumer, who smiles and laughs almost on command. Much of Keaton's appeal lies in his not following that logic and not inflicting it on his readers. In part, he takes to an extreme the principle that a joke is more enduringly funny if the performer does not announce his or her own amusement. In contrast to most performances by Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, or Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, deadpan hinders complacent watching; it encourages a more tentative mode of attention.

A similar idea exists for the printed page. Theodor Adorno dismisses exclamation points for having become "gestures of authority with which the writer tries to impose an emphasis external to the matter itself."[45] That typographical imposing of emphasis and meaning can resemble the performance of actors who convey, reaction by reaction, their responses to plot developments—and what those responses should be. Punctuation tends to confirm and reinforce a line's tonal implications. For example, the wit of Lorine Niedecker's "Poet's work" (in which her grandfather tells her to "Learn a trade," and she learns "to sit at desk / and condense") becomes more interesting, to my mind, once Niedecker deletes the periods that had ended each stanza of the 1963 publication.[46] When "Poet's work" appears in *T&G: Collected Poems, 1936–1966*, the

final, unpunctuated realization that there is "No layoff / from this / condensery" does not risk becoming a punchline or becoming smug (Niedecker, *Collected Works*, 194). The resistance and invitation of deadpan is set in motion by the unpunctuated poem: these poems do not nudge their reader. Siraganian's words about Stein are helpful here: "[T]he absence of seemingly helpful punctuation is not exactly intended to indicate hostility toward the reader. Instead, [Stein] describes a stance of carefully motivated disinterestedness toward the reader, which is critically different" (*Modernism's Other Work*, 31). In other words, Stein gives her reader freedom, though sometimes that freedom is so wide as to be comically baffling.

By refusing to impose, Stein's prose invites—and so does Keaton's blank face. Much of the pleasure of this deadpan is to see the frozen face and consider, in the same moment, the almost infinite array of thoughts and feelings that could be percolating behind it. Several critics have pointed to this move inwards, and to how Keaton's unreacting face invites the reader's gaze. The very lack of expression on Keaton's face asks the viewer to imagine its untold thoughts; the artist Gary Stevens, for example, describes watching Keaton as "looking at this extraordinary *thinking object* . . . you can see him solving problems." This deadpan, according to Stevens, "throws the responsibility for the reading onto the audience"; the actor presents "as an object that can be read in many ways."[47] Christopher Bishop perceives that same avoidance and resultant invitation: "There is in his films always something withheld, a little turned away from the audience, the nature of which is open to conjecture," and Gilberto Perez notes that "[w]e never get the feeling that he's looking at us: the effect, instead, is of our looking into him."[48]

On this point—that blankness can call attention to its own interior—the associations of both Keaton's face and the unpunctuated poem confound the most frequent connotations of deadpan. This mask contrasts with the one Rourke describes, which hides any "glimpse of the human creature underneath." While her image of an utter wall exemplifies the deadpan of much twentieth-century fiction, it also suggests what makes Keaton's face and the face of the deadpan poem differ. These ambiguous, tonally open texts are sometimes more inviting than an obviously cordial, ingratiating, revealing speaker might be. The monotone and deadpan evoked by unpunctuation kindle the process of asking, how was that remark said? What is behind that face? What is that expression, or that tone? Unpunctuation destabilizes tone, and that destabilizing, in turn, suggests but does not spell out the depths underneath it; once the veneer of established tones has been fractured, one thinks twice about how one reads.

This undemonstrative mode exposes a less-acknowledged modernist response to a sense of a minimal, weakened self. Tyrus Miller has suggested that late-modernist laughter, "itself a kind of spasmodic automatism only marginally distinct from the laughable mechanism of our embodied existence, can help serve to convince us that a self, however minimal, is still there" (*Late Modernism*, 25). Deadpan, in one view, could not be further from this laughter—there is no manifest physical reflex or sensation for the subject, nor for any viewer. Rather than contort and stiffen up the self to protect a subjectivity under threat, deadpan goes silent and blank. But as we have seen, its comedy stems from a similar impetus. And it shares modernism's wariness of

"rapacious mechanisms of identification that propel affect so quickly from intimate to abstract collectivity, coterie feeling to crowd behavior," to use Nieland's phrase (*Feeling Modern*, 21). The deadpan resists such confident identification, in both senses of the words: it eschews conclusive labelling, as well as overpowering sympathy.

The deadpan poem anticipates Rochelle Rives's idea of impersonality as not simply distancing but engaging; for Rives, impersonality "is a theory of engagement, enabling forms of connection that both radically challenge authority and simultaneously sustain it" and "an aesthetic that . . . dissolves boundaries between individuals and progressively challenges the very meaning of human particularity and literary form."[49] For the writers Rives takes up, a muting or removing of personality enables less hierarchical interactions; the deadpan poem destabilizes, pursuing a comic version of the same end. Its refusal to spell out tone and even meaning is not only provocative, subversive, or impishly unhelpful. It can also be an invitation to read with generosity, conscious of alternative attitudes, tones, and voices.

This tonal uncertainty appears vividly in the work of Frank O'Hara, though his voluble, sociable poetry would seem a great remove from the wordless deadpan of Keaton. While the underpunctuation of "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul" (from *Lunch Poems* [1964]) most immediately suggests how the speaker rattles on informally, without the hierarchical relationships implied by networks of semi-colons and commas, it also transforms tone and meaning.

> I wish I were reeling around Paris
> instead of reeling around New York
> I wish I weren't reeling at all
> it is Spring the ice has melted the Ricard is being poured
> we are all happy and young and toothless
> it is the same as old age
> the only thing to do is simply continue
> is that simple
> yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do
> can you do it
> yes, you can because it is the only thing to do
> blue light over the Bois de Boulogne it continues
> the Seine continues
> the Louvre stays open it continues it hardly closes at all[50]

It would make little sense to read O'Hara's long, rapid lines in an oratorical monotone. But despite their casual diction and generally forthcoming air, they retain traces of the affectless voices to which we've been listening. Just as Keaton plays his sad, blank face against his active eyes, tilted chin, or more animated legs, the deadpan poem sets a monotone against lifelike, animated speech. And just as deadpan gets some of its effects by setting an absurd or slapstick scene against a unsmiling demeanor, unpunctuation's conjuring of solemn elocutionary practices jostles against its workaday, less-than-sublime subjects.

O'Hara's unpunctuation counters potential exaggeration by not letting the reader halt momentously at any point. Punctuation would give one permission to add dramatic heft to some lines, and to linger on others for contrastive emphasis. Instead, "happy and young and toothless" (playing on the more customary "happy and young and beautiful") does not get to be an announced joke; it does not puncture as much as it might. Jokes are usually sealed up at the end with a click, but O'Hara's gestures at jokes do not have that click; the absence of stops forbids, above all, the underlining of something ironic, absurd, or otherwise comic. Adding two momentum-arresting commas to create "It is Spring, the ice has melted, the Ricard is being poured," for example, would tilt these phrases toward something more stagily jubilant. Instead, O'Hara's unpunctuated lines balance effervescence and unease, engagement and distance, forthrightness and indirection.

By making the lines a little ungainly, underpunctuation also offsets what might seem bouncy affirmation; instead of the stage-makeup pointing of "The Louvre stays open! It continues—it hardly closes at all," the poet seems to be holding his pen in a fist as a child would when learning to write: "the Louvre stays open it continues it hardly closes at all." It is not clear how playfully, caustically, or sincerely O'Hara repeats his declarations. Nor is it certain when his tone shifts between the wistful "I wish I were" to the self-fortifying "it is Spring"—nor if those are the adjectives one can most assuredly use for his tone. Because the sentences slide into each other with no stops, there are few crisp, precise, ironic contrasts; the contrasts are muted, and made porous. Between "happy and young and toothless" and "it is the same as old age," there is no logical semi-colon ("We are all happy and young and toothless; it is the same as old age"). Nor is there the pronounced surprise of a dash: "and toothless—it is the same as old age." There is certainly not the decisive stop of a period, nor the trailing off of an ellipsis, nor the theatricality of an exclamation point: "We are all happy and young and toothless! It is the same as old age!"

Here, sentences, clauses, and phrases come to a seeming grammatical end, only to be denied the punctuation that would confirm them. Without the punctuation that establishes a moment's pause or fluctuation in tone, these lines seem to hang suspended or to slosh against each other. When a crack forms between import ("is that simple[?]"—perhaps a doubtful or confused query) and presentation ("is that simple"—not so much asked as declared), traces of a monotone seep in. Those three words on a line with no question mark trouble one's instincts about or habits of emphasis: if one has not been given the expected mark, what can one assume about intonation otherwise? In a regularly punctuated poem, it would be normal to choose a word to italicize aloud: *Is* that simple? Is *that* simple? Is that *simple*? But once the predicted tonal notation is gone—as it is gone also in Cummings's "nobody loses"—its certainty is gone. And one cannot give an interpretive stress to one of those three words without acknowledging that one has chosen one possibility of several equally valid ones.

The conflicted senses of O'Hara's lines recall the openness that Christopher Ricks hears in Eliot's equivocal (and often sparsely punctuated) lines. The poet's way of "arching a tonal reservation against the sound of sense" derives from an idea of wit that

recognizes, in Eliot's phrase, "other kinds of experience which are possible."[51] Ricks's general description of how an opaque tone is "arch[ed]" against a clearer one (and of how one way of reading therefore strains against another), helps provide a way into understanding the comic appeal of the deadpan poem, whether one that is manifestly opaque or only glimmering with irresolution around its edges. The flat, self-effacing voice in which Eliot often recorded his poems—the "studied blankness," as Ricks puts it—avoids claiming or demanding a single, decided meaning, and avoids above all the expected, predicted tone (*Eliot and Prejudice*, 182). And although Eliot's mention of the "other kinds of experience which are possible" refers specifically to the wit of metaphysical poetry, a similar awareness informs the modern poem: the knowledge that one's own experience or perception, no matter how vivid, is not the only one, makes itself felt through lines that are tonally or semantically ambiguous. It is the opposite of a script that gives directions, such as the parenthetical adverbs called *wrylies* by screenwriters.

Is this deadpan? Is *this* deadpan? Or: why should it be funny at all? Most fundamentally, unpunctuation is a reminder of other possibilities. Several varieties of expressive, relatively light punctuation could fill the marked gaps where O'Hara's nominal cues should go. If we choose to read "is that simple" with a question mark at the end, in doing so we must recognize that identifying a solitary, correct tone cannot in fact be done. Instead, this punctuation asks us to keep readings in equilibrium; it arches the jubilant against the flat or skeptical. It asks the reader to hear and read in another person's tones, emphases, and cadences, despite the impossibility of doing so. To realize that one cannot definitely establish a tone or its underlying attitude is to recognize another voice as possessing a depth as multiple and underarticulated as one's own.

This style draws near to the concept of deadpan offered by Donna Peberdy, in a discussion of Wes Anderson's films. Building on Knoper's idea of deadpan's "doubleness . . . between an intentionally blank face and idiocy, or between cunning and naïveté," Peberdy emphasizes another facet of that doubleness: the deadpan of Anderson's characters shows their "incapacity for expression rather than [their] indifference."[52] For Peberdy, deadpan "is certainly suggestive of dispassion and disengagement but behind the deadpan, or monotone voice or lifeless body, are emotions that the character struggles to express" ("'I'm just a character,'" 59). The deadpan style as perhaps unwilled, and as potentially holding unarticulated emotions below its surface, suffuses not only *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), but O'Hara's "it is Spring the ice has melted the Ricard is being poured." For this poem and many others, deadpan taps into the liberal, freeing uncertainty described by Siraganian, Ricks, and Wood. It begins a process not of simply labelling an emotion and producing the corresponding mental or actual voice, but of seeing a comic, contradictory abundance of implications.

The deadpan poem's inward turn is reinforced by its unpunctuation in another way as well. Its lack of cues implies not only an untheatrical way of speaking, but also thought rather than speech. E. A. Levenson, writing about the Penelope episode of *Ulysses* (1922), notes that "[Molly Bloom's] reverie runs on almost uninterrupted, thoughts and sense impressions blend and merge, and the links between ideas are by association rather than by logic. Any punctuation would suggest planning and some

measure of logical sequence."[53] Levenson is noting that punctuation entails forethought; it implies a user who thinks about whether a semicolon or colon will better convey the relationship between two clauses. But as what Adorno called "marks of oral delivery" that suggest how one modulates one's tones for others' comprehension, punctuation also denotes mindfulness of the outside world ("Punctuation Marks," 300). By the same principle, because unpunctuation provides no signals as to where the voice should rise, fall, trail off, or exclaim, it does not give an impression that it is spoken aloud. Instead, it recalls the way that thoughts can be unvocalized, or preverbal: when left unspoken, they exist without a full range of tones.[54] Unpunctuated passages often seem to exist in the underarticulated language of thought; it is the typography of a mind humming along to itself.

These quasi-monotonic, unpunctuated poems cross expression with the absence of expression. By doing so, they ask us to undertake not simply to think about how lines might be sounded, but to imagine what thoughts and feelings lie behind that unrevealing surface. The deadpan poem reacts to the modernist self's predicament by committing neither to bleak, inhuman laughter nor to genial, sentimental beaming. Instead, it maintains ties to a comedy based in interiority, while acknowledging the "new configuration of self and its boundaries" (Miller, *Late Modernism*, 45).

This Is Just to Say

The example of the deadpan poem supports the belief, stated eloquently by White, that polarized lyric and anti-lyric ways of reading may tend to obscure some of what makes a poem interesting (*Lyric Shame*, 14–15). As Wheeler has observed, the individual "voice" is revered in lyric: connoting "originality and the continuity of identity over time," the idea of voice has become "a metonym not just for the body, but for the soul" (*Voicing American Poetry*, 29). But the term has been subject to skepticism: "voice" also stands in for the believable, coherent speaker whose tone can be analyzed. Marjorie Perloff has pointed out how "[o]ne of the cardinal principles—perhaps *the* cardinal principle—of American Language poetics . . . has been the dismissal of 'voice' as the foundational principle of lyric poetry."[55] She quotes, as examples, Ron Silliman's description of lyric as "simple ego psychology in which the poetic represents not a person, but a persona, the human as unified object," and Charles Bernstein's praise of Silliman's poems, which "may discomfort those who want a poetry primarily of personal communication, flowing freely from the inside with the words of a natural rhythm of life, lived daily."[56] Such accounts call to mind the work of someone like Robert Frost or John Berryman, where voice and tone are foremost.

The deadpan poem, however, refuses that "natural rhythm" on a quite literal level: it does not let the reader slip with ease into a natural way of speaking. Instead, it undermines a natural voice and works havoc on any certainty regarding tone. In doing so, it offers a counter to one of the common dividing lines between relatively traditional and experimental movements. In a language poem, minimalist punctuation makes its

absence rhetorical; by calling attention to gaps and absences, it throws attention back on the speaking voice. And when commas and points drop out of a lyric, poetry is revealed as susceptible to a physical medium: its tones can be affected by the existence or nonexistence of a few "tinkering symbols." Rather than render as precisely as possible a unique voice, or dramatize the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, underpunctuation shows how the inspired, autonomous work depends on an approximate system to represent it. It is an apt coincidence, then, that a conservative parody of avant-garde poetry is also one of the first comically unstable poems of the twentieth century.

Balancing acts are central to the deadpan poem's origins and workings; the range of poets who assimilate this mode draw on their reservations about the self and how to express it. In its constant play with the idea of the poem as the free outpouring of the human voice and soul, the deadpan poem crosses and blurs generic lines. It can be found across styles and movements: it might include Edward Dorn's *Gunslinger* (1968–75), the "talk poems" of David Antin's *what it means to be avant-garde* (1993), Paul Beatty's *Joker, Joker, Deuce* (1994), Wanda Coleman's *Mercurochrome* (2001), Sam Riviere's *81 Austerities* (2012), Anne Carson's *Red Doc>* (2013), and Victoria Chang's *The Boss* (2013). Moments in each of these books enact a miniature struggle between the human voice and the approximate, limited array of signs used to convey it. "IM NOT CNOFUSDE GODDAM THIS TYPEWRITAR," as a new ghost in Merrill's epic says (Merrill, *Changing Light*, 103).

Notes

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1. James Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (New York; Knopf, 1992), 129.

2. 1 Cor. 13:1 (King James Bible).

3. For two studies of some of the earliest unpunctuated poems in modernist France, see Eugène Michel, "Apollinaire et Breton imponctués," *Que vlo-ve?* 4, no. 16 (2001): 103–07; and A. R. York, "Mallarmé and Apollinaire: The Unpunctuated Text," *Visible Language* 23, no. 1 (1989): 45–62. Aside from these studies, glances at unpunctuation have been brief and tucked within broader studies of specific poets. For example, Peter Nicholls associates George Oppen's unpunctuation with "a kind of 'poor' poetry . . . where all signs of a conventional literariness must be expunged in deference to 'actuality'" (*George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 153). Also, Julie Gonnering Lein remarks how Mina Loy's "omission of punctuation loosens standard syntax, freeing verbal energy" ("Shades of Meaning: Mina Loy's Poetics of Luminous Opacity," *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 3 [2011]: 617–29, 623). More work has been done on unpunctuation in prose, such as Armine Kotin Mortimer's extensive study of how one experimental novel withholds and quietly supplies punctuation; see "The Invisible Punctuation of Sollers's *Paradis*," *MLN* 127, no. 4 (2012): 924–41. In "Beckett Between the Words: Punctuation and the Body in the English Prose," James Williams explores the punctuational play in the "same flat tone" passage of Beckett's *Company* (*Aujourd'hui* 24 [2012]: 249–58).

4. While unpunctuation is also widespread in prose (e.g., that of Stein or Beckett), its role in poetry is enriched by line breaks; lineation throws more force onto each minute presence or absence, and heightens the interplay—key to this article—of normal, vatic, and flattened tones.

5. Martin Jay, "Modernism and the Specter of Psychologism," *Modernism/modernity* 3, no. 2 (1996): 93–111, 93.

6. Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 25; and Justus Nieland, *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 27.

7. Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2011.

8. Lesley Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 3.

9. Don Marquis, *The Annotated Archy and Mehitabel*, ed. Michael Sims (New York: Penguin, 2006), 4.

10. For an overview of Archy's poems, which continued into the 1930s, see Michael Sims's introduction to *The Annotated Archy*, xiii–xxxiv.

11. Alyson Tischler, "A Rose Is a Pose: Steinian Modernism and Mass Culture," *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no. 3–4 (2003): 12–27, 17.

12. For a survey of how punctuation became standardized, see the opening section of Cecilia Watson's "Points of Contention: Rethinking the Past, Present, and Future of Punctuation," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (2012): 649–72.

13. Albert Mockel, *Stéphane Mallarmé: Un Héros* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1899), 32. For her assistance with translations of Mockel and Tzara, I thank Gaëlle Cogan.

14. F. T. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax—Imagination without strings—Words-in-Freedom," in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 27–34, 30.

15. Gertrude Stein, *Writings, 1932–1946* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 318.

16. Richard Aldington, "Some Recent French Poems," *The Egoist* 1, no. 12 (1914): 221–23, 223.

17. "The Passing of Punctuation in a New School of French Poetry," *Current Opinion* 63 (1917): 48.

18. Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker: Poems of Mina Loy*, ed. Roger Conover (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), 4.

19. Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno, *E. E. Cummings: A Biography* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2004), 93.

20. E. E. Cummings, *Eight Harvard Poets*, ed. Robert Hillyer (New York: Laurence J. Gomme, 1917), 7.

21. See Robert Dodsley, *The Preceptor: Containing a General Course of Education* (London: R. Dodsley, 1754), 1:xl; and Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1756), 1:77.

22. John Swett, *School Elocution* (New York: A. L. Bancroft, 1884), 120.

23. Katherine Bergeron, "Melody and Monotone: Performing Sincerity in Republican France," in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, ed. Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 44–59, 48.

24. Mark Morrisson, "Performing the Pure Voice: Elocution, Verse Recitation, and Modernist Poetry in Prewar London," *Modernism/modernity* 3, no. 3 (1996): 25–50, 40.

25. Léon Brémont, *L'art de dire les vers* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1903), 15.

26. W. B. Yeats, "Speaking to the Psaltery," in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 18.

27. Tristan Tzara makes a similar point: "With Apollinaire, modern poetry has chosen recitative [*récitatif*], following from the verbal structure of the song, in contrast to the oratorical poem based in the expressive movement of contrasting intonations [*le poème oratoire basé sur le mouvement expressif des contrastes d'intonations*]" ("Gestes, ponctuation et langage poétique," *Europe: revue littéraire mensuelle* 31, no. 85 [1953]: 72).

28. Francis Macnamara to Harold Monro, n. d., Harold Monro Papers, University of California, Los Angeles, quoted in Morrisson, "Performing the Pure Voice," 43.

29. Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 56.

30. "Sigma," *Personalia: Intimate Recollections of Famous Men* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903), 182.

31. Little Billy, "Correspondence from Our Local Unions, No. 19, Cincinnati," *International Bookbinder*, January 1917, 200–1, 200.

32. The doubleness of the monotone—that it can seem above or below normal discourse—continues into the twenty-first century. In a phrase that recalls Bergeron's, Charles Bernstein describes a way of reading that lets "words speak for themselves"; he suggests that "this more monovalent, minimally inflected, and in any case unaugmented, mode . . . touch[es] on the essence of the medium" (*Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 11). A fictional poetry reading also spells out the monotone's conflicting valences: Ben Lerner's narrator reads "in a deadpan and monotonic but surprisingly confident way . . . as if either I was so convinced of the poem's power that it needed no assistance from dramatic vocalization, or, contrarily, like it wasn't poetry at all. . . . I fantasized as I listened to myself that the undecidability of my style—was it an acknowledgment of the poem's intrinsic energy or a reading appropriate to its utter banality—would have its own kind of power" (Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* [Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House, 2011], 39). Lerner is having fun with his narrator, and with a mode of reading similar to the one that interests Bernstein; the reading creates a comic friction between the revelatory and the deficient, the self-consciously profound and self-congratulatingly dismissive.

33. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 57, 51, emphasis in the original.

34. Another early parody of experimental literature uses cliché to deflate a similar degree of earnestness: "Last night when all was still and dark I went into the great, punctuation-markless silence and brought all my power to bear upon the banishing of preconceived images" (Julian Street, "Why I Became a Cubist," *Everybody's Magazine*, March 1913, 814–25, 825).

35. E. E. Cummings, "nobody loses all the time," in *Complete Poems: 1904–1962* (New York: Liveright, 1991), 237.

36. As it happens, Cummings embodies unpunctuation's shift from the hieratic to the comic. He first omits punctuation as part of his avant-garde divesting, but does so in another spirit by the 1920s, as "nobody loses all the time" shows. Cummings's early decision to "leap into the ripe air," and his descent to the uncle that plunges into the watertank, sketches the trajectory of the unpunctuated style.

37. Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 31.

38. Robert Beum, "Epic and Lyric," *Poetry* 91, no. 4 (1958): 266–68, 268.

39. Gene Kropf, *Airline Traffic Procedures* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949), 185.

40. Randall Knoper, *Acting Naturally: Mark Twain in the Culture of Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 58.

41. Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931; rpt., New York: New York Review Books, 2004), 34.

42. Sacvan Bercovitch, "Deadpan Huck: Or, What's Funny about Interpretation," *Kenyon Review* 24, no. 3–4 (2002): 90–134, 9, emphasis in original.

43. Jane Arthur, "Revolting Women: The Body in Comic Performance," in *Women's Bodies: Discipline and Transgression* (New York: Cassell, 1999), 137–64, 152.

44. James Agee, "Comedy's Greatest Era," *Life*, September 5, 1949, 70–88, 82.

45. Theodor Adorno, "Punctuation Marks," trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *The Antioch Review* 48, no. 3 (1990): 300–5, 301.

46. Lorine Niedecker, "Poet's work," *Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 194. For the textual history, see Niedecker, *Collected Works*, 424.

47. Allen Frame, "British Theatre: Gary Stevens," *BOMB*, Winter 1988, bombmagazine.org/article/1016/british-theatre-gary-stevens.

48. Christopher Bishop, "The Great Stone Face," *Film Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1958): 10–15, 14; and Gilberto Perez, "The Bewildered Equilibrist: An Essay on Buster Keaton's Comedy," *Hudson Review* 34, no. 3 (1981): 337–66, 364.

49. Rochelle Rives, *Modernist Impersonalities: Affect, Authority, and the Subject* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3, 19.

50. Frank O'Hara, "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul," in *Collected Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 328. Frank O'Hara, excerpt from "Adieu to Norman, Bonjour to Joan and Jean-Paul" from *Lunch Poems*. Copyright 1954 by Frank O'Hara. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of City Lights Books, www.citylights.com.

51. Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 180; and T. S. Eliot, "Andrew Marvell," *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 303, quoted in Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, 165.

52. Knoper, *Acting Naturally*, 57; and Donna Peberdy, "'I'm just a character in your film': Acting and Performance from Autism to Zissou," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 10, no. 1 (2012): 46–67, 64.

53. E. A. Levenson, *The Stuff of Literature: Physical Aspects of Texts and Their Relation to Literary Meaning* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 76.

54. See, for example, Marcel Kinsbourne, "Inner Speech and the Inner Life," *Brain and Language* 71, no. 1 (2000): 120–23.

55. Marjorie Perloff, "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 3 (1999): 405–34, 405.

56. See Ron Silliman, introduction to *In the American Tree* (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), xix; and Charles Bernstein, introduction to *Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 41. Silliman is quoted in Perloff, "Language Poetry," 405; and Bernstein is quoted in Perloff, "Language Poetry," 406.