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“A Cascade of Shifts in the Brain”: Kay Ryan’s Poetics

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Contents

Introduction..........................................................................................................................2
“My Talk with Carol—without Carol”: Kay Ryan’s Journals.................................................10
“Where Thinking Can't Stick”: Ryan’s Journals and Poetics.................................................17
“Too Big to Be Innocent”: Ryan’s Poetic Debut.................................................................28

“The Feeling is Vertiginous”: Edges of Thought in Dragon Acts......................................33
“Be Brave as Matisse”: Nonsense in Dragon Acts...............................................................40

Conclusion..........................................................................................................................47
Appendix of Images.............................................................................................................50
Acknowledgements.............................................................................................................52
Bibliography.........................................................................................................................53
Introduction

In her 1983 poem “Is it by Giotto?,” Kay Ryan parodies a mode of criticism that continues to irk her throughout her career. This poem from her self-published debut collection, *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends*, pokes fun at art critics who are unable to appreciate the aesthetics of a painting without identifying its artist:

**IS IT BY GIOTTO?**

_Some experts find the work old-fashioned and derivative, others feel it combines Giotto’s power and his emotional reticence_

If it is by Giotto
it is very beautiful
a laudable absence of donkeys and camels
and pink robed angels bursting through the trees
with their expressive hands, no sheep
no goats no ordinary man trying to keep
out of the way of the Urbinos.
If it is by Giotto
the stiffness in the Madonna is sorrow,
the positioning of the Child correctly traditional.
Only the greatest master does not temporize
Upon the triangle.
If it is by Giotto.¹

In her thirteen brief lines, Ryan critiques “experts” who cannot interpret the painting’s peculiarities—its “absence of donkeys” and the “stiffness in the Madonna”—unless they attribute the work to Giotto. Only then can they look closely, sensing “sorrow” or a respect for the “traditional.” Either way, critics fail to engage with the painting on its own aesthetic terms: its success or failure depends entirely on its attribution and the narrative of its creation rather than the on the work itself. Decades later, Ryan remains frustrated by the reductive opinions of reviewers, lamenting in her private journal in 2010 that critics too often flatten the distinctive qualities of her poems by approaching them solely through the lens of what she terms

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“redemptive biography.” When editing her 2015 collection *Erratic Facts*, Ryan records her dread that “narrative diminishment,” which she defines as a reviewer heightening the author’s story at the expense of her poems, will be “inevitable” upon its publication. Even as Ryan’s public stature changes—from the self-published author of *Dragon Acts* in the 1980s to the two-term United States Poet Laureate, Pulitzer Prize winner, and MacArthur “genius” fellow of the 2010s—she maintains her early desire that her poems be interpreted through their aesthetic oddities and not her biography alone.

Whereas attributions to Giotto may be dubious, Ryan’s poems are unmistakably hers. They are rarely longer than twenty lines, each of which seldom exceeds six syllables. Her poems are difficult to gloss: frequently only a single sentence, they nevertheless precipitate a great opening of thought in a tone of amused detachment. Langdon Hammer observes that each starts with a “curious conceit” around which the entire piece moves as a “thought-experiment.” In the case of “Is it By Giotto?,” the questionable attribution of the painting becomes the kernel of Ryan’s pithy critical manifesto. Ryan’s poetic project—developed with remarkable consistency over her decades-long career—is best summarized by the title to one of her own poems: “How a Thought Thinks” (1996). As the poem observes, thought is “the most / random eater,” sampling

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2 Kay Ryan, journal, “April 8, 2010 7:13,” Box 20, Folder 1127, Kay Ryan Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Henceforth cited by Ryan’s entry heading, box, and folder number. This project began during the pandemic: Christian Wiman graciously provided me with private transcriptions of Ryan’s 2009-2016 journals taken by him and his research assistant, Laura Traverse. These transcriptions grounded my work when I could not access the unprocessed collection from March 2020 through February 2022 because of pandemic safety logistics and while on a leave of absence. When possible, I cross-referenced transcriptions with notes and photos I took while working on a presentation for Professor Wiman’s *Poetry and Faith* seminar in the fall of 2019. Upon returning to Yale in the spring of 2022, I located and checked entries in the newly-processed collection. Where my interpretations of Ryan’s handwriting diverge from transcriptions for the 2009-2016 journals, I have noted them in the footnotes. Unless otherwise noted, transcriptions for 2009-2016 journals are based in those provided by Professor Wiman.


topics as wide-ranging as Ryan’s quirky fascinations with angler fish, medieval saints, English clichés, and facts from Ripley’s Believe it or Not! volumes. No matter their subject, Ryan’s poems are consistently recognizable by their combination of small size and vast expansions of thought.

As heterogenous as Ryan’s poems are, critics have tended to approach her work with the same narrow lens as the scholars satirized in “Is it By Giotto?” Biography offers a secure path into Ryan's poems, which, with their intricate details and swift developments of thought, have confounded critical attempts to analyze their inner workings. As friend and fellow poet Jane Hirshfield notes, the contrast between their small stature and grand thought creates interpretive difficulty. “People,” Hirschfield observes, have not “yet learned how to read” a Ryan poem, “to see through the surface to what is actually being held by the words.”6 Similarly, Amit Majmudar characterizes Ryan's diminutive poems as “pinpoint apertures that focus on vastness,” their drastic interplay of scales frustrating critics’ attempts to survey their internal operations.7

Instead of delving into the breadth of thought in Ryan’s poems, critics frequently rely on her biography to explain their subjects—even when these personal details shed little light on Ryan's deceptively difficult work. Ryan is read, at turns, as the poet of a hardscrabble American west,8 of outsiders to the MFA set,9 of new age spirituality,10 or “of marriage.”11 These readings

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do not yet get under the surfaces of Ryan’s poems. Instead, they construct, as Hammer observes, a “mysterious poet somewhere behind them,” waiting to be discovered.12 For Ryan’s identity and experience to shed light on her work—to see her career as a teacher of basic composition as typifying her love of practical prose, for instance, or to understand her visions of queer femininity—critics must first take account of the aesthetic concerns that motivate her poems themselves. As Ryan’s work begins to attract more scholarly attention, readers must first gain a deeper understanding of what Ryan’s poems do before we investigate why.

This essay constructs an account of Ryan’s poetics by reading her poems alongside her published essays and unpublished archival material, which serve to complement and expand on the concerns of her brief, rapid, and varied lyrics. Her prose, published sporadically throughout her career and collected in *Synthesizing Gravity* (2020), offers insights into Ryan’s understanding of her own work in essays that consistently return to the mental operations of poetry. The Kay Ryan papers, acquired by Yale’s Beinecke Library in 2018, provide an additional source of information for investigating how Ryan’s poems build her particular account of thought and artistic expression. The collection’s varied materials, including journals, drafts, rare first collections, correspondence, photos, ephemera, artworks, and teaching materials, attest to Ryan’s enduring interest in cognition throughout her work and her private life.

Though the earliest items in the Beinecke collection date to 1945, when Ryan was an infant, the majority of its materials capture the arc of her career as a poet between the mid-1970s and 2017. Ryan’s papers contain little information from her years as an undergraduate at Antelope Valley Community College and UCLA, or her brief time as a doctoral student in

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literary criticism at University of California, Irvine.\textsuperscript{13} The bulk of the collection dates from after 1976, when Ryan decided, at age 31, to become a poet while on a revelatory cross-country bicycle trip.\textsuperscript{14} The collection documents her relationship with Carol Adair, whom she met in 1977, and whom she married twice—in 2004 and 2008—as California’s same-sex marriage laws changed.\textsuperscript{15} Ryan’s archive includes teaching materials from her career at College of Marin, where Adair was also an English instructor.\textsuperscript{16} Alongside Ryan’s career, the collection offers a glimpse into the couple’s life together—of travelling, of friends, and of the Fairfax home they shared for thirty years and where Ryan still lives after Adair’s death from cancer in January 2009.\textsuperscript{17}

Ryan’s papers offer the writer’s own perspective on her distinct poetic voice and intricate aesthetic aims, as well as many interpretive angles into her poetry, creative impulses, and conceptual frameworks. In the collection, Ryan details her fear that many readings of her work, like those parodied in “Is It By Giotto?,” create “reductive meaning—as though you could give others some key for simplifying the long project you’re about.”\textsuperscript{18} Instead of flattening Ryan’s poems, studying her poetry together with her papers builds a critical approach to her work congruous with her own conviction that “it is not in isolation that a thing is most eloquent”—that an understanding of a poet’s thinking and preoccupations puts pieces across their career in


\textsuperscript{14} Kay Ryan, “Bike Journal,” Summer 1976, Box 20, Folders 1110-1111.


\textsuperscript{16} Kay Ryan, “Teaching Materials: College of Marin,” Box 25, Folders 1317 and 1318.

\textsuperscript{17} Halstead.

\textsuperscript{18} Ryan, journal, “October 21, 2014,” Box 21, Folder 1141.
This essay is the first to use Ryan’s archives, and specifically her journals, to consider her poetic project.

Together, two poles in Ryan’s archive ground her unique poetics as she carefully defines the workings of her artistic thought. At the start of her writing life, *Dragon Acts* develops a blueprint for Ryan’s lasting set of aesthetic concerns. Decades later, Ryan enacts this poetic self-formation anew in the journals that she began to keep after the death of Adair, whom Ryan calls “my single companion in my poetry life.” After several months subsumed by grief and unable to write, Ryan began in March 2009 to recreate in her journals the literary conversations she had shared with her wife. Ryan’s entries, which she sustained through her recovery from a stroke in 2016, articulate the same vision of poetry as a mental function that courses through her earliest work in *Dragon Acts*. Throughout Ryan’s career, she hews to a cognitive model of poetry in which her verbal structures mirror her own expanses of thought and provoke new forms of cognition in her reader.

Though *Dragon Acts* and the journals are in some respects distant from one another—one a self-published debut, the other the private diaries of a mature writer at the height of her critical fame—together they demonstrate Ryan’s remarkably consistent set of poetic concerns. They share the same project of mapping the workings of her own mind and transferring them onto the page. As Ryan reflects in a 2015 entry, “[w]hat I was always doing—sitting up in that room of

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mine thirty-five years ago, what I have always been trying to do—is find a way into where I can think, and it always involves having a pen in my hand.”

For Ryan, each sentence and line she writes is part of a common “motion” of thought, enabled and continued by her pen. As she writes in her journal, the only thing that has changed since 1983 is her critical reception: “I no longer have to also defend a place for myself, or convince the world of anything.”

This essay draws on Ryan’s journals to elucidate her poetics of thought. In the first section, I situate the journals that Ryan kept from 2009 to 2016 as both personal and professional documents, arguing that they yield a unique perspective on her cognitive poetics. Because these later journals explicitly articulate the terms Ryan uses for her own poetry, I discuss them first to develop a model of her thought.

Next, I bring her mature poems into conversation with these journals, drawing out their common artistic and cognitive preoccupations in Ryan’s intertwined conception of her mind and poetry. In her journals, Ryan inventories the central terms of her subtle poetics. The simultaneous expansiveness and limitation, as Ryan views it, of the mind animates her poetry, able to sense “borderless thought” but unable to master its glimmer. Ryan’s work attempts to reconcile this “immensity of the mind’s extension” with the necessary edges and boundaries of poetry. To navigate the mind, Ryan turns to “shifts,” small cognitive modulations that enable unforeseen expansions of thought. Shifts pervade Ryan’s poetics: from the perceptions and observations that form the kernel of each poem, to her technique and, finally, to the imagined experience of her reader.

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Ryan's journals develop a consistent poetics; returning to her poems informed by these insights illuminates her theory of thought. In my final section, I demonstrate the remarkable persistence of Ryan’s artistic thought by tracing its earliest contours in her debut collection. Through a series of poems focusing on painting and music, *Dragon Acts* explores the aesthetic conditions by which artists generate shifts in their audiences. As she transfers her aesthetic experiences of other artworks into poetic form, Ryan creates her own model of artistic thought, in which poems, paintings, and music all enable a “mysterious exchange” between creator and audience.28

Considering Ryan’s poetics through her journals and earliest work offers a path beyond “redemptive biography”29 and “narrative diminishment”30 to understand her subtle and quirky poems on their own terms. As late as May 2015, Ryan wrote in her journal that “I don’t feel that my poems have really been enjoyed yet, although they have been rewarded.”31 Unlike the critics of “Is it by Giotto?,” who deduce explanations for a painting’s peculiarities from its artist, attention to Ryan’s poetics allows an appreciation of her work to arise from her poems themselves.

29 Kay Ryan, journal, “April 8, 2010 7:13,” Box 20, Folder 1127, Kay Ryan Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Henceforth cited by Ryan’s entry heading, box, and folder number. Unless otherwise noted, transcriptions provided by Christian Wiman and Laura Treverse.
1. “My Talk with Carol—without Carol”: Kay Ryan’s Journals

Despite penning an essay titled “Notes on the Danger of Notebooks” (1998), Ryan kept many over the course of her career. Her papers include notebooks from her early days deciding to become a poet in the 1970s through her critical success starting in the 1990s. These notebooks contain compositions, trip notes, drafts of prose pieces, sketches, spurts of self-reflection, and thoughts on other poets. Her notebooks are of varying sizes and lengths, but Ryan tended to dedicate each journal to one specific topic. Her “Ear Journal,” for example, which documents doctors’ appointments during a bout of Tinnitus, contains only a few pages of notes. The notebooks Ryan filled can span a long period of time: a slim volume holds personal entries from 1977 to 1983, and one sketchpad of drawings alongside quotations and compositions covers 1991 to 2002.

Among Ryan's myriad, miscellaneous collected notebooks, the set of journals that she began keeping after Adair's death stands out as a unit. Ryan conceived of them as one herself, keeping a separate notebook with a key to her entries. In their pages she refers to the activity of “keeping these notebooks,” and the specific “stack” of them “since Carol died.” All but one of the 23 are from the same line of 9.5 x 6-inch, spiral-bound, college-ruled volumes from Staples. They vary only in the patterns on their brown recycled covers. Unlike her other notebooks, Ryan fills almost all of her journals to the last of its 100 pages, sometimes finishing a few pages short so that she can start a new one when travelling. Ryan opens almost every entry with a date and time, usually between six and ten AM, but sometimes as early as two or three in

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34 Ryan, Journal, “Notebook (with drawings),” Box 22, Folder 1159.
the morning if she cannot sleep. She frequently notes a location: at home in Fairfax or one of the many places she visits to give readings. She sometimes marks a special event in an entry’s title, such as a wedding or birthday.

In the initial pages of her journals from March to December 2009, Ryan documents her grief and inertia at the loss of Adair, addressing her entries directly to her late wife. By January 2010, as the immediacy of her grief dissipates, Ryan stops consistently writing to Adair in the second person, and produces more varied entries, including reflections on other poets and compositions of her own. Throughout the journals Ryan nevertheless continues to hold Adair as her interlocutor, pointing out quotations her wife would have enjoyed, reflecting on their life together, or directing questions about her writing to “Carol” and remembering her advice.38 Even as the journals’ scope expands, Ryan insists that “I don’t like this book to become other than my talk with Carol—without Carol.”39

Just as Ryan’s relationship with Adair was always closely connected to her writing life, the journals demonstrate that Ryan’s grief over her wife’s death is intimately linked to her work. Ryan dedicated every collection of her poetry to Adair. Alongside losing the wife who managed their social schedule, connected Ryan to the outside world, and filled their home with decoration, Ryan documents another “kind of loss”: she suspects her “writing is going in the gutter.”40 Adair was present for the eight years Ryan wrote poems before her first major publication in Poetry Magazine in 1984. In one of the few interviews Adair gave about Ryan’s writing, she said admiringly of those early years: “She wrote every day, and she wasn’t even good yet. That takes so much guts.”41 Adair not only read and helped edit Ryan’s poems, but arranged that their

38 Ryan, journal, “August 7, 2016 8:15,” Box 21, Folder 1146.
40 Ryan, journal, “June 18, 2009,” Box 20, Folder 1125.
41 Halstead, “Kay Ryan Rises to the Top despite Her Refusal to Compromise.”
friends—“the first 50 subscribers,” as the collection’s title page calls them—would receive copies of *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends* in 1983. Adair even wrote an essay about the collection, without referencing her relationship with its author, which Ryan mailed out to potential reviewers. After Ryan gained recognition in the 1990s and 2000s, Adair remained the first reader of all her drafts, and accompanied her wife to readings and public events. As Ryan’s “talk with Carol,” the journals take the place of the poetic conversations she would have had with Adair.

Over several volumes and years, Ryan’s journals both constitute and document her process of regaining the ability to write. In May 2009, Ryan reflects that her journals are a way to channel the feeling that “I’d explode with needing to say things to her [Adair].” After worrying that her writing was “going to the gutter” in May, by December 2009, Ryan writes to Carol that “I am starting to be able to write with something resembling freshness.” Ryan continues, however, to write in her journals for years after this initial period in which “great gears are shifting my perspective, working on my biorhythms” such that “I am being altered so I can work.” Instead of simply returning Ryan to her ability to write, the journals provide her with a space in which “my mind becomes available.” This description of the journals’ function in “the barrenness of my post-Carol life” hints at the nature of their literary partnership. Ryan writes a dialogue with herself as she tries to observe the poetic consciousness that conversations with Adair once tracked and shaped.

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42 Ryan, *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends*.
43 Kary Ryan to Richard Tillinghast, late August 1983, Box 7, Folder 261
As the type of conversations Ryan had with Adair move onto the pages of her journals, she remembers her wife’s understanding of the abstract aims of her poetry. Even “quite early in our life together,” Ryan recalls, Adair observed and reminded her of the “job” of her writing. Over thirty years later, Ryan steels herself to “cleave” to Adair’s “Orphic instructions,” as she recounts them:

your job isn’t to describe the fence (or wall, I don’t remember) but to describe what keeping in is.

I never concerned myself with the facts of it, the fence or wall or whatever, enchanted with the abstract sense of it instead. Not the appearances of things, Kay, but the deep marking of boundaries, the marking places where this shifts to that. That’s the interesting zone for you.\(^{51}\)

Adair reminded Ryan of her primary poetic interest—not her lively details, strange propositions, or fascinating creatures, but their “abstract” operations and functions. Because they are abstractions arising from Ryan’s own mind, the same one she tries to observe in thinking about her poetry, she calls her new project after losing Adair “my hand drawing my hand.”\(^{52}\) Ryan’s journals record the process by which her mind responds to her surroundings and turns these instinctive sensations into poems.

Ryan also uses her journals to recreate Adair’s ways of mediating between the interior work of her writing and the life of her poems outside her own mind. As Ryan considers returning to public readings in the year after Adair’s death, she remembers her wife’s support at these events: “You knew all my poems better than I did (easy) […] You always interpreted what happened for me—audiences, how I read, my poems too. It was wonderful to have you in an audience—the star of it. I relied on it.”\(^{53}\) In the years following Adair’s death, Ryan’s public

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\(^{52}\) Ryan, journal, “June 4, 2009,” Box 20, Folder 1125.

\(^{53}\) Ryan, journal, “August 2, 2009 7:57 AM,” Box 20, Folder 1125.
poetic duties increased exponentially. The period of tremendous personal loss captured in her journals is also that of Ryan's greatest public recognition, the years in which she receives the Pulitzer Prize and MacArthur fellowship (2011), and the National Humanities Medal (2012). Throughout her journals, Ryan considers the coincidence of these events, and the irony that despite the awards, grief eclipses her ability to write poetry or enjoy the attention. On her way to accept the National Humanities Medal from President Obama, Ryan addresses an entry to Adair and reflects on this period: “Carol, I’d like to talk to you about all this. It is particularly confusing that I lost you just as I began to get all of this. Would it clang as hollowly if you were here to hear it with me?” Ryan feels a hollowness in this recognition; she is unable to share its joy with her wife, and misses the reader who understood her poems most intimately.

Without Adair to talk to, Ryan admits to her journals that she is anxious about the public reception of her work. Ryan finds public readings taxing; she also worries that they are “not just pointless but actual impediments to discovery.” She continues to bemoan that “if someone says to me, after a reading, ‘now I get it,’ I am the opposite of pleased” because the person’s comment has indicated to her that “they will never ever get it.” Something about a public reading—with Ryan at center stage, and only a brief encounter with each poem—precludes understanding her work. As an established poet in 2013, Ryan maintains the same worry expressed in “Is it by Giotto?” in 1983: that a fixation on the artist rather than on the poems will limit their expressive abilities.

As she attends events without Adair, Ryan imagines ways of appreciating her poems beyond public readings. As if straining to fit the context of the event to her understanding of her

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own work, Ryan reads certain poems twice. Their brief length and quick pace enable this practice, and allow an audience to marvel at their intricate twists of thought.\textsuperscript{58} Their repetition also gestures at a form of iterative reading Ryan hopes will lend her poems a certain transparency, a process she calls “opalization.” Public readings, Ryan writes, draw out her “worry—so many years ago but still current—that my poems wouldn’t have a chance because what has to happen to them is they have to be repeated and repeated before they can attain opalization.” A poem can become “translucent and luminous” over time, in the same way “a tree had become a stone had become a window” in the transformation of organic material into a partially transparent gem.\textsuperscript{59} Ryan hopes that her poems will opalize into a “window,” a process which cannot occur in a single encounter—within the confines of a reading, say—but must happen repeatedly, leading to transcendent seeing. Ryan describes “opalization” when she reads Emily Dickinson’s poetry. “Through ED’s eyes,” Ryan can see the world as “unmanageably vivid and gorgeous, so intense and luminous and ecstatic” because she “is in fact inside the mind of the person” who experiences it that way.\textsuperscript{60} Poems, for Ryan, offer a way of occupying the mind and vision of a poet through their words.

By documenting Ryan’s reaction to other artists and writers, her journals suggest how she wishes her poems to be read. Ryan envisions a reader assimilating another’s modes of thinking through their work as opalized “windows.”\textsuperscript{61} While the journals also demonstrate that Ryan reads a remarkable number of biographies—of Erik Satie, Walter Benjamin, Marianne Moore, Marcel Proust, Paul Cézanne and Agnes Martin, and the autobiography of 19\textsuperscript{th} -century writer Henry Adams—to name just a few, Ryan’s readings of these texts offer a glimpse into how she

\textsuperscript{58} Hammer, “Confluences of Sound and Sense,” 58.
\textsuperscript{59} Ryan, journal, “August 7, 2016 8:15,” Box 21, Folder 1146.
\textsuperscript{60} Ryan, journal, “December 30, 2011 4:41 AM,” Box 20, Folder 1133.
\textsuperscript{61} Ryan, journal, “August 7, 2016 8:15,” Box 21, Folder 1146.
understands the value of learning about a writer’s or artist’s life as related to but separate from their style. She is rarely interested in the events of their lives, looking instead to inhabit their personae. In coming to understand a writer’s mind through their work and through the comments of a biographer, Ryan reflects that she is “watching the stretching fabric of the poet’s whole complex attempt to get the time of the stars.” This revelation creates the conditions by which “the work is alive—most alive—for the reader.” Ryan, however, sees her approach not as biographical or critical, and immediately clarifies her statement: “this is not to advocate for reading poems through the glass of biography and not even to insist on chronology, but to acknowledge that it is not in isolation that a thing is most eloquent.”62 As with Ryan's own method for reading biography to understand the unique operations of a poet’s thought, her journals give broader access to the “fabric” of her mind and make apparent the common preoccupations of her poems.

Ryan’s journals externalize her internal poetic conversation as she once did with Adair. Alone with her journals, Ryan articulates her understanding of her poetic project—the ways in which her mind comes to write, her technical markers, and the experience she imagines for her reader.63 Because of their unique function in her personal and writing lives, Ryan’s journals demonstrate how a study of her poetics must exist alongside an account of her thinking.

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2. “Where Thinking Can't Stick”: Ryan’s Journals and Poetics

In contrast to her tightly wound poems, Ryan’s journals give an expanded ground in which to consider the uniquely cognitive aims of her writing and their expression in her poetics. Ryan’s journals detail her account of artistic thought based on the relationship between mind and poetry: as she argues in an essay on Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Poetry is the shape and size of the mind. It works the way the mind works. It is deeply compatible with whatever it is we are.” Ryan’s journals elaborate a poetics of mind and poem working in tandem.

Ryan considers the cognitive project of her poetry in three intertwined parts—her own mind, her poem, and her reader. At each stage, she frames her poetics through the idea of “shifts,” a characteristically modest term fitting her subtle poems. Through her poetry, Ryan attempts to transfer what she calls a “fascinating condition” of unstable thought. Ryan writes that her poetry springs from shifting mental territory—places at the edge of cognition “where the ground gives way, where things get marshy and begin to think or flicker.” To communicate the experience of unstable cognition to her reader, Ryan deploys a variety of poetic shifts. This wide array of unexpected maneuvers—in form, rhyme, and meaning—avoids fixing her marshy mental terrain into the dry ground of literal explanation, and nudges her reader into new cognitive territory. Through a “shift” of understanding, Ryan envisions bringing her distant reader into unique forms of thought alongside her: she hopes that “the reader feels (pleasurably) that same shift of understanding or perspective has occurred in her which cannot be explained, and that this is something she [the reader] is sharing with the (remote) poet.”

only result from, contain, and trigger “shifts;” they are themselves a site of “shift” from poet to reader.\footnote{Ryan, journal, “April 4, 2011 John’s Birthday 5:30 AM,” Box 20, Folder 1131.}

In her journals, Ryan grapples with the challenging first stage of communicating thinking she cannot herself fully grasp. Ryan frames the pleasure and difficulty of mapping her own mind in the parable of blind men approaching an elephant. In the story, a group of blind men stumble upon an elephant; unable to see the unfamiliar animal, each comes away with a different impression of it based upon the part he touched. Their limited perspectives are equally valid, even as each fails to apprehend the creature’s totality. In 2012 Ryan writes that “[t]he privilege of a long writing life is being able to come back to the elephant as so many different blind men.”\footnote{Ryan, journal, “August 21, 2012 1:51 PM,” Box 21, Folder 1136.} By this metaphor, Ryan conceives of her work as revisiting the same preoccupations of which she, like the blind men, does not have a complete picture. Indeed, elephants themselves recur in Ryan’s work, appearing in “Elephant Rocks,”\footnote{Ryan, \textit{The Best of It}, 146.} the title poem of her 1996 collection, and “The Elephant in the Room” in 2005.\footnote{Ryan, 214.} As Ryan returns over time in her journals and poetry to the movements of her own mind, she does so with a gleeful understanding that it is a project of conveying that which she herself can never fully understand.

Poems such as “No Names” (2005) capture the difficulty of rendering into words what Ryan herself cannot firmly apprehend. The poem reaches toward that which cannot be fully contained in words:

\begin{quote}
No Names

There are high places
that don't invite us,
sharp shapes, glacier-
\end{quote}
scraped faces, whole
ranges whose given names
slide off. Any such relation
as we try to make
refuses to take. Some
high lakes are not for us,
some slick escarpments.
I'm giddy with thinking
where thinking can't stick.\(^{73}\)

Ryan delights in a slickness of thought that resists the activity of writing, by which “given names / slip off” and “any such relation / as we try to make / refuses to take.” Ryan writes toward these slippery places, “giddy with thinking” not despite, but because her “thinking can’t stick.” Ryan sustains her poems with this spirit of exhilarating futility: her project is ongoing because, by its definition, it cannot be completed.

Ryan locates the “exquisite pleasure” of her own work in the refusal of certain words and ideas to settle easily in her mind.\(^{74}\) In “The Main Difficulty of Water Wheels” (2010), the technique of Ryan’s rhymes, which I mark in bold below, reflects her central metaphor:

The Main Difficulty of Water Wheels
was their inseparability from water.

Wikipedia

There are many machines
of great generative power
that can only work locally
for one reason or another.
The great fixed wheels
moved by water
cannot be moved
from water. It hurts
to think of anything
wrenched out of where
it works. But not
just for the work.
Those buckets
drenching the river

\(^{73}\) Ryan, 255.

\(^{74}\) Ryan, journal, “February 18, 2014 8:19AM,” Box 21, Folder 1141.
all the ornaments of torque.\textsuperscript{75}

The relation between water and wheel mirrors that of mind and words in Ryan’s poetics. The difficulty of the tool—the wheel—is its “inseparability from water,” on which it relies to function. The same could be said of Ryan’s connection of mind and poetry; they require each other. In a 2014 journal entry, Ryan remembers her 2010 poem and locates its connection with the mind in its off-kilter rhymes:

Wrenched / drenching / For “Waterwheels”
Work / torque
I was thinking as I did the dishes of the exquisite pleasure these shifts give me—how they—how they shift other dimensions, I guess.\textsuperscript{76}

Each pair of slant-rhymes works to subvert the reader’s expectations, their technical “shifts” causing a “shift” in Ryan’s mind. “Wrenched” and “drenching” rhyme at their forceful middles, but then suddenly collide with their discordant endings. “Work” and “torque” nearly rhyme, but the subtle twist between their short o-sounds leaves the pair unsettled. The “shifts” in these near-rhymes enact Ryan's assertion in “No Names” that “any such relation / as we may try to make / refuses to take.”\textsuperscript{77} By constructing her relationships of rhyme as an aspect in the dynamics of shift, Ryan gives voice to the “other dimensions” of her mind—the zone of thinking where “thinking can't stick.”\textsuperscript{78}

A shift generates power in “The Main Difficulty of Water Wheels” and in Ryan’s poetics. In the poem’s metaphor, torque creates power in the conversion of the water’s linear force to the wheel’s rotational energy; in its technique, its abutting slant-rhymes give Ryan “exquisite pleasure.”\textsuperscript{79} Ryan’s theory of something which can “shift other dimensions” governs her poetics

\textsuperscript{76} Ryan, journal, “February 18, 2014 8:19AM,” Box 21, Folder 1141.
\textsuperscript{77} Ryan, The Best o’It, 255.
\textsuperscript{78} Ryan, 255.
\textsuperscript{79} Ryan, journal, “February 18, 2014 8:19AM,” Box 21, Folder 1141.
more broadly as “the reason for poetry’s attractiveness.” Poems, Ryan writes, contain “any number of shifts,” which cause a “release” of the mind into a different type of thought:

Where the release happens is slippery. That is as close to its unfixed nature as I can get. Perhaps quicksilver. Mercury. Its fixed address is in transit. 

So wordplay is not superficial. It releases a cascade of shifts in the brain because shifts trigger further shifts. The feeling is delight. 

And where we know this is so deep down in the mind that it isn’t even intelligence.81

“Shifts” connect the words of a poem to their uncontained effect on the mind. Though apprehended by reading, words set off a “cascade of shifts” perceived in a plane “so deep down in the mind that it isn’t even intelligence.” Even as poem and mind initially move together, “shifts trigger further shifts,” allowing the mind to continue its “cascade” beyond the contents of the poem. “[W]ordplay”—such as the rhymes in “The Main Difficulty of Water Wheels”—initiates an ongoing reaction in the mind, whose “fixed address” remains constantly “in transit” as it continues to reach further regions of thought.

Ryan’s fascination with shifts as ways of opening the mind extends beyond her poetics. In the “Orphic instructions” she attributes to Adair, Ryan takes “the marking places where this shifts to that” as the center of her poetry.82 Ryan finds herself in an “interesting zone” where shifts activate new territory in the mind, not only in the artful cognition of her poetry but also in mundane moments of blurred perception.83 In one journal entry, Ryan records the experience of mistaking her cat, Ubu, for a napkin. In an example of a mental shift, “this” (the cat) briefly becomes “that” (the napkin):

It is interesting to me that there is a part of the mind or a place in the mind without feeling—where the information that radiates from a black napkin is identical to the information that radiates from my dear old black cat. Mostly we can’t resist feeling; I respond to Ubu differently—usually—than I respond to a breakfast napkin.  

Ryan’s amusing error unearths a plane of thought where cat and napkin blur despite her love for one and indifference to the other. She senses this place through a shift in her understanding of black cat and napkin—a perceptive movement that allows for a “release” into a new awareness of her own mind. The “pleasure of noticing” for Ryan, is not understanding, but sensing her own revealing “shift in attention.”

Ryan’s understanding of a “shift in attention” creates the cognitive and emotional depths beneath the surfaces of her poetry. Much as Ryan’s confusion of Ubu with a napkin reveals her love for her cat, her poetry attempts to derive emotion from perceptual shifts between disparate categories:

I don’t really distinguish between people and objects all that sharply. When I think about feelings, I think among cats and objects and weather conditions and minds and geometries.

For Ryan, it is “so tiresome to have to point out” that her poems of objects and geometries hold feeling. Ryan thinks “among” people and things, not about people and things. In a characteristic blurring of thought and feeling, Ryan locates “love” in such a perceptual and cognitive process, as “the deep exchange of which we see only the external evidence.” In the same way that each blind man in the parable of the elephant fails to comprehend the whole creature from the section he touches, Ryan’s “external evidence” does not capture her whole
The shifting undercurrents of Ryan’s poems rely on an indeterminacy of meaning accessed through a semantic phenomenon she terms “nonsense.” Nonsense, for Ryan, need not be humorous, nor even particularly nonsensical in the conventional understanding of the word. Ryan uses the term to distinguish the “faulty” and “useless” nature of poetry from other forms of pragmatic writing that communicate a direct message. By existing, as Ryan explains in an interview with friend and poet Atsuro Riley, in “tension with sense,” nonsense allows a poem to slip away from settled meaning. As any expression free from bounds of fixed meaning, nonsense, by Ryan’s definition, “is ‘the poetic’”—the defining feature of her genre. The practitioners of this nonsense poetry extend far beyond Ryan’s beloved Edward Lear, the Victorian writer perhaps most popularly associated with the genre, to include stylists who couldn’t be “less apparently nonsensical,” as Ryan writes of Robert Frost. Ryan’s journals confirm that she sees all worthwhile poetry as somehow nonsensical: in a 2010 entry, she reflects that “[t]he properties of poetry work upon the mind and relieve us of the constraints of usefulness.” She continues that this freedom does not change “depending upon the ‘content’ of this or that poem.” For Ryan, every level of a poem, from wordplay to metaphorical thinking, can “partake in this aspect of nonsense” because, as she writes of the words in a rhymed pair,

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90 Ryan, journal, “[Valentine’s Eve, 2015 8:17 AM],” Box 21, Folder 1142.
93 Ryan, journal, [Not clearly dated page: most like a continuation of “Notes for West Cit Conference 2010”], Box 20, Folder 1127.
they “find each other in my mind and make new connections.”95 By itself shifting the mind from stable sense, Ryan’s nonsense allows for the new operations of thought she both describes and initiates in her poetry.

Nonsense, in Ryan’s specific usage, creates a looseness of meaning that enables expansion into transcendent modes of thought. This movement, she claims, is the aim of her poetry. Instead of making sense, Ryan hopes to unmake it though nonsense, a type of writing “useless” at conveying a specific point. As she writes in a 2018 poem responding to George Steiner’s *Poetry of Thought* (itself an apt title for Ryan’s oeuvre), poetry is “transcendent” in its uselessness:

Some Transcendent Addiction to the Useless

–George Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought*

Unlike the work of most people you’re supposed to unthread the needle. It will be a lifetime task, far from simple: the empty eye achievable—possibly—but it’s going to take fake sewing worthy of Penelope.96

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95 Ryan, journal, [Not clearly dated page: most like a continuation of “Notes for West Cit Conference 2010”], Box 20, Folder 1127.
96 Ryan, “Some Transcendent Addiction to the Useless.”
Like Penelope in the *Odyssey*, who furtively unweaves her day’s work each night, Ryan’s “lifetime / task” of writing is a kind of nonsensical, yet productive, “fake sewing.” Ryan’s poem, like the eye of the needle, is a framing device for the hard work of unthreading that reveals the boundless thought she hopes might be “achievable” for her reader. Through the “useless” words of nonsense, Ryan creates vacancies of meaning as openings onto expansive possibilities of thought.

“Some Transcendent Addiction to the Useless” and Ryan’s writing at large construe her poems as the center of a cognitive process that links her with her reader. Much as the nonsensical “fake sewing / worthy of / Penelope” exists to be unraveled, Ryan crafts poems that allow the mind to continuously unfurl. Ryan’s “cascade of shifts in the brain”97 begins with sensing one in her own attention.98 She then centers her poems around verbal shifts in the belief that “shifts trigger further shifts.”99 In order to preserve this continuous process, Ryan’s poetry avoids settled relationships in form and semantic meaning. Only through nonsense can her work resist limiting the reader’s mind with a set point.

In their indeterminacy, Ryan’s poems become forms of shift themselves—from the mind of their poet to their reader. Ryan captures this dynamic in “Shift” (2005), which considers the life of her poems outside their writer’s mind:

Shift

Words have loyalties
   to so much
   we don’t control.
Each word we write
   rights itself
   according to poles
   we can’t see; think of

98 Ryan, journal, “August 1, 2016 8:30,” Box 21, Folder 1146.
magnetic compulsion
or an equal stringency.
It’s hard for us
to imagine how small
a part we play in
holding up the tall
spires we believe
our minds erect.
Then North shifts,
bearings shear,
and we suspect.100

At the heart of "Shift" is one in particular, identifiable from its reference to 9/11 ("buildings shear / and we suspect"): on the morning of the attacks, a typescript of “Home to Roost,” a lyric Ryan wrote while “chastening myself” for personal mistakes, sat on the desk of her editor in New York.101 Even upon its delayed publication, the poem’s birds “circling” in a clear blue sky and “blotting out the day” accrued sinister significance beyond Ryan’s control.102 The speaker, like so many who witnessed the shocking “shear” of the Twin Towers, is forced to confront “how small / a part we play in holding up the tall / spires” of poetic meaning. But, unlike the catastrophic physical destruction of the 9/11 attacks, the shift in the meaning of “Home to Roost,” however uncomfortable to its poet, is generative of new types of reflection within and about the poem.

“Shift” generalizes Ryan’s poetics as one of connection between reader and writer. “Write” and “rights,” themselves a shifted pair of homophones, summarize a shared relationship over the concrete poem: whatever structures a poet creates realign themselves in her reader. The poem’s writing does not settle, even as it rights: verbal constructions “shear,” much like Ryan’s

100 Ryan, The Best of It, 23.
“cascade of shifts”\textsuperscript{103} and the unravelling of Penelope’s “fake sewing.”\textsuperscript{104} Even with its wrenching reference, the contrast in scale between Ryan’s small poem and its collapsing skyscrapers further captures her thinking on lyric form. “Shifts” enacts Ryan’s observation in a 2009 journal entry that her poems are able to “touch the farthest keys” not despite their brevity and subtle technique, but because “just a small stir generates the big shifts.”\textsuperscript{105} The “mystery” of poetry, she continues, “is dearest when the contrast between agent and effect is greatest.”\textsuperscript{106} Ryan centers her poetics on intertwined shifts, large and small, that act upon the inseparability of mind and poem to initiate remarkably large cognitive expansions.

Whereas her journals show Ryan relearning how to think and write on her own after Adair’s death, \textit{Dragon Acts} exhibits a similar process as she develops the mechanics by which her discrete poems shift into expansive thought. In her 1983 debut, Ryan undertakes her career-long project of parsing the limits, expansions, and connections of the mind. Through poems in which she considers paintings and music, Ryan observes how the perspectives of other artists shift in her own mind through their aesthetics. These art poems experiment with Ryan’s ability to translate her own aesthetic experience to her reader in verbal form, establishing her own unique poetics.

\textsuperscript{103} Ryan, journal, “6.24.12,” Box 21, Folder 1135.
\textsuperscript{104} Ryan, “Some Transcendent Addiction to the Useless.”
3. “Too Big to Be Innocent”: Ryan’s Poetic Debut

While no works from Ryan’s first two collections appear in her 2010 Pulitzer Prize winning collected poems, The Best of It, the epigraph of her 1983 debut announces the maturity of her writing:

WARNING

You are getting so big, all of a sudden, Dragon!

You have lost your baby fat
and know where
your head and tail are at

You are too big to be innocent

Now when you melt a city
we will not respond playfully

There will be no more allowances
for your homelessness
and lack of friends

Now we will read your acts
as Dragon acts to Dragon ends.107

The poem, from which the collection takes its title, introduces Ryan as a new and confident writer. It remarks, with resolve and humor, on the collection’s status as a self-published debut, which nonetheless will be granted “no more allowances / for your homelessness / and lack of friends.” Ryan asserts that the Dragon’s actions, however transgressive, are ready to be “read” as “Dragon acts to Dragon ends.” Maturing quickly without its “baby fat,” Ryan insists that her Dragon—and her slim poems—be interpreted as taking deliberate poetic “acts” with intended “ends.” In a poetics of shifts, where the poem expands outside its bounds and resists settled understanding, Ryan’s first collection experiments with the unstable “ends” of her poems: both

107 Ryan, Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends, 7.
their conclusions on the page and their ultimate meanings. Ryan is clear, however, that they are to be understood not as amateur mistakes, but as purposeful artistic choices.

*Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends* demonstrates Ryan’s attention to what would prove a remarkably consistent set of aesthetic considerations throughout her career. Ryan later claimed that the collection “didn’t get me anywhere” in terms of recognition.108 It offers, however, the “literary genesis” Willard Spiegelman finds lacking when he comments that Ryan appeared “like Athena, springing full-grown from the head of Zeus” into the literary world during the late 1990s.109 In a 1998 essay—the first critical study of Ryan’s work—Dana Gioia surveys *Dragon Acts* as “[u]neven but substantial,” noting that it “already contained many poems that bear Ryan’s signature virtues of complex wordplay, dense but irregular rhyme, elastic lineation, and extreme compression.”110 The book also includes some of Ryan’s favorite topics—odd creatures, medieval saints, ancient myths, music, and paintings. Throughout the collection, Ryan introduces her unique voice, as Gioia describes it, “at once oddly learned, amiably witty, and utterly casual—rather like the conversation of an intelligent friend.”111

In her correspondence, Ryan conceives of *Dragon Acts* as cohesive in presenting a new poetic voice behind its varied poems. In a 1983 letter to poet May Swenson seeking support for the collection, Ryan describes it as a resulting from a process by which she “plucked one representative bean and one representative eggplant and one representative zucchini” from the “forbidding jungle” of her work. She hopes that, despite its variety, the collection will introduce a singular perspective: “If I have a strong voice,” she writes to Swenson, “surely that voice will

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108 Ryan, The Art of Poetry No. 94.
111 Gioia.
hold it all together” like a network of “veins or some other thing a doctor could see.”112 The collection proved more a “forbidding jungle” than anything else, provoking reactions by various contemporary poets—all in private correspondence—of mixed enthusiasm and bafflement. Instead of finding clear “veins,” early letters note that Ryan’s quick pace, drastic variation in tone, and density of thought make her poems impenetrable.113

The collection’s art poems, two on music and eight on painting, exemplify Ryan’s early experimentation with her complex cognitive poetics. These art poems convey Ryan’s developing understanding of the aesthetic experience of her poems and their centrality of thought. Seven take their titles from works of art, including Charles Ives’s Universe Symphony, Edward Hopper’s Morning Sun, and Mary Cassatt’s Lilacs in a Window. Among several changes in the order of poems in typescripts and galley prints, Ryan always maintained the painting poems as a single unit.114 In one version, she opened the collection with them; in its final iteration, the painting poems constitute the entire second section. By considering other artworks, Ryan explores the operations of aesthetic experience doubly: as moving from painter or composer to their audience (the speaker or “thinker” of the poem), and from poet to reader. In this double-jointed scheme, the art poems in Dragon Acts use Ryan’s understanding of aesthetics to inform her emerging poetics.

Many, but not all, correspondents treat the distinctive characteristics of Ryan’s art poems—their brevity, slant-rhymes, uneven tone, and incompleteness of thought—as markers of her inexperience rather than manifestations of her poetics. William Stafford and Miller Williams remark enthusiastically upon the painting poems as a group in which Ryan’s voice appears most

112 Kay Ryan to May Swenson, 18 June 1983, Box 7, Folder 261.
113 e.g. Miller Williams to Kay Ryan, 6 October 1983, Box 7, Folder 261.
114 Ryan, 1983, Box 7, Folders 262 and 263.
clearly. On the other hand, Mary Kinzie of *The American Poetry Review* focuses her comments on the same run of poems when declining to review the collection. She emphasizes her interest in their “subjects,” but not in the “poems themselves,” wishing for a “longer and more serious engagement”:

> You have written some pieces that are not without interest... I am, furthermore, interested in the subjects of your painting poems, although not so much by the poems themselves [...]. But I believe that this is still novice work – it strikes me as the workbook of a very ambitious but still uncertain and unfocused writer. One sign of what I am trying to suggest is that all your poems tend to go out after the same amount of “breath,” in a little pouf like a candle flame: which [sic] I miss in the painting poems is the longer serious engagement with the subjects rather than these ingenious squibs.

In this critical response to the painting poems, Kinzie nonetheless points out much of what Ryan maintains in her mature poetry: its consistency of “breath,” its almost-disappearing endings, and its author’s propensity for apparent one-liners. Kinzie, however, dismisses the animating tension of Ryan’s poems—the relationship of the “little pouf like a candle flame” of her words to the great paintings they consider. With her candle imagery, Kinzie unwittingly highlights in Ryan’s early work what the poet describes in her 2015 journal as interesting her most—where things begin to “flicker” in the mind, a condition at odds with the “longer serious engagement” Kinzie encourages.

The apparent mismatch between Ryan’s diminutive poems and their great “subjects” is an early manifestation of her theory of aesthetic thought. *Dragon Acts*’ flickering art poems, in which Ryan offers fleeting engagement with paintings and music, reflect the idea she later elaborates in her journal that art allows “alignments that are intermittently possible between minds during which [it] is possible to sense a deep access into mysterious processes.”

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115 William Stafford to Kay Ryan, 6 June 1983, Box 7, Folder 261.
116 Mary Kinzie to Kay Ryan, 7 October 1983, Box 7, Folder 261. Emphasis original.
118 Ryan, journal, “July 2, 2015 5:30 ish,” Box 21, Folder 1144.
Ryan, art involves a mystery by which she experiences a passing correspondence with its removed creator. The “subjects” of Ryan’s art poems are thus not only the pieces with which she engages, but the brief moment in which she feels coherence with another artist. The connection cannot last longer than the size of Ryan’s poems, dissipating like the “pouf” Kinzie identifies in their intermittence of thought.\(^{119}\) Ryan’s “subject” is not each work of art, but the “deep access into mysterious processes” by which she accesses another’s mode of thinking.

Ryan considers her art poems as partaking in a communion with other artists through aesthetic experience. The group of paintings in *Dragon Acts* replicates the form of an art gallery, a persistent motif in Ryan’s thought. Ryan writes to Swenson in 1983 that, like an art gallery, she envisions her poems creating a single aesthetic conversation that might “carry the smudges of Van Gogh’s violent oils over onto the clean Hopper walls.”\(^{120}\) In a 2011 journal entry, Ryan remarks that such a setting illuminates the “instant mystery of art” by isolating it from the context of its creation. This “test of deracination,” she believes, demonstrates that even though a painting is “made of something we can’t understand” because a viewer cannot recreate the exact context of its creation, the artwork nevertheless mysteriously conveys “the grit in the air of its moment.”\(^{121}\) The transportation to “its moment” occurs, in Ryan’s view, “below the conscious threshold.”\(^{122}\) Without knowing its artist, Ryan can sense in a painting by Van Gogh or Rembrandt, she writes, “that whisper, that blood murmur, something subterranean and secret, passed on without comment, under the table.”\(^{123}\) Doing so “without comment” is the “mystery of art,” and creates the formal challenge of Ryan’s inherently verbal form.\(^{124}\)

\(^{119}\) Mary Kinzie to Kay Ryan, 7 October 1983, Box 7, Folder 261.
\(^{120}\) Kay Ryan to May Swenson, 18 June 1983, Box 7, Folder 261
\(^{121}\) Ryan, journal, “March 11, 2011 10:00 AM,” Box 20, Folder 1130.
\(^{122}\) Ryan, journal, “November 28, 2013 8:54 AM,” Box 21, Folder 1138.
\(^{123}\) “November 28, 2013 8:54 AM,” Box 21, Folder 1138.
\(^{124}\) Ryan, journal, “March 11, 2011 10:00 AM,” Box 20, Folder 1130.
Ryan uses her art poems to study her own ways of connecting with an artist’s thought through their work. Ryan, an amateur painter herself, detects an aesthetic experience common to all artforms—a single “live line of knowing” reaching all the way back to the “cave paintings at Lascaux.” In a 1982 journal entry in the wake of disastrous flooding in Northern California, Ryan reflects that “I felt my weakness and in the presence of a real poem or a sonata or an Edward Hopper painting of light and shade, I drank it in like a blood tonic, an elixir.” The art poems of Dragon Acts show Ryan exploring the common mysteries of aesthetic experience. As Ryan’s mind mingles with those of painters and composers, her collection considers how to represent this shared artistic phenomenon in her verbal medium.

First, she examines and replicates the relationship between her experiences of expansive thought and the physical boundaries of an artwork. Next, she experiments with nonsense as a verbal conduit for the unbounded thought initiated by art.

3a. “The Feeling is Vertiginous”: Edges of Thought in Dragon Acts

The art poems of Dragon Acts examine one of the central concerns of Ryan’s journals: the tension between the mind’s limitless thought and the bounded, discrete nature of her poems. Like the blind men encountering the elephant in her favorite parable, each poem captures only an instant in a longer movement of thought. To craft her characteristically brief lyrics, Ryan must introduce edges: boundaries of form that, like the end of a symphony or the frame of a painting, mark where the artwork ends. At the same time, Ryan’s poetics strives to capture the totality of her thought by bringing the reader to its marshy peripheries—the edges of cognition. Playing on

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these two senses of edge, Ryan develops the characteristic scale of her poems in relation to their expansive thought.

The collection’s first art poem, on Charles Ives’s *Universe Symphony*, establishes Ryan’s interest in the contrast in scale between vast topics and discrete artistic forms. Its epigraph, a quotation about the piece’s composition, announces it as a poem about the artistic process, in which Ryan considers Ives’s attempts to capture a defeatingly large theme. The poem continues, though, with no obvious exposition on the symphony or Ives himself, instead offering an imaginative and associative banquet scene:

*Universe Symphony*

_He was always working on this, but the theme was so gigantic that it was not intended to be finished._

—*a friend talking about Charles Ives*

—the way Queens ate
whole pigs whole plates
of little birds five tanks
of ale, sauce on the vegetables;
you should have seen their tables
groaning beneath the load of comestibles!

Fools marvel:
“Nobody would have been able to eat all that…”

“Oh so what, so *what,*” the Queens not only thought
but couched imperially,
“WE are HUNGRY!”

Ryan’s poem takes on the epigraph’s concern with any possibility of completion: only “Fools” worry about the feast’s ending. The poem’s exuberance is its appetite towards grandeur—“WE are HUNGRY!” As Ives cannot and does not plan to encapsulate the “gigantic” theme of the universe and the Queens have no interest in finishing their feast, Ryan’s poem declines to offer a

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synopsis of the symphony. Instead, it presents what Ryan later calls “an abstraction, a brain picture” of her reaction to Ives’s piece.128

After “Universe Symphony” situates Ives’s artistic appetite in an unexpected banquet scene, Ryan’s first painting poem considers the mystery of aesthetic experience by which Edward Hopper’s Morning Sun transports its viewer into the artist’s perspective (Figure 1). Hopper is a touchstone of Ryan’s aesthetic thinking, appearing in her journals as early as 1982129 and as late as 2011, when Ryan reflects that “Hopper and I share some wordless knowledge,” a kinship “terribly abstract and intimate.”130 In this early poem, Ryan inhabits Hopper’s mind through indirect discourse:

*MORNING SUN, Edward Hopper*

It is always something about how light comes in—however dirty the air or the room something else is clean. There is no need
to explain to the woman on the bed; she has so often been painted by him. It is a peaceful thing, to aim at whatever light he likes, to cast a shadow on the sheets.

He is free with her there—agent of space, as though he were room itself—with her looking out at the old men and the children on the street, the bird that flies. I will have to die first, he thinks. It would not be possible to go on; shadow become something else than what she turned from.131

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130 Ryan, journal, “March 11, 2011 10:00 AM,” Box 20, Folder 1130.
131 Ryan, *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends*, 35.
The poem takes up the dual nature of its aesthetic moment—both the vastness of Ryan’s response to Hopper’s work and the artist’s own reaction to the totality of the world he paints. Ryan skirts around a straightforward description of *Morning Sun*: in the present tense of the poem the painting itself does not yet exist. The speculative poem, however, does not abandon the final painted object because its entire imaginative project arises from the painting. “*Morning Sun,*” like “*Universe Symphony,*” contains two implicit accounts of aesthetic experience: that of the viewer-poet towards the painting and that which she imagines for Hopper.

Ryan’s poetic preoccupations echo the aesthetic struggle she imagines for Hopper as he attempts to render a moment of simultaneous brevity and immensity within his bounded canvas. In a 2015 journal entry, Ryan articulates a similar predicament in her own thinking: “My mind can light so briefly on these things […] It seems deeply and constantly interesting, and possibly the better part of valor. But it *may* be too brief a landing.”

As Hopper feels that he is “agent of space” and “room itself,” he also senses the impermanence of this coherence. His plaintive understanding that “It would not be possible / to go on” embodies Ryan’s own fixation with the brevity and depth of artistic transcendence. As she comments in her journal in 2012, the “cruel fact” of poetry is that “the most beautiful thoughts and feelings can barely settle…we can’t endure more than the briefest visitations.”

Neither poem nor canvas can capture the expanse of their moment, but the brevity of the encounter is all the mind can endure.

Despite their physical parameters, Ryan presents both poem and painting as sites where feeling shifts between minds. The imaginative trajectory of Ryan’s 1983 poem expresses her theorization 33 years later that, by marking the places at which “edges match in various minds”

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with “surgical precision,” an artist can generate a great expansion of thought.\footnote{Ryan, journal, “January 4, 2016 8:20.” Box 21, Folder 1145.} This, for Ryan, is how the “unknowable is expressed”: Hopper brings his viewer to the concrete edge of understanding so that she can survey what he cannot commit to his canvas. In “\textit{Morning Sun},” a viewer can never recreate what Hopper’s model actually saw beyond the window, but Ryan is able to imagine the “the old men and the children on the street, / the bird that flies.” Similarly, Ryan’s reader cannot reconstruct the poet’s exact reaction to Hopper’s painting. By what Ryan calls the “mystery of art,” however, Hopper captures his experience of fleeting transcendence even as the shadow before him will instantaneously become “something else than what she turned from.”\footnote{Ryan, journal, “March 11, 2011 10:00 AM,” Box 20, Folder 1130.} Hopper’s painting enables a shift in his viewer’s understanding, a movement that embodies Ryan’s later definition of poetry as the “exact formation of this shift out of that form and the feeling of expanding space inside the reader.”\footnote{Ryan, journal, “September 15, 2016,” Box 21, Folder 1146.} Through her verbal rendering of \textit{Morning Sun}, Ryan considers the same relationship between artist and audience she articulates in her journals as central to her poetics.

In \textit{Dragon Acts}, Ryan focuses on the edges of her poems as places of transfer from writer to reader. Her second poem on a Hopper painting sharpens Ryan’s interest in the audience’s indeterminate experience at the edges of an artwork:

\begin{quote}
\textit{ROAD AND HOUSES, CAPE COD,}
\textit{Edward Hopper}

A road makes
a wide mark
a place where
nothing else is
It is never
not a promise
When it falls
at the edge
\end{quote}
of the canvas
the feeling
is vertiginous
How we must trust!
Soon a car
will come past
which will not
slam on its brakes
Motion cannot
assume a cliff,
the painter
cannot ask
What if

The lineation of Ryan’s poem forms a “a wide mark” on the page, much like the road Hopper’s painting depicts (Figure 2). The edges of Ryan’s narrow lines, which presage her mature style, also match the “edge / of the canvas” she observes. It is a fitting correspondence for a piece in which Ryan explores the continuation of thought past the bounds of an artwork. The poem embodies Ryan’s assessment in a 2012 journal entry that “[t]here is an after-motion that is generated by an idea well-started. It can be pleasant to be allowed by your writer to go gliding on after the writer has shut up.” Ryan’s poem mirrors his effect.

For Ryan, the edges of an artwork allow its thought to exceed its concrete form. In a 2008 interview, Ryan comments that “Edges are the most powerful parts of the poem. The more edges you have the more power you have.” Much like Hopper's road, with its “vertiginous” drop over “the edge / of the canvas,” Ryan's poem itself ends at a cliff, with the momentum of her sentence continuing past the unpunctuated “What if.” While “Morning Sun” closes with wistful dissipation and “Road and Houses, Cape Cod” with a dramatic drop, each poem uses its ending

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137 Ryan, Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends, 36.
139 Ryan, The Art of Poetry No. 94.
not for cognitive resolution but to shift into its reader’s imagination. As Ryan muses in 2014, she is able to create a sense of “borderless thought” in the reader only by “not mucking it up by not putting something wrong in, or putting nothing on top of something.”\(^\text{140}\) In the same way the drop at the edge of Hopper’s canvas animates the painting for its viewer, the poet cannot anticipate the “immensity of the mind’s extension” possible just beyond her poem’s end.\(^\text{141}\) Like the painter, Ryan must work with the edges of her medium while paradoxically not anticipating the nature of its expansion—she cannot ask “What if.” She must allow her poems to continue their trajectories in her reader’s mind.

Ryan’s art poems exemplify Kinzie’s comparison of her work to a “pouf like a candle flame.”\(^\text{142}\) What Kinzie faults is Ryan’s aim in her brief lyrics. Kinzie’s metaphor accurately describes both Ryan’s reaction to artworks and her own poetics. As flame turns to smoke, the art poems of *Dragon Acts* shift substances: from Ives’s symphony to Ryan’s short scene of feasting; and from Hopper’s paintings to her poems. In observing Hopper, Ryan carefully executes this shift in her final lines, aligning the edges of her understanding with those of her poems. By doing so, Ryan enacts what she later calls in her journals “our only interest” in poetry and art—of “getting right up to that edge, although it…although it suddenly gives out.”\(^\text{143}\) For Ryan, this dissolution at the simultaneous edges of a poem and of understanding enables her lyrics to transcend their discrete bounds.

\(^\text{142}\) Mary Kinzie to Kay Ryan, 7 October 1983, Box 7, Folder 261.
\(^\text{143}\) Ryan, journal, “January 4, 2016 8:20,” Box 21, Folder 1145.
3b. “Be Brave as Matisse”: Nonsense in Dragon Acts

*Dragon Acts* partakes in Ryan’s enduring concept of nonsense as the way for a poem to expand into the mind of its reader. A nonsensical freedom of meaning, as Ryan writes in her journals, is the very essence of her craft: “it is ‘the poetic.’”\(^{144}\) Compared to other arts, Ryan finds poetry particularly difficult because “its medium is language and it is required to mean as music or paint are not.”\(^{145}\) By evading the strict meaning-making expected of language, nonsense allows Ryan’s poetry to “escape all the weight” of making sense, by “agreeing to mean, but freely, so that meaning can get away.”\(^{146}\) The art poems in *Dragon Acts* prefigure Ryan’s later statement that nonsense not only “gives poetry much of its secret irresistibility and staying power,” but also that “this mysterious exchange informs all the arts I’m drawn to.”\(^{147}\) Ryan’s first collection explores the freedom of meaning she admires in music and visual art, and creates its own poetic analogues.

In *Dragon Acts* Ryan considers her own response to artworks that participate in her broad concept of nonsense through their abstract departures from literal representation. Much as “*Universe Symphony*” jumps from its epigraph on Ives’s composition to an Arthurian scene, Ryan’s poem on Henri Matisse illustrates her own apparently nonsensical reaction to his enigmatic, collage-like painting (Figure 3). The middle of the poem marks a shift from the mechanics of Matisse’s observation into Ryan’s own thought:

*RED INTERIOR, Henri Matisse*

Oh only a skinny ungenerous angle

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\(^{144}\) Ryan, journal, [Not clearly dated page: most like a continuation of “Notes for West Cit Conference 2010”], Box 20, Folder 1127.


\(^{147}\) Ryan, “A Consideration of Poetry,” 35.
would squint round tables,
vuluptuous tables of apples’
deep-shadowed navels,
wide dilate pupils open
as the window; ask any Eskimo
with bright axe and shovel
if the warm seal jumps
out of an oval!
ROUND is how all things come in
ROUND is how they leave—

Of course
things slip—

why else
is BOUNCE?

Be brave as Matisse.¹⁴⁸

After hewing to a description of Matisse’s radically flattened pictorial space, Ryan makes her
own associate leap after the semicolon in the sixth line with the unexpected introduction of the
ice-fishing “Eskimo” figure and the artic seal into Matisse’s French interior. In much the same
way that the artistic gusto of Ives’s modern symphony spurs Ryan's imagination of a medieval
feast, Matisse’s vivid painting creates the conditions for, if not the precise content of, the poem’s
free-wheeling thought. Its pale blue table cloth resembles an ice fishing hole, activating Ryan’s
reference to the “Eskimo” and the seal jumping forth. The cold ice and warm-blooded seal mirror
Ryan’s description in a 2006 essay of nonsense as a “deep exchange of heat for cool that I’m
trying to get at.”¹⁴⁹ Both Matisse’s color scheme and Ryan’s association with the far north enact
this conception of nonsense.

The nonsensical trajectory of Ryan’s thought in “Red Interior” recalls the fluid ending of
“Road and Houses, Cape Cod.” In both cases, Ryan’s poem continues beyond the painting that

¹⁴⁸ Ryan, Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends, 37.
inspires it, past its edge or through the portal of a blue table cloth. Each poem, to use Ryan’s later analysis, is the “after-motion that is generated by an idea well-started.” Where the continuation of Hopper’s painting into Ryan’s mind mirrors the road that both painting and poem depict, her thinking on Matisse’s interior springs from his canvas more aesthetically than thematically. From his “skinny ungenerous angle” Ryan generates a rotund seal. His painting holds a static posture, its angle flattening the rounded “voluptuous tables of apples / deep-shadowed navels, / wide dilate pupils open.” Ryan’s poem does the opposite: its second half veers to “ROUND” forms and the movements of “slip” and “BOUNCE.” The courage Ryan references in her closing line—“Be brave as Matisse”—thus corresponds with her pronouncement in “Road and Houses, Cape Cod” that “the painter / cannot ask / What if.” In both instances, the painter cannot “assume” the reader’s reaction, even as their work conditions it.

The poem’s abrupt movements typify a nonsensical mode present throughout Dragon Acts. In an early response to the collection, Miller Williams finds aesthetic weakness in Ryan’s “confusion of sense,” with thematic material “erratically changing.” “Red Interior,” as it veers from Matisse’s squinting angle to the animated “BOUNCE” of Ryan’s seal, might epitomize what Williams calls a “confusion of tone, when apparent flippancy, childlikeness and high seriousness tumble into each other.” On the whole, Williams concludes that he “can’t be sure what you’re saying.” As Ryan herself responded to Williams, however, the nonsensical shifts of Dragon Acts signal the early development of a new poetics: “The confusions […] are surely

151 Ryan, Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends, 36.
152 Ryan, 36.
153 Miller Williams to Kay Ryan, 6 October 1983, Box 7, Folder 261.
154 Miller Williams to Kay Ryan, 6 October 1983, Box 7, Folder 261.
there, but I’m fairly certain that they are interlocked with whatever strengths I have in a way I can’t tinker with too much.”\textsuperscript{155} The hurtling movements of “Red Interior” ensure that its reader, like Williams, cannot “be sure” what Ryan is saying. In her early poem and letter, Ryan identifies her departures—at various levels of her poems—from logical sense as essential to her poetics.

Ryan’s far-reaching concept of nonsense allows her poems to emulate the paintings she admires by “agreeing to mean, but freely” so that their insights can take on new life in the reader.\textsuperscript{156} If the arctic intrusion of “Red Interior” and the gluttonous Queens of “Universe Symphony” activate a kind of nonsense humor, Ryan's capacious definition of the term also encompasses her tender, melancholic poem on Mary Cassatt's \textit{Lilacs in a Window} (Figure 4). Referencing the pastel purples and greens of Cassatt’s painting, Ryan uses this chromatic contrast to spark a meditation on personal longing:

\textit{LILACS IN A WINDOW, Mary Cassatt}

Do colors
call to one another—
lilac in a window
call green; green
beg relief from
green—each
thing the other’s
name? No lilac
without end.

Lilac,
my mother’s choice,
one bush
by the desert house
against sand and
bitter wind
call to her

\textsuperscript{155} Kay Ryan to Miller Williams, 16 October 1983, Box 7, Folder 261.
\textsuperscript{156} Ryan, journal, “October 19, 2014 9:30 AM,” Box 22, Folder 1141.
Ryan's quieter poem models nonsense in its syntax. The first stanza’s twisting image of “lilac in a window / call green; green / beg relief from / green” eludes the clarity of a fixed meaning. The mutability of Ryan's sentence structure echoes her free juxtaposition of lilac and green, in which these contrasting colors mystifyingly become “each / thing the other’s / name.” As she connects this relationship of lilac and green with the speaker’s mother in the second stanza, Ryan mingles the colors of Cassatt's still-life with the thematic content of the artist’s famous mother-and-child scenes, in which the figures often seem, like the intertwined colors of the poem, to become indistinguishable at their edges. By freely associating lilac with green, still-life with family genre scene, Ryan matches the thematic content of her poem to its unsettled syntax—leaving its meaning, like its colors, calling “without end.” As Cassatt’s paintings permeate Ryan’s thought, so Ryan's syntactical and thematic nonsense allows her poem’s longing tenor to resonate endlessly in the mind of its reader. It leaves her reader, as Ryan says of nonsense in a 2006 essay, with the lingering feeling that “things are on the verge of coming together” in its syntax, colors, and reflection on the connection between mother and child.

As Ryan plaintively considers the relationships of Cassatt’s colors, her poem enacts her later theory of personal warmth behind nonsense. Her jump from the abstracted color of lilacs to the personal history that they were “my mother’s choice”—an exceedingly rare first-person pronoun in Ryan’s work—mirrors that of “Red Interior.” Each poem voices an idiosyncratic,
free-associative reaction to the colors of the painting. Ryan’s strange conflation of lilac and green typifies the individuality in her conception of nonsense, which she describes as functioning under the rules of a “highly personal idea of cause and effect” beyond another’s understanding.\(^1\) In her 2013 essay “Specks,” Ryan locates the personal operations of nonsense in her own reaction to colors, musing that “[m]aybe some of us are wired backwards … maybe what we think is orange is blue.”\(^2\) As with the exchange of hot for cold in “Red Interior,” the slippage from orange to blue or purple to green captures a nonsensical motion between opposites. Ryan’s idiosyncratic meditation on Cassatt’s painting demonstrates the type of unfettered response she locates in the interpretive freedom of nonsense. Her looping syntax and nonsensical overlaps of color mark an attempt to reconstruct the visual effect of Cassatt’s still-life in Ryan’s verbal form.

Ryan’s poems on Ives, Matisse, and Cassatt trace her personal reactions to their aesthetics, which the poet believes operate more freely in painting and music.\(^3\) By offering her own nonsensical verbal responses to other art forms, Ryan attempts in her poems to “escape all the weight” of language’s requirement to mean.\(^4\) Ryan leaves her poems as atmospheric and indeterminate as the art she admires by creating pieces in which “meaning can get away” from the reader, preserving the instability essential to her shifting poetics.\(^5\) Without the parsable meaning of stable sense, Ryan’s nonsense begins to align her poetry with the less meaning-bound forms of painting and music.

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\(^1\) Ryan, “A Consideration of Poetry,” 25.
In *Dragon Acts*, Ryan considers the bounds and edges of finite works of art. While such boundaries are necessarily at odds with her own experience of shifting and expanding thought, she develops an aesthetic and poetic understanding of edges not as limitations, but as ways in which to initiate the “immensity of the mind’s extension.”\(^{166}\) By bringing a reader to the “verge” of meaning,\(^{167}\) nonsense allows Ryan to create a semantic edge between stable understanding and the shifting place she hopes to activate in her reader “so deep down in the mind that it isn’t even intelligence.”\(^{168}\) Through an awareness of boundaries—in the mind and in art—Ryan crafts a poetics that seeks to execute a “mysterious exchange” across its border between writer and reader.\(^{169}\)

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\(^{166}\) Ryan, journal, “November 20, 2014 11:57 AM,” Box 21, Folder 1136.


Conclusion

Reading Kay Ryan’s papers alongside her poetry and published prose reveals the consistency of her fascination with poetic cognition. As her journals make clear, Ryan sees her own thought and writing as a single “long project” from her obscure early days to her later recognition.\(^{170}\) Rather than fixing the meaning of her work to the bare facts of her biography—a method Ryan has herself been wary of since “Is it by Giotto?”—the journals offer a view of the universe of her mind, her “whole complex attempt to get the time of the stars.”\(^{171}\)

The brevity of Ryan’s poems belies their expansive thought. The contrast in scale between her concrete lyrics and the “immensity of the mind’s extension” animates her poetics.\(^{172}\) At various points in her journals and essays, Ryan writes of an exchange at work in her poems. First, there is the “deep exchange” that occurs within the mind’s endless, unknowable expanse “of which we see only the external evidence.”\(^{173}\) Next, the “exchange of heat for cool” typifies the elusive meanings of Ryan’s capacious concept of nonsense.\(^{174}\) Ultimately, a “mysterious exchange” between artist and audience, as the poet writes, “informs all the arts I’m drawn to.”\(^{175}\) For Ryan, shifts govern this exchange at all levels—from verbal techniques, to the shift in understanding between poet and reader, and finally to the “cascade of shifts in the brain” precipitated by her work.\(^{176}\) Since “shifts trigger other shifts,” as Ryan puts it, her poems create a continuous process: their edges not places of completion, but of transfer from poet to reader and into ongoing expansions of thought.\(^{177}\)

\(^{175}\) Ryan, “A Consideration of Poetry,” 35.
\(^{176}\) Ryan, journal, “6.24.12,” Box 21, Folder 1135.
\(^{177}\) Ryan, journal, “6.24.12,” Box 21, Folder 1135.
The theoretical language that Ryan develops in her later writing illuminates *Dragon Acts* as an early poetic manifesto. In her poems on music and painting, Ryan emulates the freedom of meaning she locates in these art forms—in Ives’s gusto, Hopper’s edges, Matisse’s distinctive angle, and Cassatt’s nonsensical and evocative colors. Her free-associative mode of ekphrasis allows Ryan to explore the aesthetic conditions by which artworks grant her access to new depths of thought and feeling, rather than pursuing the dogmatic approach she parodies in “Is It by Giotto?” In contrast to its “experts,” who cannot interpret the painting before them without identifying its artist, Ryan’s experience of artworks arises from their unique aesthetic atmospheres, connecting her organically to their creators.

Ryan turns this coextensive concept of art back on herself in another poem from *Dragon Acts*, aligning herself with a painter in “We Are Too Much in Evidence.” The poem, which might serve as an antidote to the satire of “Is it by Giotto?,” imagines a type of artistic expression in which the self is fluidly transmuted into the artwork:

If there is peace  
it must be in this transmutation of self  
into wash  
moving the sunset or mist  
or dry branch through  
the arm through the brush;\(^{178}\)

The poem creates a unified aesthetic experience as the “sunset or mist” flows through the artist’s self, arm, brush, and eventually onto her canvas. The painter’s identity need not be imposed upon her work to explain it, as the critics of “Is it by Giotto?” attempt to do, because she suffuses it: her mind “empties” into its very existence. Where those caricatured “experts” must strain to interpret “the stiffness in the Madonna” as Giotto’s genius depiction of “sorrow,” the fluid aesthetic of “We Are Too Much in Evidence,” like a “sunset or mist,” spreads through painter,

\(^{178}\) Ryan, *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends*, 40, 1-6.
canvas, and viewer in a continuous and dynamic relationship. As expansive self and mind permeate the painting, its artist ensures that “correct thought / is not possible.” In its illogical aesthetic space, making sense of the painting in the manner satirized by “Is it by Giotto?” is neither necessary nor desired. The “transmutation” of self through art is nonsensical: it is an alchemical phenomenon, a “mysterious exchange” by which the aesthetics of a painting allow experience to flow as “wash” from creator to viewer.

The flowing aesthetics of “We Are Too Much in Evidence” already voice in Ryan's 1983 debut the process of transformation that the poet would admire decades later in her private journals. As she rekindles her ability to write after Adair’s death, Ryan marvels in 2012 that, at their very best, “[c]ertain poems are entirely radiant with transformations.” Ryan’s compact lyrics expand through these transformations—in Ryan’s thought, in the words of her poems, and finally in the mind of her reader. Much as the painting and music poems in Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends generate surprising shifts in Ryan’s own perspective, she crafts poems that enable a radiance of transformation in her reader as the poet’s thoughts take on new life beyond her own imaginings.

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179 Kay Ryan, Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends (Fairfax, Calif: Taylor Street Press, 1983), 38.
Appendix of Images

Figure 1 Hopper, Edward. *Morning Sun*. 1952. Oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 40 1/8 in. Columbus Museum of Art. https://www.columbusmuseum.org/blog/2020/05/12/pocketguide-to-cma-edward-hoppers-morning-sun/.

Figure 1 While no Hopper painting bearing Ryan’s exact title can be found, the above is illustrative of his Cape Cod works. Hopper, Edward. *Morning Sun*. 1952. Oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 40 1/8 in. Columbus Museum of Art. https://www.columbusmuseum.org/blog/2020/05/12/pocketguide-to-cma-edward-hoppers-morning-sun/.
Figure 2 Matisse, Henri. *Red Interior. Still Life on a Blue Table*. 1947. Oil on canvas, 116 x 89 cm. Private Collection. https://www.henrimatisse.org/red-interior-still-life-on-a-blue-table.jsp#prettyPhoto[image2]/0/.

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