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# Poetry and the Multiple Drafts Model: The Functional Similarity of Cole Swensen's Verse and Human Consciousness

## Abstract

This project compares the operational methods of three of Cole Swensen's books of poetry (*Such Rich Hour, Try, and Goest*) with ways in which the human mind and consciousness function. I use Daniel Dennett's Multiple Drafts Model of consciousness, as described in *Consciousness Explained*, alongside concepts presented in several other philosophical works (from both analytic and continental traditions), to demonstrate that significant similarities exist between the operations of poetry and consciousness in general, and that these operational similarities are especially noticeable in Swensen's work. This thesis examines several operational modes that are present within the human mind (intentionality, phenomenological perception, a materialist process of formation, etc.), as they are contingent upon the Multiple Drafts Model, and constructs a theory of how these same concepts and principles function within Swensen's poetic texts.

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POETRY AND THE MULTIPLE DRAFTS MODEL: THE FUNCTIONAL  
SIMILARITY OF COLE SWENSEN'S VERSE AND HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

---

by

Connor Ryan Kreimeyer Fisher

June 2011

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Title: POETRY AND THE MULTIPLE DRAFTS MODEL: THE FUNCTIONAL  
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### **Abstract**

This project compares the operational methods of three of Cole Swensen's books of poetry (Such Rich Hour, Try, and Goest) with ways in which the human mind and consciousness function. I use Daniel Dennett's Multiple Drafts Model of consciousness, as described in Consciousness Explained, alongside concepts presented in several other philosophical works (from both analytic and continental traditions), to demonstrate that significant similarities exist between the operations of poetry and consciousness in general, and that these operational similarities are especially noticeable in Swensen's work. This thesis examines several operational modes that are present within the human mind (intentionality, phenomenological perception, a materialist process of formation, etc.), as they are contingent upon the Multiple Drafts Model, and constructs a theory of how these same concepts and principles function within Swensen's poetic texts.

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## Section One: Introduction

The second page of Cole Swensen's book Such Rich Hour begins with a peculiar meditation; the specific passage references, among other subjects, the complex nature of perception and of thought. Swensen writes:

numbers, which Saint Augustine considered  
God thinks  
if he am is therefore there

I remember liking the sun

he said. He was  
interviewed in Green Park on Sunday he said, I remember very clearly  
to be the thoughts of God. (Swensen 2)

This diffuse, lyrical passage raises several questions which deserve further analysis. While an initial inquiry may be posed: are numbers indeed the thoughts of God?, or: do God's thoughts follow numerical or mathematical principles?, these are questions best left to a theological analysis. However, by evoking the concept and processes of thought, Swensen raises a question that is not easily dispelled: what place does such a reference to *thinking* have in a collection of poetry, rather than in, for example, a text concerned with neurobiology?

Such a reference to thought does more than idly allude to the issue; it seems to evoke the actual processes involved in human cognition and an important aspect thereof: memory. (The phrase "I remember" occurs twice in the few lines quoted above.) As an

element of this evocation, Swensen's passage contains references to the manner in which a conscious subject perceives objects and occurrences external to itself. This effect often co-occurs with processes of memory—indeed, there is an element of “otherness” to all memories, as they are separate from the conscious thoughts that any conscious agent is experiencing at a specific time. However, the phenomenological perception of external happenings to which I here refer (and which shall be discussed in greater detail later) is another matter. It is noticeable in the lines: “He was/interviewed in Green Park on Sunday he said.” Herein, we note a crucial occurrence: the text does not explicitly reference thought, but rather *enacts* its processes. By referring to two ambiguous persons (“He” and “he”), Green Park, and Sunday, the poem makes reference to individuals, places, and times which seem to lie outside of the perceptive “mind” of the poem, if such a term may be used. This is to say, they are realized and described as a conscious, human subject would perceive objects in his or her own environment.

Such phenomenological action, both here and elsewhere in Such Rich Hour, along with the actions of cognition and memory described on the previous page, highlight an essential trait of Swensen's work: its functions seem to parallel those of the human mind and consciousness. To gain a better understanding of this operation, let us examine another instance of this type of unique, poetic phenomenology, in which poetry seems to mirror the actions of human cognition, this time from Swensen's book Try. Like many moments within Such Rich Hour, the ekphrastic verse in Try enacts processes of perception and cognition as the poetry encounters various works of art. Elsewhere within the volume, such processes of observation take on a tone of meta-perception, as the text



in some ways enacts an awareness of—and meditation upon—its own actions. To return to Swensen’s text, at the conclusion of the poem “There”, she writes:

There’s a world out there that isn’t there.

gathered all the pieces  
and led them across the sky—  
there’s a stag, there’s a bull, there  
a tree on fire all the way home  
built a house of them: one and  
one and one what’s done  
is hardly done. (Swensen 42)

This beautiful stanza marvels at the externality and autonomy of the world; the passage encounters a surreal blend of objects (animals, structures, forces of nature, and perhaps time itself) which the text then integrates into a single “portrait.” Here again we can see the “mind” of the poem at work (I shall soon abandon the quotation marks and explain this term clearly). In this description, the objects undergo a process of apprehension and were drawn into a space that the poem seems to have an awareness of. This process of perception, integration, and articulation occurs throughout Try, as has been described; it is also a dominant operative mode within Such Rich Hour and Swensen’s volume Goest. Indeed, all three of Swensen’s books demonstrate qualities which consciousness itself also manifests.

However, the earlier-posed question still has not been answered: how can poetry enact processes which are inherent to the human mind, and how can verse mirror the function of human consciousness? Consequent questions emerge, which are contingent upon the first: which aspects of the mind does Swensen’s verse imitate in its function? How is the alleged “consciousness” of poetry formed, and how can this exist within a non-conscious object such as poetry? How does poetry “perceive” the objects which it

can be said to “internalize,” when, like all texts, poetry lacks a physical brain, eyes, and nerve endings? As a step towards resolving these questions, I will demonstrate the manners in which Cole Swensen’s poetic texts operate similarly to human consciousness and the mind. My arguments will be based primarily upon the works of three notable thinkers within the philosophy of mind tradition: Daniel Dennett, John Searle, and David Chalmers. I will also draw from the work of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century continental philosopher John-Paul Sartre, from four literary scholars, and from the contemporary thinker Jane Bennett.

## **Section Two: Establishment of Method**

### *Books without Brains*

Before an analysis of the parallels between the operations of human mind and consciousness and Cole Swensen's books can be performed, there are a couple of questions which must be resolved. One of the most pressing is: how can books (which lack brains and have no physical constituents other than paper and ink) be said to imitate the workings of human minds, which are made of complex, living material? Certainly, books in general and poetry in particular have no intrinsic capabilities or nature that exist apart from their cognitive perception by humans. That is to say that we could not claim that poetry operates similarly to consciousness unless conscious beings were reading it and making such a declaration. If all of human life came to an abrupt end, poetry could not be said to function similarly to consciousness, because there would no longer be conscious beings capable of reading poetry and making that assertion. Thus, it is true that the alleged consciousness and mind-esque function of poetry depends upon the pre-existence of these qualities in individual human beings. Such an argument plays an important part in the section below, entitled *Intentional Structure*.

### **Poetry Acts like the Brain's Processes**

There are two primary means of legitimation by which we can say that Swensen's poetry does operate similarly to consciousness and which will permit us to speak of the

consciousness and mind of the poems themselves. The first is a simple argument. As alluded to in the Introduction, we can claim that Swensen's poetry makes use of the concepts of memory, perception, and cognition in a manner similar to that of the human mind itself. This will be further evidenced in the third and fourth sections of this thesis.

When Swensen's verse approaches a topic, it does so like the conscious human mind thinks of the topics that it meditates upon. When her work references for the second (or third, or fourth) time an event or thought which has already occurred within the text, it may fairly be said that this is a *textual memory*, since the manner in which these prior events are resurrected in the mind of the poem is similar to how memories are resurrected within the conscious human mind. When the text of the three books establishes a narrative of temporal occurrences within a single poem or a narrative that continues through an entire book, diffuse as such narratives often are, verse performs this action in a manner that is similar to how the human mind forms its own internal narratives of occurrence and belief.

Although there is occasionally a narrating persona within these three books (one who speaks: "I"), it cannot be said that these actions of memory and cognition are being performed by a textual agent or character within the poem itself, for the poetry operates in an identical fashion even when there is no such narrator/character. Likewise, it cannot be said that it is Cole Swensen's conscious processes which are being recorded in her poetry. In addition to the fact that literary texts do not refer back to or represent their authors, there are historical events described within Such Rich Hour which Swensen has

not herself experienced, and works of art whose composition she was not present to witness.

Thus, it seems logical to conclude that the poetic texts themselves, although they lack brains, eyes, hands, and are not themselves alive, function in many ways like human minds and consciousness.

### **Intentional Structure**

The second argument which I will use to assert the validity of claiming that Swensen's work operates like the human mind and consciousness and that we may legitimately refer to the mind and consciousness of the poems themselves is similar to a statement that was made early in the Methods section. I started that we could not claim that Swensen's poetry functions similarly to the human mind if there were not conscious human beings able to read the work and subsequently determine that the verse operates like consciousness. Thus, consciousness must first exist within human subjects and, having perceived poetry, thereafter consider it as something that operates similarly to the human mind.

This reasoning is similar to that used by John R. Searle in his essay "The Phenomenological Illusion," wherein he describes how any object must exist in reality prior to its taking on any meaning to the human mind. This is to say that meaning is not inherent in objects themselves, but is placed upon them by inquisitive human minds; this meaning is often quite arbitrary (as in the meaning of words) and often not (as in the use of a hammer or other tool). (Searle 118)

On page 117, Searle writes,

The production of [an] acoustic blast . . . is the performance of [a] speech act. . . . We know . . . that the production of meaning is entirely observer relative, entirely done by humans, because we know that without intentional human thought and action there is no meaning.

Searle deals with this same type of thought in more explicit language in his book Mind, Language, and Society. As in the passage from “The Phenomenological Illusion,” he argues that meaning does not inhere within objects, words, etc.—rather, after these objects have been created or perceived by human minds, meaning can then be given to them. On page 121 of Mind, Language, and Society, in the chapter “The Structure of the Social Universe,” he writes,

It is a remarkable fact about human beings and some higher animals that they are capable as using certain objects as tools. This is an instance of the more general capacity to assign functions to objects, where the function is not intrinsic to the object but has to be assigned by some outside agent or agents. Think of primitive peoples using a log as a bench, or using a stone for digging. All of these are cases of agents assigning a function to, or imposing a function on, some natural object. The agents exploit the natural features of the object to achieve their purposes.

This topic has a profound impact upon the way in which we articulate the operation of poetry. Such an articulation can only be performed after poetic texts have been written, just as meaning can only be attributed to verbal statements or physical objects after they have been created and/or perceived. Poetry—in the case of this study, Cole Swensen’s poetry—can thus take on certain functions, meanings, and patterns of operation because such functions have been “given” to it by conscious (human) agents. This process parallels the manner in which speech acts come to have their meaning, as Searle describes.

Therefore, Swensen's verse can be perceived as—and indeed, *becomes*—something that operates like the human mind and consciousness because, having perceived its existence, we can attribute meaning to it as *something that functions like consciousness*. Historically, after constructing a simple chair, a primitive man may have thought, “I intend to use this object as something to sit upon.” This gave arbitrary—albeit functional—meaning to the previously undefined chair-object.

Likewise, we have read Swensen's verse and have thereby perceived its natural ontology: that which the poetry is prior to any meaning being placed upon it. We may say that, in the state of poetry prior to any function being attached to it, it is comparatively meaningless. This is a moment of analysis which is valuable to preserve and dangerous to move beyond too quickly. Although we will use theories of mind and consciousness (especially Dennett's) to interpret and understand Swensen's verse, they do not captivate its totality; there are elements of the poetry which escape categorization by our discussions of the Multiple Drafts Model, Perception, and Intentionality. The nature of philosophical theories is as limited as that of poetic texts; these types of texts function in manners or address topics (such as consciousness) which at times coincide. However, there is no meta-poetic or meta-philosophic force which determines that the poetry finds its purest interpretation through the lens of the philosophy. This paper shows the confluence of specific texts and theories—yet it is not the case that the poetic texts are entirely consumed within the philosophy or that they find their greatest meaning through the lens of Dennett's and Searle's theories.

By giving Swensen's verse the meaning: *something that functions like the human mind*, we are viewing it through a specific interpretative lens; we are performing the same act as when speech acts are made meaningful. Just as a verbal speech could be given any arbitrary meaning, so Swensen's verse could be interpreted (with varying degrees of success) through a myriad of theoretical lenses. This argument serves a valuable purpose in this inquiry by allowing us to define poetry—and Swensen's verse in particular—as something which functions in a specific way due to the meaning which we, the conscious audience, attribute to it.



### **Section Three: Multiple Drafts Model of Consciousness**

Throughout the history of philosophy of mind as a field of critical inquiry, there have been many theories which have sought to explain the function and nature of the human mind and consciousness. The theories which are most viable are those that have abandoned the Cartesian conception of dualism (the idea that the metaphysical, non-material mind somehow co-exists with the material brain) and embraced the idea that consciousness is a quality directly contingent upon the material, scientifically observable, neurobiological processes that occur in the brain. It is largely agreed upon within the field of philosophy of mind the physical processes of the brain give rise to consciousness.

A crucial fact of consciousness is that it must be experienced by the agent whose brain is performing the physical processes which give rise to the conscious awareness. As Searle states in the chapter “The Mind as a Biological Phenomenon” of Mind, Language, and Society, “Consciousness has first-person ontology and so cannot be reduced to, or eliminated in favor of, phenomena with a third-person ontology. . . . It is a fact of neurobiology that that certain brain processes cause conscious states and processes.” (Searle 52) On his next page, he elaborates slightly: “Conscious processes [processes which give rise to consciousness] are caused by lower-level neuronal processes in the brain. Consciousness consists of higher-level processes realized in the structure of the brain.” (Searle 53)

However, just as not all theories of consciousness are equally effective in explaining the causal factors that give rise to consciousness and to its mode of operation, not all of these theories are effective at explaining the mind-esque function of Cole Swensen's poetic texts. In my review of a sampling of the pertinent literature, I found a single theory which best describes the operation of both human consciousness and Swensen's verse: Daniel Dennett's Multiple Drafts Model of consciousness, as set forth in his 1991 volume Consciousness Explained.

I plan to devote this section to an explanation and analysis of Dennett's theory—initially I will describe the Multiple Drafts Model as it explains human consciousness, then take that knowledge and form a cohesive theory of the ways in which Multiple Drafts can help us to understand Swensen's verse. This will allow an understanding of the manner in which her verse operates like consciousness.

### *Operation in Mind*

Dennett's Multiple Drafts Model provides a sharply materialist, biological theory of consciousness. It quickly moves beyond dualism and allies the phenomena of consciousness very closely with the operation of physical processes within the brain. The crux of Dennett's theory can be presented briefly by stating that, in order to construct consciousness, the mind draws from "multiple drafts" to compose the single, linear narrative which every conscious being perceives in its mind as "conscious experience".

Dennett introduces the concept in this manner:

According to the Multiple Drafts model, all varieties of perception—indeed, all varieties of thought or mental activity—are accomplished in the brain by parallel,

multitrack processes of interpretation and elaboration of sensory inputs. For instance, since your head moves a bit and your eyes move a lot, the images on your retinas swim constantly . . . . But that is not how it seems to us. . . . under normal conditions, their eyes dart around in rapid saccades . . . and that this motion, like the motion of their heads, is edited out early in the processing from eyeball to . . . consciousness. (111)

According to Dennett's model, consciousness is the result of the myriad processes and objects which affect the body and whose resultant sensory data are transmitted through the body's neural systems. As light hits the eye, it is transmitted via a complex biological pathway into the mind, where it is perceived as a visual stimulus and becomes one of the "multiple drafts" which compose our consciousness. As the nerves in the hand or foot come into contact with the surface of a table or carpet, the resultant sensory data are transmitted to the brain via neural pathways. It is a crucial element to the Multiple Drafts Model that these sensory perceptions (which become the multiple drafts of consciousness) are not mediated by any central function of mind, whether a "dominant" location in the brain (which does not exist) or a synthesizing element which controls conscious thoughts.

The implications of this model, which I have explained briefly, are tremendous. I shall outline a few of its primary points; this will add to the explanation I have already provided and will allow us to have a clearer understanding of Dennett's theory. From this point, we may apply the Multiple Drafts Model to Swensen's poetic texts and form a theory of how her verse operates like the human mind.

### **Single Perception of all Sensory Data**

One of Dennett's primary objections against dualist theories of consciousness is that they necessitate a central place within the mind which "oversees" the processes of thought and consciousness. Such theories postulate that sensory input, transmitted from the nervous system to the brain, is not made conscious until it has passed through a metaphysical "theater" in the mind. An agent (generally unspecified) within the brain perceives the various sensory and mental data which pass through our brains and, as these pass across the "stage" in the "Cartesian Theater" (so called because of the dualism which is necessary for the position), they become conscious. (Dennett 107)

Dennett describes it thus, on page 39:

. . . [dualist] theorists tend to think of perceptual systems as providing "input" to some central thinking arena, which in turn provides "control" or "direction" to some relatively peripheral systems governing bodily motion. This central area is also thought to avail itself of material held in various relatively subservient systems of memory.

Thus, the concept of the Cartesian Theater implies a conscious center within an individual's mental structure, which receives data from and is aware of the individual's sensory systems (including those within the mind, such as memory). This central agency consequently controls the actions of both the mind and the physical body; whatever thoughts it perceives and determines are then termed "consciousness."

However, Dennett finds such dualistic ideas insufficient to explain the complex operations of consciousness. As one reason for this supposition, he cites the frequently incomplete knowledge which individuals have of their own physical and mental processes and conscious states. Indeed, a theoretical system which adheres to the

Cartesian Theater would necessarily postulate that an individual has complete control over their own memories, thoughts, and all physical extremities—but this is simply not the case. Introspection, for example, is a notoriously flawed method by which a conscious individual can gain an element of self-knowledge by looking “within” their own mind or psyche. There are many mental phenomena which are not perceived by the consciousness of the individual—this destabilizes the concept that a mental presence at the mind’s “center” is aware of or controls all mental proceedings.

Dennett has this to say about the dangers of looking within our own consciousness and presuming to have a privileged understand of what we perceive (in the spirit of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*):

. . . what we are fooling ourselves about is the idea that the activity of “introspection” is *ever* a matter of just “looking and seeing.” I suspect that when we claim to be just using our powers of inner *observation*, we are always actually engaging in a sort of impromptu *theorizing*—and we are remarkably gullible theorists, precisely because there is so little to “observe” and so much to pontificate about without fear of contradiction. (68)

Without any central agent or space within the mind, it is impossible for an individual to be aware of what is taking place within his or her own consciousness. This is a significant point: if Dennett is correct and all introspection is merely theorizing about the self, then, although we have first-person experiences of our own consciousness, we can intuit almost nothing about what *actually occurs* within our minds to produce these conscious states. Although we may feel that there is a single, controlling conscious force which perceives and evaluates all of our mental impulses, this is simply another instance of counter-productive theorizing about our mental and conscious states.

Another aspect of consciousness which Dennett uses to support his opposition to the Cartesian Theater is that there is no specific *temporal moment* or *spatial place* at which sensory data, passing through our minds, becomes conscious. Rather, as biological studies have demonstrated, there are multiple physical points within the brain at which sensory data are perceived and which, having passed through, these sensory data can then be acted upon. (Dennett 101-106) Thus, there is no physical “central” point within the conscious brain that synthesizes sensory streams into a single conscious narrative, but what of the temporal element of consciousness? May we assume that all consciousness emerges based upon the order in which the productive, conscious sensory data reach a specific part of the mind? According to Dennett, we may not.

He writes, on page 107,

If the “point” of view of an observer [the brain-place at which sensory data becomes conscious] must be smeared over a rather large volume in the observer’s brain, the observer’s own subjective sense of sequence and simultaneity *must* be determined by something other than “order of arrival” [at whatever locus within the brain allows sensory data to become “conscious”].

Thus, if consciousness is not created by the arrival of sensory data at a specific point in the mind, viewed by a central mental agent, and if sensory data inputs do not become conscious according to their “order of arrival” at specific locations in the brain, where and when are events perceived by consciousness?

### **Fragmented Consciousness**

According to the Multiple Drafts Model, the formation of consciousness within an individual mind has nothing to do with the perception of sensory data in a central location in the brain, or with the order in which sensory data arrive in specific locations in the

mind. Rather, it is based upon a process of “editorial” selection of the multiple conscious drafts within the brain. (Dennett 115) This process determines which of the sensory data that affect our bodies and minds are to be “raised” to the level of conscious awareness and which are to remain at the “lower” level of unconscious processing. The occurrence of editorial selection in the brain is a complex matter which we will not look into here—I will describe it in the section “Pandemonium and Editorial Selection.”

Think of the myriad sensory data which are being processed by each individual’s brain at any moment. I am currently feeling the carpet with my feet, the table with my forearms, enjoying the taste of root beer, beginning to feel sleepy, and remembering a conversation that I had earlier in the day. What determines that these specific sensory inputs (a category which includes memories and other mental phenomena) have become conscious, while others are relegated to the unconscious level? Why am I not remembering a different conversation, or paying attention to the sensation of my glasses on my nose?

Dennett views each of the separate sensations and perceptions which I described in the preceding paragraph as a separate “stream” of consciousness, which bears no necessary relation to the other conscious sensations an individual is experiencing. That is, there is no causal or neurobiological relation between the fact that I am drinking root beer and the fact that I feel the carpet with my feet. According to the Multiple Drafts Model, each sensory experience is perceived separately within the mind; these experiences become conscious at unique temporal moment and spatial locations within

the brain. Via the previously mentioned process of “editing,” such streams can be combined into an individual’s “conscious field”: the totality of experiences that he or she is aware of at any moment.

Dennett explains the situation thus:

It is always an open question whether any particular [mental] content thus discriminated [within the brain] will eventually appear as an element in conscious experience, and it is a confusion . . . to ask *when it becomes conscious*. These distributed content-discriminations yield, over the course of time, something *rather like* a narrative stream or sequence, which can be thought of as subject to continual editing by many processes distributed around in the brain, and continuing indefinitely into the future. This stream of consciousness is only *rather like* a narrative because of its multiplicity; at any point in time there are multiple “drafts” of narrative fragments at various stages of editing in various places in the brain. (Dennett 113)

Thus, human consciousness, at any and every point of our existence, cannot be viewed as single and linear “narrative”—rather, it is continually in a fragmented, non-prioritized state within the mind. Each input of physical or mental sensory data (e.g., memories, visual stimuli, auditory stimuli) operates as a single “stream” of consciousness, without any necessary relation to the other “streams” which are contained in an individual’s mind. Without the “sorting” and “prioritizing” function of the alleged mind-center found within the Cartesian Theater, conscious experience becomes decentered; events do not necessarily become conscious in the order of the perception in various places within the brain. Right now in my mind, there is one draft of a conscious state in which I am focusing on the sensation of the carpet on my toes *and* one in which I am focusing on the taste of my root beer. This continual multiplicity of disassociated conscious states is one of the primary features of the Multiple Drafts Model.



After this explanation, questions still remain: first, how are events incorporated into the “narrative stream or sequence”? Second, consciousness does not seem to human agents to exist in what Dennett calls “narrative fragments at various stages of editing”; we experience it as a single, linear narrative. How do the decentered, non-temporal drafts of consciousness come to be perceived as a single conscious structure? I will address both of these questions in the two subsequent sections.

### **Biological Selection of Drafts to Form Narrative**

Let us first consider the issue of how events “become conscious” in the first place. According to Dennett’s theory, this question misses the point. The sea of the conscious mind is filled with multiple, contemporary drafts of our consciousness—these are not drafts of *what may become* our conscious experience rather, they are drafts of what *already is* our conscious experience. The difference is significant: without the controlling presence of the “mind-center” of the Cartesian Theater, there is no control over which of our mental experiences become conscious and which are relegated to the unconscious realm. (Dennett 114-120) Hence the name of Dennett’s theory; within the conscious human mind, at all times, there are multiple drafts of *actual consciousness*, which have no inherent prioritization.

There is no “final point” in the mind at which the incoming sensory data gain consciousness; thus, there can be no simple determination of what constitutes an event “becoming conscious.” Each bit of sensory data, once it is perceived by the correct non-centralized receptors within the mind, *is conscious* in one of the multiple conscious drafts

which always exist simultaneously within the mind. Dennett writes that “. . . there is no privileged finish line [for sensory data to become conscious], so the temporal order of discriminations cannot be what fixes the subjective order in experience.” (119) Rather, it is the editorial process within the mind that determines what appears to conscious individuals to be the linear, sequential narrative of conscious that we think of as conscious experience.

### **Pandemonium and Editorial Selection**

Let us now address the second question asked above: How do the decentered, non-temporal drafts of our consciousness come to be perceived as a single conscious structure? To answer this, we must first expand upon a concept that has been mentioned several times: that of the editorial processes that take place within the conscious mind, among the multiple, simultaneous drafts of consciousness. According to the Multiple Drafts Model, the difference between the state of consciousness within the human mind (many fragmented drafts of conscious experience) and the perception that we have of our own consciousness (a single, linear narrative) is due to biological reasons. (Dennett 118, 121-124)

It is simply not biologically viable for an organism to *experience* its own consciousness as an unformed collection of simultaneous, co-occurring perceptions. Conscious agents (not only humans, but many animals as well) would be unable to make quick and efficient decisions in “fight or flight” situations; they would often be paralyzed

by a mental overload of conscious states, as each of the decentralized drafts took its place in the totality of conscious experience.

Thus, in order to render consciousness functional, some sort of editorial process is needed to compose a “conscious narrative”—this allows the subject conscious access to high-priority sensory data (e.g., being chased by a predator) while quickly glossing over low-priority data (e.g., the texture of the grass). Yet, we have already rejected the Cartesian Theater model; there is no central zone within the mind which controls an individual’s conscious perception. Consequently, there is no dominant “mind-center” which examines all of the various drafts of consciousness and determines which are to be included in the “final” conscious narrative perceived by an individual. How then does the mind enact an editorial process and “simplify” the myriad drafts into a single, cohesive conscious narrative?

Dennett proposes that the mind’s editorial processes is based upon what he terms *pandemonium*. In such a theory, each of the drafts of consciousness finds itself on equal footing; no draft has priority over any others. In Dennett’s phrasing: “[there is no] convenient captain already at hand . . . , so conflicts between volunteers [the individual drafts] [have] to sort themselves out without any higher executive.” (Dennett 188)

Within the mind, each of the drafts is aware of the others; in any given situation, they all clamor for their own priority within the space of the mind which, in this situation, takes on an aspect more anarchic than democratic. However, these varying drafts, which Dennett refers to as a “tournament of words” (238), eventually sort themselves out in a

way which seems to be the best for the behavior and survival of the conscious organism. This, then, is the conscious draft which is “presented” to the individual as a single, linear narrative; it is what we perceive as our own consciousness. From the anarchic mixture of competing drafts, the mind is able to sort itself out to a single version—however, just because a single conscious draft has “won” and been acted upon the body in one instance, this does not imply that it has become “authoritative” or will be acted upon again.

(Dennett 221-223)

In Dennett’s own words:

Even if, thanks to an underlying Pandemonium-style architecture, the chaos soon settles, leaving one specialist temporarily in charge . . . there are obviously at least as many bad ways for these conflicts to be resolved as good ways. Nothing guarantees that the politically most effective specialist [the draft which ends up being included in the final conscious narrative] will be the “man for the job.” [the draft that would have performed the best in a given situation] (222)

Thus, while a conscious animal in the jungle may give first priority to the conscious draft which says “run from the lion!” and overlook the draft stating “feel the grass on your feet,” both drafts are *equally conscious*; one is simply excluded from the process of “narrative formation.” There is no central, authoritative voice that gives the first conscious draft priority over the second; rather, within the cacophony of the mind, that draft asserts its own primacy and is subsequently acted upon by the body.

Before moving on, we must clarify a potential misunderstanding. We have established two facts concerning the operation of consciousness, according to the Multiple Drafts Model: (1) we have numerous, non-prioritized, decentered narratives of consciousness within our mind, and (2) these are all “edited” by the mind’s processes of

pandemonium into a single narrative, which (imperfectly) enables the body to act upon the most relevant conscious data. Yet we must inquire: what becomes of the other drafts of consciousness which are not included in the final, narrated draft within the mind?

There are two answers.

First, Dennett explains that our memories may fool us into holding flawed conceptions of our conscious experiences. Memories of conscious drafts may be superseded or covered up by subsequently remembered drafts; the animal in the jungle may remember “yesterday I fled from a lion,” while in reality, it had a plethora of conscious experiences which it simply *does not remember*, because, although they were indeed conscious, they never became incorporated into the final narrative draft. Indeed, the conception of this “final narrative” is primarily an effect of memory. Because we are simultaneously aware of many conscious drafts at one time, it is largely through memory that we have a conception of the drafts which were temporarily “victorious” in determining the course of action taken by the body.

In many sections within Consciousness Explained, Dennett discusses various ways in which the mind may mis-remember the types of conscious experience that it has actually had—in these situations, our memories may have been said to have “lead us astray.” The causes for this are numerous and complex. It will suffice to summarize: the timing of the narrative probing into the mind’s conscious drafts has the power to change the resulting narrative. Thus, if the mind is probed too early or too late, the *remembered*

*narrative* may have an erroneous conception of what happened in the biological mind and which of the multiple drafts ultimately “triumphed.” Dennett writes that,

. . . some of the contents in these drafts will make their brief contributions and fade without further effect . . . . Probing this stream [of conscious drafts] at various levels produces different effects, precipitating different narratives—and these *are* narratives: single versions of a portion of “the stream of consciousness.” If one delays the probe too long, the result is apt to be no narrative left at all. (135)

The second answer to the question: “what becomes of the other drafts of consciousness which are not included in the final, narrated draft within the mind?” is perhaps more anticipated: the non-narrated drafts often become “unconscious”; they are still capable of having an effect on the body and its actions, beliefs, etc., but are not perceived or remembered by the conscious mind. Dennett adheres to Freud’s conception of the so-called “Freudian slip”; he states that

Freudian slips draw attention to themselves by seeming to be mistakes and not mistakes at the same time, but the fact . . . that they satisfy *unconscious* goals does not make them any harder to explain than other word choices that fulfill several functions (or goals) at once. (243)

Therefore, although the draft of conscious which produces the Freudian slip is not included in the final narrated memory of our conscious experience, it can still exert an effect upon the workings of the mind and body. As a Freudian slip is the manifestation of non-narrated drafts of consciousness in the realm of language, so these drafts also manifest themselves in other areas of thought and behavior.

In this section, we have established a necessarily abridged understanding of the ways in which Dennett’s Multiple Drafts Model proposes that consciousness operates. Let us now move into an analysis of Cole Swensen’s three books; we shall use Dennett’s

model to explore the methods in which her verse operates similarly to human consciousness. We are making a shift in material and methodology with this transition: we are shifting from philosophy of mind to poetic analysis and literary theory. With this shift, we will no longer be discussing the human brain and consciousness itself; rather, we will be using these terms and concepts to form the lexicon of a specific mode of literary analysis. This is far from an illegitimate or contrived shift. As I discussed in the section “Books without Brains,” we may legitimately claim that the function of poetry parallels or imitates the function of consciousness. We proceed with the understanding that we are essentially placing a layer of meaning (“operates as the human mind does”) over the poetry and that this allows us to speak of “the poetry’s consciousness” and “the poetry’s mind” (hereafter without quotation marks) as we would speak of human consciousness and the human mind.

### **Decentering Dennett**

As discussed in section two of this paper, on pages 9 and 10, Dennett’s Multiple Drafts Model does not exhaust the hermeneutic possibilities of Swensen’s verse. Just as a speech act may be given a singular meaning to serve a social or personal function, so this thesis will give Swensen’s verse a similar restriction by viewing it through the lens of philosophy of mind. This is a necessary restriction to the potentially infinite meanings and resonances of which the verse is capable; the thesis takes Dennett’s Multiple Drafts Model and other philosophical concepts as its primary theories in order to answer the question: how does Swensen’s poetry function like human consciousness?

Yet, there is a certain irony to using a philosophical model—something *foreign* to the poetic text—to explain or interpret the poetry. Swensen’s three books are able to “justify” themselves; they exist as autonomous literary objects which need no external clarification or assistance. There are gaps and passages within Such Rich Hour, Try, and Goest which, when seen through the lens of Dennett’s theory, seem to exist in a place of ambiguity or mystery. These poetic instances have varying, potentially conflicting, interpretations which defy philosophical categorization and yet are as fully a part of the poetry as are the passages that conform most closely to the philosophical models. Such mysterious passages may simply exist outside of the category of texts-that-function-according-to-the Multiple Drafts Model; that is, they may not function like the human mind. Alternately, such passages may clarify potential flaws or inconsistencies within Dennett’s Model. It is possible that, having established the similarity between the operations of poetry and the mind, points within the poetic texts which defy philosophical categorization therefore indicate weak points or inconsistencies within Dennett’s own conception of the human mind.

This passage from Such Rich Hour serves as an example of poetry which is not easily interpreted by the Multiple Drafts Model. It is taken from the poem “November 1485: Jean Colombe Hands the Finished Manuscript to Charles I of Savoy,” and describes in some detail the fate of the Duc de Berry’s Book of Hours.

After the death of the Duc du Berry, the unfinished manuscript went to his sole heir, King Charles VI, and from there to Duc Charles I of Savoy. It then disappeared until 1855 when Henri d’Orléans, Duc d’Aumale heard of it and traced it to a girls’ boarding school in Genoa. Coats of arms on the binding indicate that it



was owned at some point by the Spinola family and then later by the Marquis Hieronymous Serra of Genoa. (Swensen 97)

This passage is not easily incorporated into the Multiple Drafts Model; its mind-like function, while it may exist, is not immediately apparent. The text does not seem to contain multiple conscious, poetic drafts which have been selected by a process of pandemonium. Rather, it moves by an apparently logical, linear method which differs from the conception of mind which Dennett espouses. For the purposes of this thesis we shall postulate that, while the passage does indicate some qualities of consciousness (it deals with phenomenological perception, which shall be addressed in section 4), it does not seem to operate according to the Multiple Drafts Model. Thus, as far as Dennett's theory portrays the operations of consciousness, the quoted passage is paradoxically related to the mind. The Multiple Drafts Model is herein revealed not to hold a totalizing, overdetermining relation to Swensen's texts.

However, the moments of intersection between Dennett's Model and Swensen's texts are frequent, due a primary reason. Dennett's sharply materialist philosophy, which can be perceived as overly violent or stringent when applied to actual life, provides an excellent model for the analysis of verse. It does not allow any consideration of vitalistic force within the operation of the human mind and consciousness (or of life itself) and so holds purely unanimated material objects and forces entirely responsible for the composition of life and all reality. Although this is contested even by other materialist philosophers, such a fiercely materialistic model correlates with the nature of texts. As this thesis shows, texts (merely words on the page) have no life or consciousness in

themselves. Thus, Dennett's purely materialistic philosophy allows us to strip away all concerns with *élan vital* and similar ideals; we may deal entirely with the materiality of lifeless language.

If we were to attempt an analysis of Swensen's verse with a dualistic philosophy—or even a materialist one which posited any sort of vivifying faculty within matter—this analysis would be automatically handicapped. We would have to ask questions such as: what living, animating force propels poetry? There is no such force (again, poetry is merely words on a page), but such an inquiry would lead us to focus on speculative qualities that do not exist. Dennett's severe materialism allows us to focus simply on the intrinsically material qualities of Swensen's verse in order to determine how its function is similar to that of consciousness.

#### *Operation of the Mind and Consciousness in Swensen's Books*

Let us think back to the Introduction of this paper, wherein I discussed two passages by Swensen: one from Such Rich Hour and another from Try. Therein, we saw the textual evocation of thought, memory, and phenomenological perception—indeed, these concepts were more than evoked; they were enacted by the verse itself. Such is the pattern which Swensen's verse typically follows.

#### **Such Rich Hour**

Such Rich Hour addresses events which occurred in England and France throughout the course of the Hundred Years' War (from 1337 to 1453). It takes as a guide and a catalyst for the pseudo-historical meditations which fill its pages the *Très Riches Heures du Duc*

*de Berry*, a book of hours composed during the fifteenth century. Swensen writes that, “Books of hours were popular during the Middle Ages as personal devotional texts designed to allow individuals to observe religious ritual outside of the strict format of the mass.” (4) The book is comprised of poems filled with emotion and of a sometimes hallucinatory, sometimes surreal nature, which reference one another in ways both explicit and implicit. The fractured, incomplete narrative that consequently emerges has a great deal in common with the narratives that are constructed by the “pandemonium” processes within the human mind.

Let us begin this investigation in Swensen’s *Forward*. Herein, she writes:

darkly darkly we	through a glass	(there was this once)
	dark was	we see
dark as	thus is, and glass	glass (sharp) (Swensen 7)

At this level, the verse acts as the Multiple Drafts Model suggests that the mind does when it receives sensory input. That is, this poetic fragment seems to have “multiple drafts” of thought and operation at work within itself—this is an observation on a microcosmic scale, but it holds true on a macrocosmic scale as well. In Swensen’s lyric, the syntax is fractured—indeed, it is nearly altogether absent—and forms no cohesive narrative. It evokes ideas and allusions but does not make them concrete; it hints at emotional and temporal states but provides no specificity or resolution. This parallels a passage from Dennett that we have already quoted: “Probing this stream [of conscious drafts] at various levels produces different effects, precipitating different narratives—and these *are* narratives: single versions of a portion of ‘the stream of consciousness.’ ”

(Dennett 135)

Dennett suggests that temporal alterations in probing the various drafts of consciousness, which exist within the mind, alter the resultant narrative. Likewise, so does the perception or “interpretation” of one of Swensen’s fragments (or any other selection from her texts) change when there is an alteration to the point at which a perception is formed. That is, just as different narratives will be formed if conscious drafts are “probed” prior to or following the introduction of new data from a neural pathway, so one narrative formed within a poetic text will differ from another, based upon various points of completion within the text itself. Such points are essentially the moments at which a poem stops or continues: if the text stops at “thus is, and glass/glass,” a different narrative and sensation results than if the poem finishes: “(sharp)”.

Dennett also states that *time* has a peculiar role within the mind, as there is no specific “mind-center” which neural data must reach in order to become conscious. Thus, the time at which neural data reach the brain is the time at which they become conscious. Similarly, there is no poetic “center” within Swensen’s text, to which all of her lyric fragments must relate in order to correspond with a central or authoritative meaning or intention. Each of the distinct lines, words, and parenthetical bits within Swensen’s verse is, at once, part of the poem’s own *consciousness*; it does not have to conform in “meaning” or “affect” with any of the other lines or words in order to stand as an autonomous part of the verse.

No part of the lyrical fragment needs to refer to the other fragments in order to be drawn into a synthetic, “unified” text, since such a text does not exist. Although associative connections between the textual fragments are naturally formed within the poem, there is nothing within the poem itself which determines the shape that this action will take. Just as various drafts of consciousness exist within the human mind, which may overlap with one another and even present differing versions of similar events (due to temporal variations in the mind’s “probing”), so the poems may contain, without paradox, textual moments which do not cohere with one another and which do not strive towards a single purpose.

*Perloff and the Grammar of Mind*

Up to this point, we have been consulting philosophical works in order to gain knowledge of the workings of consciousness and to apply these insights to Swensen’s verse. Here we will briefly invert this methodology; we will consult a text which deals explicitly with poetics and with language. The concepts suggested are immediately applicable to Swensen’s texts—in this case, Such Rich Hour—but, in an unexpected twist, they also shed a light on our understanding of the mind and its constitutive elements.

The work in question is a book chapter by Marjorie Perloff: “The ‘Synopsis of Trivialities’: *The Art of the Philosophical Investigations*.” As the title suggests, Perloff engages with Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations in order to advance the critical understanding of contemporary poetry and poetics. An issue which both she and

Wittgenstein fixate upon is *grammar*: a crucial aspect of both “common” and “poetic” language (a distinction which Wittgenstein denies) that allows linguistic systems to retain their own unique, ontologic internal cohesion. The grammar of a language—whether an international system of communication, the jargon of a group of individuals, or the idiosyncratic language within a book of poems—serves both to *contain* and to *justify* its linguistic and epistemological system. (Perloff 77-78)

Let us refer to the article to clarify this point. Perloff refers to Wittgenstein in order to describe the self-containing and self-justifying nature of a system of grammar. On page 58, she writes:

It is the formation of this “instinctive” use of language . . . that became Wittgenstein’s new focus. And here he turned to *grammar*, the actual construction of words and phrases in a given context. For “there are no gaps in grammar; grammar is always complete.” Complete in that “we can only have incompleteness *in* a space,” whereas the grammar of a sentence—say, “The door is open”—*is* the space. “You cannot justify grammar”; it merely is.

The issue of space is crucial to a Wittgensteinian understanding of grammar and language. The space of a grammar is necessarily always-already complete, as it *is* the space of its own embodiment. There can be no incompleteness or linguistic “falsity” within such a space of grammar; all elements that come together to form that grammar contribute to its nature to its unalterably complete ontology. As such, the space of grammar is a singular entity. Any differentiation of priority or of degrees of “correctness” within a grammatical system would disrupt its necessary completeness and diminish grammar into a derivative system which is formed by elements other than its own.

This conception of the completeness of a grammar provides an interesting avenue of analysis into Swensen's Such Rich Hour. Throughout the work, the verse often has the appearance of extreme fragmentation; "ordinary" syntax and semiotic relations are eschewed in favor of uncommon and experimental constructs. In addition to enacting the functions of consciousness, these textual moments are decentered, ambiguous, indeterminate, and exist in states which would seem to be filled with incompleteness. Yet this view is tempered by Wittgenstein's assertion of a grammar's continual completion.

The unique grammar established within Such Rich Hour thus prompts the reader to view it not as a diminished form or an offshoot of contemporary American English, but instead as a complete and self-contained alternate, poetic grammar. Such a conception works well with a passage such as this, found at the beginning of the poem titled "April: In the Garden."

The earth tilts, cracking open fields and the courtyard,  
open,  
shows  
what made by man, geometry in  
form, and in division the plan,  
nascent, of astronomy (Swensen 41)

Let us keep in mind Wittgenstein's exhortation to view grammar (such as this passage enacts) as a system that has no gaps and is always complete. Thus, although the passage does have many elements which separate it from the grammar of traditional, spoken English, it is best viewed as helping to embody the separate grammatical system of Such Rich Hour. This unique grammar is an always-already complete, self-containing, and

self-justifying system of language which can contain no inner incompleteness. The grammar of Swensen's book, like all grammatical systems, is thereby *whole* within its own ontological framework.

Finally, it is appropriate to briefly establish a correlation between Wittgenstein's outlook on grammar and the state of human consciousness. Put concisely, the similarity is this: both the system of grammar and the "system" of the mind create an entirely self-contained and self-justifying space. Just as there can be no aberrancy or incompleteness within the space of a grammar—since grammar *is* the always-complete space of linguistic motion—so there can be no incompleteness within human consciousness. The elements which we have identified as constituting the "grammar" of consciousness (i.e., multiple conscious drafts of sensory data) also "cannot [be] justified"; they too form a unique space that constitutes its own ontology. There can be no gaps or absences within the conscious mind; even within the play of conscious and unconscious states (discussed in the sections on Intentionality), the system of consciousness can be perceived only as a unified, whole entity. Thus, its grammar proceeds without interruption and, like the grammar of language, cannot be justified apart from its being as a system-that-is.

### **Try**

Similar poetic operations take place within Swensen's volume Try, the recipient of the 1998 of the Iowa Poetry Prize. These works of verse meditate upon paintings primarily from the early Renaissance, including the work of notables such as Hieronymus



Bosch and Auguste Rodin. The poems of Try, no less than those of Such Rich Hour, operate similarly to the workings of the conscious human mind.

In an article which reviews Try and compares Swensen's work to that of two of her contemporaries (Kathleen Peirce and Bin Ramke), Burton Raffel criticizes Try as a work which lacks poetic boundaries and which is too unformed for its own good. He writes that,

Such [verse] finds its way onto the printed page . . . only when a poetic culture has become so uncertain, so muddled and confused that it becomes virtually impossible even to speak of "standards". . . . *Try* is a veritable kaleidoscope of styles and rhetorics, a jumble of only partially digested echoes, swinging with utterly unconscious ludicrousness from the childish faux naïf . . . to the pretensions fake sublimity . . . . (Raffel 794)

I will leave aside my objections to Raffel's comments and focus on the issue at hand: it is likely that the characteristics of Try which Raffel criticizes are precisely those which allow its function to correlate with that of consciousness. Inasmuch as the verse is "a veritable kaleidoscope of styles and rhetorics," so does it operate similarly to the multiple drafts of consciousness which we find present in the mind. Nothing is more "jumbled" than the mix of similarly formed, yet otherwise unassociated conscious states which co-exist in the conscious mind and which are probed to form the cohesive, memory-driven narrative of conscious events.

This is exemplified in one of the longest pieces within Swensen's book: a section called "Triptych," which contains three separate (albeit related) poems that relate to paintings of the holy family's flight into Egypt. The poems are formed via a type of *bricolage*, wherein multiple textual and meta-textual sources are drawn upon to form the

body of Swensen's lyric text. The first poem, simply called "The Flight into Egypt,"

begins with this passage:

Reach me to  
    new all other  
    land  
That flees  
Known. Recognized though  
you can't remember what  
the house looks like it's huge (Swensen 33)

Passages such as this invoke the operations of the mind on a microcosmic level. Herein, we see references to spatial perception and to the nature of memory. In the workings of the lyric fragment, as in the workings of human consciousness, memory is an ambiguous topic, one which may accurately recall a past perception ("Recognized . . .") or which may fail to accurately recall such a perception (" . . . though/you can't remember what/the house looks like it's huge").

From here, the text moves into prosaic passages which detail the history of paintings portraying the Flight into Egypt: " 'From the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, we find in the painterly obsession with the Flight into Egypt a recognition of . . . as being . . . who focus . . . here on earth . . . ' " (33; all ellipses are present in Swensen's text)

This type of prosaic, somewhat didactic passage occurs frequently throughout the "Triptych" section; such passages inform the reader about the nature and cause of paintings of the Flight into Egypt and reminisce upon the objects found within the paintings themselves.

Other passages within the “Triptych” poems narrate the events that occur within the paintings and provide commentary on the possible thoughts and emotions of the “characters” that the paintings portray. In general, each type of passage blurs the categorical distinctions between how the paintings appear visually, the details of their compositions, textual observers’ perceptions of the work, and the hypothesized elements that “bring to life” the paintings themselves (e.g., the thoughts of Mary and Joseph). There are very few points at which a reader may separate each of these poetic aspects from one another and focus, for example, exclusively on what the paintings themselves “actually look like.” Such poetic indeterminacy and the blurring of categories within the poems themselves results in a polyphonic verse—rather than establishing a fixed, didactic narrative about the aesthetic and meta-aesthetic elements of the poems, each section colors or haunts the others.

This operation bears remarkable similarity to the constant play of the multiple conscious drafts that are present within the human mind. Similar to Swensen’s verse, the mind also contains many polyphonic drafts, comprised of various types of sensory data. These drafts, like Swensen’s varying types of poetic fragments, do not always contain the same type of material as one another. The brain simultaneously receives (and consequently, consciousness is simultaneously aware of) sensory data from the eyes, hands, feet, nose, ears, and from other regions within the brain (memories, etc.). All of these data, which become drafts of consciousness, are not synthesized with one another by any central area within the mind but exist in a state of some tension and disharmony,

similar to the varying levels and types of poetic fragments within Swensen's "Triptych" poems.

A final similarity is this: as Dennett discusses within Consciousness Explained, time operates curiously within the conscious mind; the time at which certain neural data make their way to the brain and become conscious does not necessarily dictate the temporal structure of the resultant "conscious narrative"—this is formed by probing within the multiple drafts of consciousness. Temporal occurrence is handled loosely within the mind. As Dennett states,

As we have already seen, this multitrack process [the processing of various conscious drafts] occurs over hundreds of milliseconds, during which time various additions, incorporations, emendations, and overwritings of content can occur, in various orders. These yield, over the course of time, something *rather like* a narrative stream or sequence, which can be thought of as subject to continual editing by many processes distributed around the brain, and continuing indefinitely into the future. (Dennett 135)

So, as there is not necessarily a correlation between the temporal order in which sensory data enter the brain and the temporal order of the resulting narrative(s) in conscious awareness, there is no such temporal determination within Swensen's verse. The various fragments, prosaic meditations, and emotional pseudo-memories within the "Triptych" poems are perceived in a linear temporal structure by the reader. However, such a temporal structure of reading does not reflect upon the nature of the poem itself; all of the dissimilar textual fragments seem to bleed into one another, as temporal events shift from the time of Christ (the holy family's flight), to the mid-Renaissance, to the contemporary era without any warning or logic. The bits of verse are handled in the text in a way similar to that of the multiple drafts of consciousness: the interpretation of the

poetic fragments is subject to frequent revision and exists in a non-narrated state of multiplicity.

Such a reading (albeit without the references to philosophy of mind) is also given by Lynn Keller, in her book chapter “Poems Living with Paintings: Cole Swensen’s Ekphrastic *Try*.” Keller explains that the primary effect in Swensen’s verse is one of indeterminacy or of a beneficially muddled episteme. The views of the poet (if discernable) are mixed with those of various personas within the text and also with the constructed thoughts of the actants within the viewed paintings. *Try* blurs fact with imagination, knowledge with speculation, and creates a polyphonic portrait of its subject paintings that emphasizes their malleable and flexible nature. Keller writes that

In attending to the verbal and visual as realms united within the experience of the writer . . . [Swensen] ostentatiously keeps the aural, the textual, and the visual constantly in play, while often entwining the haptic sense with sight and hearing; her work, then, emphasizes and extends the ways in which poetry inevitably mixes or hybridizes the information of several senses or “modes of experience.” . . . Swensen does not maintain a distance—or any constant relation—between the writer and the painting: shifting among subjectivities and perspectives, her poetry moves rapidly in and out of the painting and among its subjects or pictorial planes. (100)

Keller arrives at a reading of *Try* that is parallel to—and thereby substantiates—the interpretation produced by viewing the book through the lens of the Multiple Drafts Model. In both situations, the text pulls away from temporal and narrative specificity and allows itself to be probed at various instances, resulting in multiple, fragmented narrative possibilities. As Keller notes, this produces a mixed or hybridized perception of “modes of experience.”

## Goest

Finally, let us turn to Goest, Swensen's third collection that I will discuss in this paper. Like Such Rich Hour and Try, Goest operates within a fairly specific conceptual framework: it concerns itself with intangible objects, with light and fluidity. The poems of Goest meditate on whiteness, illumination, and transparency; the second of its three sections describes a series of inventions, all of which relate to intangible qualities: the lightbulb, mirror, hydrometer, etc. The perception of these abstract phenomena and concrete objects within the text as they draw into and disperse from various combinations is paralleled by the operations of the conscious human mind—specifically the pandemonium which Dennett discusses in Consciousness Explained.

Let us enter the text through another article by Lynn Keller, entitled "Singing Spaces: Fractal Geometries in Cole Swensen's *Oh*." Although this essay deals not with Goest but with Oh (another of Swensen's volumes), many of Keller's interpretations shed light on Goest as well. She writes: "Thematic materials recur in multiple contexts, pulling the reader's attention backward and forward through the text, not just on a single page, but across the series." (Keller 149) Although in Oh these "thematic materials" deal with the nature of the opera and its means of creating drama, the same can be said for the thematic materials used in Goest.

Indeed, the manner in which these materials appear to be retained by the consciousness and memory of the poemworks similarly to the pandemonium-esque

structure of draft selection within the human mind. Let us examine a series of passages from Swensen's work. On page 11, a poem entitled "Two" begins:

There is a single, almost dazzling white spot of a white house out loud  
against the fields, and the forest in lines  
receding, rises,  
and then planes. Color,  
in pieces or entire . . . .

Here we see colors manifest, painted upon surfaces that are presented as concrete and visible within the text: a white house, forest, and "planes"—this functions as a verb, yet is a homophone to a term denoting physicality: "plain." Throughout the book, such a sense of vibrant color remains. However, the nature of *color* itself seems to shift. The underlying instability of concepts of color, as they are presented in—or, we may say, perceived by the consciousness of—Goest is evidenced in the following passage, taken from a poem entitled "Razed Cities." (Swensen 55)

The first thing I do whenever I move	is paint the walls all white.
There's a painting of this	
she said pointing to the photograph,	"It's perfectly white."
"You mean it's blank?"	"No, white."
"You mean there's nothing there?"	"Then who are they?"

By this point in Goest, color has lost its concrete aspect; it is no longer a layer of the constitution of physical objects, as in the house and forest of the first passage. Rather, it has become an abstract value, something that behaves more like a signifier (prompting the unanswered question, "Then who are they?") than like a term descriptive of physical value.

In this, there is a strong similarity to Dennett's proposed pandemonium operation of consciousness: the procedure by which distinct drafts of consciousness vie against one

another for conscious and behavioral “supremacy.” As was already quoted in the

“Pandemonium and Editorial Selection” section of this paper,

. . . some of the contents in these drafts will make their brief contributions and fade without further effect . . . . Probing this stream [of conscious drafts] at various levels produces different effects, precipitating different narratives—and these *are* narratives: single versions of a portion of “the stream of consciousness.” (Dennett 135)

This is the non-prioritized and non-temporally determined procedure of draft selection.

There is no logical course or consistent pattern with which one draft is drawn into the mind’s remembered narrative while another is left in the unconscious; all drafts have equal priority in the anarchic space of the mind’s narrative-forming competition.

With this theory in mind, the similar operation between Dennett’s drafts of consciousness and Swensen’s unstable use of color becomes apparent. Just as the contents of the mind are probed by a process of pandemonium, allowing contradictory and temporally diverse drafts to co-exist in consciousness without paradox, so do multiple meanings and usages of language exist within Goest. In this analysis, we see that color is described and embodied in differing drafts within the verse’s consciousness which do not synthesize or unify as the book progresses and concludes. Each use or description of color functions like a draft of consciousness: it is manifest within a single poem (or series of poems), but the consciousness of the verse soon departs from this draft/use and alights upon a different draft/use. This is the operation that we see in the passages quoted above, as the conscious draft in which color is a quality of physical objects is replaced by the draft in which it is a signifier of an unspoken quality, object, or person.



However, there is a significant difference here between the operations of mind and the operation of the verse in Goest. In the mind, conscious drafts are eventually pulled into a single narrative, accessed by memory—this is a mental and biological necessity, which ensures that a conscious being can repeat a previously performed physical action. If a wild animal succeeded in finding food, defending itself, or mating, but had no means of preserving this memory for its later recollection and reuse, it would be unlikely to survive or to pass on its genes. (Dennett 187-193) Unlike this biological necessity under which the mind operates, the “multiple drafts” of poetry in Goest are under no obligation to form themselves into a single (albeit considerably arbitrary) narrative.

There is no manner of resolution between the uses of color; within the consciousness of Swensen’s verse, it simultaneously occupies the roles of “descriptive term for physical objects” and “abstract signifier.” This is a significant moment within our analysis of the similarities between the Multiple Drafts Model and the operation of Swensen’s verse. We have uncovered a key divergence: while the mind and consciousness are inherently *limited* by the body and need to operate in a manner which preserves and enhances the likelihood of the body’s survival, poetry is under no such constraint.

In this aspect, poetry operates in a manner that would be impractical to a conscious, living being. Although, as examined earlier, verse does operate according to the principles of selection-via-pandemonium, it has no need to *act* upon the conscious

drafts which fill its mental space. Thus, the conscious draft which manifests itself in one poem (color as an attribute of physical objects) can be replaced by the manifestation in a subsequent poem (color as a diffuse signifier). While memory in the human mind forms linear narratives from the conscious drafts that have been acted upon by the body, the “multiple drafts” within Swensen’s verse may continually exist in a state of tension. Unlike the mind’s drafts, the drafts of poetry persist in their state of tensions and continual interpretative conflict, as it is not necessary for them to provide a biologically viable narrative stream of conscious drafts; they exist as purely aesthetic objects.

*Altieri and the Poetics of Mind*

At this point, let us refer to another scholar of poetics in order to gain a more finely nuanced and polyphonic understanding of Goest. Charles Altieri, in his book Postmodernisms Now, discusses the state of poetry in its transition from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. During this transition, some poetic principles, once believed to be crucial or indispensable to the art itself, have come to be viewed with skepticism (including the high value placed upon characteristic “postmodern” thought). Such an analytic activity benefits our reading of Swensen; Altieri explores the relations between text, poet, and reader in a way that sheds light on often under-exposed aspects of this triune relation.

In the chapter “Some Problems About Agency in the Theories of Radical Poetics,” Altieri seeks to pull back from the perhaps unnecessarily radical poetics of language espoused by the Language school. Language poets suggested that poetry should—or can—have no referential value; for them, poems do not establish a series of

signs which refer to objects outside of the textual object. Rather, they saw language as creating bodies of text (such as poems) which the reader encounters empirically and which enact semiotic processes only within their (the poems') linguistic space.

To oppose this view and argue that the poems can have real-world referentiality, Altieri writes,

Practices of reading and writerly projections must encourage hermeneutic concerns . . . as a desire not to let one's own blinders . . . get in the way of whatever possibility of mutual understanding might arise. Differences cannot really be registered without some effort also to negotiate among them, and hence to be willing to surrender the sense of positional or ego boundaries that we assume when we have to defend specific identities. (Altieri 172-173)

Thus, texts are able to have qualities which inhere in them, displacing the Language school maxim that no outwardly referential linguistic statements are poetically possible. An important aspect of this sign-making ability of poetry is that it allows the reader's self (the ego, as Altieri highlights) to encounter an otherness in the poetry. This would not be possible if the poetry merely reflected the biases and ideas that the reader brought to it; every encountered text would then mirror the reader's biases back to him or herself.

There are significant correlations between Altieri's theory and Swensen's Goest which merit expansion. It is not enough to say that, from time to time, Goest contains externally referential language in its moments of concrete historical reference. Altieri's revision of the Language school's theory is not merely situational, but categorical: all language is inherently *capable of* external reference, and can bring the mind of the reader into contact with specific alternacies. Thus, the Swensen's poetic texts do not merely point back at the reader. Although the poems are to be encountered as empirical

objects—as language graphically encountered by the reader—they may refer to the world beyond the poem’s own textual borders.

A powerful example of this within Goest occurs in the poem “The Development of Natural Gas”:

in 1803  
the Lyceum Theater in London was illuminated by gas, and a few years later,  
the street outside it,  
a curved street lined with trees, or is that simply  
a trick of memory with its variable eye  
forced upward in jets  
until you washed it till it burned (Swensen 52)

This segment begins with a narrative which performs an explicitly referential action.

(Note that referential does not imply representative; language may signify or indicate something without mimetically depicting it.) The description of the Lyceum Theater then fades in the fourth line and is replaced by an abstract meditation.

Yet, according to Altieri, this abstract section is not to be viewed as an instance of language which ceases to refer outwardly or which serves only to reflect the reader’s ideals back to him or herself. Rather, the final three and a half lines of this fragment are just as effective at causing the reader to “surrender the[ir] sense of positional or ego boundaries” as are the explicitly referential lines of the passage’s beginning. These phrases, such as “memory with its variable eye,” bring a textually based otherness into contact with the reader’s self and thereby trouble the notion that poetry cannot intrinsically contain ideological or conceptual notions which are foreign to the mind of the reader.

Finally, in a correlative vein, we can see that this question of the composition of poetic texts is similar to inquiries into the composition of human consciousness. Unlike other mind-related points within this paper, this idea is not contingent upon Dennett's theory, but applies to nearly any understanding of mind. It seems that consciousness operates as Altieri suggests that poetry does and in opposition to the Language school's outlook. That is, an individual's consciousness is able to access a world that stands truly external to that consciousness. Thoughts and mental states are capable of referring to objects and beings that exist outside of the conscious subject's own mind. Such a conception of mind works to displace the remnants of skeptical, idealistic, and solipsistic theories which continue to haunt the philosophy of mind.

Another point of coincidence between the operation of mind and Altieri's conception of verse is that not every conscious state (Dennett's "drafts") points back to the perceiver's own consciousness; we are capable of perceiving objects without simultaneous conscious awareness of our own perception. Consciousness, like poetry, is capable of referentially bringing *otherness* within the conscious subject's mind; it is not constrained within the necessity of self-implication. This theory stands in opposition to some tenants of historical Phenomenology—these issues will be further discussed in the "Phenomenology/Perception" section.

## **Section Four: Areas of Philosophy Contingent upon the Multiple Drafts Model**

At this point, we have explored the primary ways in which three of Cole Swensen's books of verse operate similarly to the Multiple Drafts Model. Whether through the pandemonium-driven process of narrative selection or the non-temporal functioning of conscious drafts within the analyzed books, the workings of Dennett's Model and Swensen's verse share many of their primary attributes. There are two important concepts within Philosophy of Mind (and related continental philosophy) which have not yet been discussed, but which are related to the Multiple Drafts Model and which can be seen functioning within Swensen's verse. In this section, I will discuss these important topics: Intentionality and Phenomenology/Perception. In the first part of each section, I will discuss the philosophical concept itself. After that, I will show the manner of its operation within Swensen's books within the overarching interpretive context of the Multiple Drafts Model.

### *Intentionality*

#### **In Philosophy of Mind**

The intentionality of consciousness is the manner in which consciousness is drawn to interact with the objects of its perception. The phenomenon of intentionality can be thought of as consciousness' movement-towards, or attraction-to an object, state, or condition. This is to say, it is because of intentionality that the mind is drawn to

certain beliefs, suppositions, thoughts, and desires—such qualities are all considered *intentional states*, and are an intrinsic characteristic of consciousness. It is through intentionality that the mind directs its focus—and directs the body’s responsive action—upon any of the myriad objects that a person encounters within a day. In Mind, Language, and Society, John Searle says this about intentionality:

. . . a conscious state such as an intention or a desire functions by *representing the sort of event that it causes*. For example, I want to drink water, so I drink water. Here the effect, drinking water, is consciously represented by the cause, the desire to drink water. This sort of mental causation I call “intentional causation” . . . . (64, italics added)

Thus, we see that intentionality can provoke consciousness to certain actions; as Searle makes clear, it often functions as a causal agent. The phrase “. . . representing the sort of event that it causes” is key. In keeping with the Multiple Drafts Model, we may claim that the mind (informed by various sensory data traveling along neural paths to the brain) sorts through its drafts via the pandemonium-driven process. It is likely that intentional states accompany individual conscious drafts—thus, as these sensory data are perceived by the mind and become conscious, intentionality comes into play, driving the mind to act upon the conscious perception with which it is associated. (It is viable to postulate that intentionality also plays a role in the selection of which of the multiple conscious drafts are selected, via pandemonium, to be acted upon by the body and preserved in memory as a linear narrative.) Intentionality directs the mind towards certain physical or mental objects; it represents to the mind the state that it causes.

This involves a complex temporal play—let us explore it with Searle’s example of drinking water. Intentionality—which must be understood as an attribute of

consciousness as we have already defined it, not a separate activity of mind which has its own agency—directs the mind towards the glass of water. The intentional state we are discussing is *desire*. “Intentional causation” drives the mind towards this desired object (water) by representing to the mind its own future state—intentionality represents the effect of its own fulfillment (drinking water) to the mind before this effect has occurred. This prompts the mind to fulfill the desire and arrive at the represented state; the mind moves towards a future state that intentionality has represented to it and finds that the effect of intentionality (drinking water) was caused by the future-looking “intentional causation.”

Intentionality is also discussed by David Chalmers, in his book *The Conscious Mind*. Although Chalmers approaches conscious activity through the tradition of dualism and rejects much of the materialism espoused by Dennett and Searle, his view of intentionality is complementary to theirs. Chalmers differentiates between *known* and *unknown* intentional states; he defines the latter as those states which are formed through processes that are not narrated within the brain and which consequently remain at the level of the unconscious. In terms compatible with the Multiple Drafts Model, we may say that certain intentional states are not conscious because, in the mind’s polyphonic space of multiple drafts, these intentional states were not included in the linear narrative formed by the process of pandemonium.

Chalmers writes,

Certainly, there is often conscious experience in the vicinity of belief: there is something it is like when one has a [conscious] belief, and most [unconscious]



beliefs can at least bring about a conscious belief. The crucial questions, though, are whether this conscious quality is what *makes* the state a belief, and whether it is what gives it the content it has. This may be more plausible for some beliefs than for others: for example, one might argue that a conscious quality is required to truly have beliefs about one's *experiences*, and perhaps certain sorts of experiences are required to have certain sorts of beliefs about the external world . . . (20)

Chalmers' concerns with the possibly dual nature of intentional states (i.e., both conscious and unconscious) are easily extrapolated, even if they are answered with difficulty. We may ask: what becomes of the intentional states which are not conscious, i.e., which are not incorporated into the linear narrative that the memory has access to? Do these intentional states and desires continue to represent to the mind the effects of the states fulfillment, as Searle describes?

Ultimately, Chalmers guides this discussion into the territory of dualism, which directly conflicts with the ideas of Dennett, Searle, and most other philosophers of mind. This paper will not follow these deliberations; they have little relevance to Swensen's poetic works. However, Chalmers' distinction between conscious and unconscious intentional states and the questions he has raised concerning the function of unconscious intentionality allow an interesting discourse with Searle's notion of intentionality. These ideas also provide an avenue of analysis by which we may re-approach Swensen's work—such an activity will allow us to solidify our understanding of the manner in which it functions like the human mind and consciousness.

### **Intentionality in Such Rich Hour**

In order to understand the function of intentionality within the mind of Swensen's poetic texts, let us return our attention to Such Rich Hour. Since the verse's

consciousness is continually apprehending objects within the text (i.e., the objects of the textual world), this book exemplifies both Searle's and Chalmers' thoughts on intentionality.

First, let us examine Searle's claim: that intentionality—via desire, belief, and other mental states—represents the effect of the intentional state's own fulfillment to the mind and so becomes, in essentially, the cause of its own effect. Such an action, by which intentionality continually affects a sort of circular self-indicating (by causing its own effects) takes place in Such Rich Hour by creating certain absences or moments of desire within the text. These fissures within the poetic weave preoccupy the consciousness of the verse; the poems' intentionality represents to the mind of the poem the fulfillment of its desire, as intentionality does in the human mind. I refer to these moments of desire as "absences" because, unlike within the human mind, in Swensen's verse we see that intentionality often operates on *false representations*. It creates a belief or state of desire which is perceived by the mind of the poem but which, as the poem textually draws close to it, is found to be absent.

This phenomenon occurs in a poem entitled "May 1<sup>st</sup>: Broad Day." Swensen writes:

something else  
something called "green earth"  
but they weren't accurate enough to make a landscape live  
but did wonderfully as the base for the warm tones of the skin (Swensen 50)

though that is also  
my love who has promised the  
world

Herein, we see desire and belief—intentional states—at work within the mind of the poem. Each of the linguistic statements creates a state of desire: the desire for its own fulfillment, in which intentionality represents to the verse’s consciousness the conditions of its own fulfillment and the linguistic and semantic effect that will result from this desired fulfillment.

This representational process occurs at the fragment’s beginning, with the phrase “though that is also/something else/something called ‘green earth’.” With awareness of this linguistic construct, the intentionality of the poem represents to the consciousness of the poem the (as yet unrealized) effect of its fulfillment—i.e., the meaning that will result if the linguistic phrase is completed. However, the poem then moves into a seemingly different discourse which fractures its previous syntactic and semantic unity: “my love/who has promised the.” This is a moment that demonstrates “incomplete” intentionality; the desire raised by the line of text (what has been promised by the lover?) is not fulfilled before the poem’s syntax is deferred into a different linguistic situation. Moments such as this occur throughout Such Rich Hour; intentionality establishes states of desire and belief, but the effect of these intentional statements are seldom manifest. To refer again to Searle’s example, the glass of water is perceived and desired by the mind, but never grasped or drunk from.

Having arrived at this point of discourse, we may now turn issues raised by David Chalmers concerning the conscious and unconscious levels of intentionality. In our analysis, these terms will refer to those intentional states which have been integrated into

the delicate linear narrative of the poems' consciousness (conscious) or which, although they did form a conscious draft and partook in the process of selection-by-pandemonium, were not included in the linear narrative (unconscious). Fortunately, Chalmers' discussion provides a logical next step from Searle's argument. We have established that the intentional states within Swensen's work are often unfulfilled; the effect represented to the verse's mind by an intentional state is not created, as the poetic discourse is often deferred into an alternate syntactic pathway.

In Chalmers' terms, it is here that we find evidence of the unconscious intentional states. If we view the entirety of Such Rich Hour as embodying the function of the human mind, we then recognize the force of pandemonium at work, as it selects from among the multiple drafts of (textual) consciousness. We also see that the book does not progress without focus; it moves through a series of historical dates (which are found in the poems' titles) and has certain recurring themes which reoccur on a macroscopic level. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the references to numbers as the thoughts of God are an example of this: "father son and holy father son and only counting," found in a poem titled "March 3." (Swensen 31)

Thus, the book as a single entity does have a very loosely structured narrative, which deals with elements of history, theology, and aesthetics in medieval France and England. However, as in the human mind, there are many individual moments conscious perception—i.e., conscious drafts—which, in the activity of pandemonium, are not selected for inclusion in the "final" narrative of consciousness. The moments discussed

on the previous page can be included in this category: the statement: “my love/who has promised the,” in addition to exemplifying an “incomplete” intentional state, can be considered a conscious draft which was not included in the final “narrative” in the poem’s mind. At this point, we may say that the conscious draft has become, in Chalmers terminology, “unconscious”.

It is now evident that the two operations we have been discussing—“incomplete” intentional acts of poetry’s consciousness and unconscious intentional states— are the same. The intentional states that are not fulfilled within the consciousness of the poem, in effect, slip to the unconscious space. As unconscious intentional states, these uncaused beliefs and desires are excluded from the somewhat linear narrative formed within the poem (the historical progression and theological concerns discussed earlier). They no longer have an effect upon the desires, hopes, etc. of the poem; they embody brief textual urges (i.e., finding out what “my love” has promised) that seem not to remain in the poem’s conscious mind after the process of pandemonium has taken place. Conversely, we may say that those intentional states within the poem that are retained in the linear narrative are those associated with conscious drafts of thought that have been selected via the process of pandemonium. In these scenarios, the intentional state has succeeded in representing the effects of its fulfillment to the mind of the poem and has thereby essentially caused itself, as Searle described.

## *Phenomenology/Perception*

### **In Philosophy**

Within the philosophical tradition, Phenomenology is an area of thought which examines human perception and consciousness. It operates with the understandings that we do perceive things in a world external to ourselves and that consciousness is an essential agent in this process of perception. Phenomenology strives to understand what role consciousness plays in the apprehension of objects and states, both internal and external to ourselves, and how our perceptions reveal our own consciousness to us (if indeed this occurs).

In his 1936 text The Transcendence of the Ego, Jean-Paul Sartre is deeply concerned with the role played by the consciousness in phenomenology. His argument is multi-faceted and complex; however, he departs from the assertions of earlier Phenomenologists (such as Edmund Husserl) and asserts that the actions of human consciousness are not directed by an Ego which oversees the mind. Consciousness is not “controlled”; rather, it moves about by random happenings and the pull that objects exert on its attention. Although Sartre’s and Dennett’s philosophies are far removed from one another, at this point they are compatible: there is no central agency in the mind which controls its perceptions, but the formation of conscious thought and awareness happens by chance (in Dennett’s terms, pandemonium).

John Searle also addresses the issue of phenomenology in his essay “The Phenomenological Illusion,” in the collection Philosophy in a New Century. He too objects to the phenomenology of Husserl and also of Martin Heidegger, referring to them as “idealists”:

It is idealism of a . . . kind which I tried to define semantically . . . . The definition I used was this: A view is idealistic in this semantic sense if it does not allow for *de re* references to objects. All references to objects [in an idealistic philosophy] are interpreted as being within the scope of some phenomenological operator, such as Dasein or transcendental consciousness. (Searle 107)

In the same essay, Searle criticizes these traditional phenomenological thinkers for prioritizing their “phenomenological operators” (Dasein or transcendental consciousness, Husserl’s position) over the perceived objects themselves. A significant flaw in this mode of thought is its assertion that conscious beings do not perceive objects directly; rather, we perceive objects within the scope of their Dasein. The implication of this assessment is that we actually perceive our own consciousnesses whenever we think we perceive an external object. If traditional phenomenology is unable to break away from the prioritizing of “phenomenological operators,” then one is unable to say “I perceive a maple tree;” one must say “I perceive that my consciousness is perceiving a maple tree.”

This is troublesome to Searle, for such a position elevates categories of being unnecessarily. This forces any perceived objects into a certain mold before they can be perceived *de re* by the mind; this is similar to Dennett’s rejection of the so-called Cartesian Theater. Any central agent—whether in the mind or in a phenomenological outlook—forces consciousness’ multiple drafts, or its perception of external objects, into already-formed directions of meaning and limits their natural (ontological) play. Searle

references Bertrand Russell as an example of how to avoid the problematic aspects of Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophies:

In [his] theory of descriptions, Russell does not ask himself what it consciously feels like when he utters the sentence, "The king of France is bald" . . . . He does not ask himself what his state of consciousness is; rather, he tries to describe the conditions under which the sentence would be true. He arrives at his famous analysis by analyzing *truth conditions*, not by analyzing his experience. (Searle 113)

Although there are flaws within the arguments of phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger, the field of Phenomenology itself is still valuable and productive. It permits inquiries into the nature of perception and of the qualities of objects that we perceive. The freedom from the necessity of "phenomenological operators" parallels the Multiple Draft Model's freedom from the central agency implicit in the dualism of the Cartesian Theater. There is a consequent element of similarity between the analysis of the "truth conditions" of objects (their ontologic status and operation) and the pandemonium-driven operation of drafts of consciousness. Both are free to move as their own agency prompts them.

Yet an unexplored topic remains: what is the nature of external reality and of the objects which we perceive? Even if we believe, along with Sartre, Russell, and Searle, that we can analyze objects themselves and not merely their placement in phenomenological systems (i.e., their Dasein), there is still some question as to the nature of the material reality that we perceive. Jane Bennett addresses this question in her book [Vibrant Matter](#), published in 2010.



In this work, Bennett is critical of the typical view of material objects: they are traditionally perceived as bodies and properties that are not conscious or alive, but which have material form and operate by the laws of physics, such as trees, electricity, gasses, cars, sewage, etc. Such objects are typically viewed as passive; they allegedly serve no function other than to provide a context for human agency or to complement human will and action through their static, stable nature. (Bennett 29-30) However, Bennett seeks to destabilize this view of material objects. Instead of viewing these objects as *things* (passive, lacking agency, complementing human agency), Bennett argues that they have a quality of *vibrant materiality*. Although physical objects and properties are neither conscious nor living, they do demonstrate a real agency; material objects are actants, without any contingency upon human systems or conceptions.

In Vibrant Matter, Bennett proposes that the most accurate view of a total system of material agency (containing both humans and objects) is that of an *assemblage*: a system comprised of multiple active forces which exist in a state of proximity and tension. Each individual force has its own agency; they mutually affect one another and each active system must respond to the impacts made upon it by other systems. A city can serve as a suitable example of Bennett's assemblage. It contains many types of systems of actants, all of which combine into an assemblage: the adults and children, the electrical grid, water and gas systems, birds and animals, cars and their exhaust, and the weather itself all demonstrate material vibrancy or agency.

Bennett writes:

Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materialities of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. . . . Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. (23-24)

Thus, the material world is comprised of multiple polyphonic constructs; human agency and will can no longer be prioritized over the agency of non-human materiality. This has an interesting relation to phenomenology and to other fields of thought that concern perception. If human observers do not transcend or stand apart from an assemblage, but are themselves active participants within that field of mutually impacting agencies, their observations are apt to be less authoritative and less axiomatic. If conscious, human observers have a degree of autonomy and force which is equal to that of all other material objects within a given assemblage, then, as Bennett notes, it becomes a nearly impossible task to accurately perceive the origins and causal relations of events within that assemblage. (Bennett 31-35)

This portrayal of assemblages and vibrant materiality has a strong similarity to the Multiple Drafts Model and to Searle's conception of phenomenological perception. In all three theories, there is no central agency which controls autonomy, thought, or perception. These activities operate on their own, within tension-filled totalities. In systems such as these, which seem to function via means suspended between democracy and anarchy, there is tremendous possibility for play, ambiguity, and chance.

### **Phenomenology/Perception in Goest**

The role of phenomenology and perception within Swensen's poetry blends Sartre's and Searle's meditations upon a philosophy that is not determined by "phenomenological operators" with Bennett's sense of "vibrant materiality." This is demonstrated most clearly in Goest; we see the decentered operation of a consciousness which takes its cues not from a central "Ego" but from random lures and pressures. It is such a consciousness, whose mechanism is driven by pandemonium, which observes the natural world of assemblages, which are themselves driven by similar processes of internal polyphony and conflicting agencies. The book contains no sense of an entirely autonomous, self-directing, perceptive consciousness which makes willful decisions about what natural objects or historical moments are to be perceived. The sequence of events is instead determined by incidents within the text: objects or persons which tempt the poems' consciousness and lure it away from linear movements.

Although this process drives the direction of the book as a whole, such an event occurs on a microcosmic level in the poems of Goest's second section: "A History of the Incandescent." The poem "The Invention of the Night Watch" concludes with this stirring passage:

There's a light that lists toward each en  
route to heaven and we follow the  
folding screens. Between seven and  
sixteen bodies a night were collected off  
the streets of Paris from the thirteenth  
through the seventeenth centuries and  
several more from the Seine.  
Who counted in his sleep

counted his sleep;  
who took a walk after dark; *I have a friend*  
*in the world.* (Swensen 22)

Within these lines, there is a small “distraction” within the flow of consciousness: the statement “there’s a light that lists . . .” slips into the account of dead bodies in Paris. This emotionally powerful anecdote then draws the attention of the poem into an intimate passage: “Who counted in his sleep . . .” etc. The objects perceived by the verse’s consciousness undergo more radical shifts as the book progresses. Having read the meditations in “The Invention of the Night Watch,” the opening of a poem 12 pages later (“The Invention of the Mirror”) seems abruptly different; it is more fragmented, less intimate, and its phenomenological operation approaches objects differently. The poem begins:

“And therein found this face”  
  
there at the bottom  
  
    something moving through the tarnish  
at a different rate.  
  
    They poured the liquid metal  
across the flattened panes. Ice upon ice: antimony,  
lead, colophonium  
        once called mirror-resin (Swensen 34)

Clearly, between these two passages from Goest, the consciousness of the verse has been distracted by a pull or pressure and, in the absence of any overriding “phenomenological operator,” has abandoned its previous direction of intent and moved in a different one. The poem is thus able to follow the motions of the textual objects themselves, without needing to create a synthesis or syntactic link between its varied

objects of perception and textual description. Eschewing any traditional causality or linearity, the mind of the poems is animated by alternate forces, which cause a shift in both the tone of the verse and the objects to which the poems are drawn. The intentionality of poetic consciousness is not *directed* to perceive and remember the objects: “face . . . tarnish . . . liquid metal . . . ice . . . mirror resin.” Rather, it is drawn to each of these objects in turn; they seem to exude a strong pull on the consciousness of the poem. This is similar to saying, as Dennett would, that the linear conscious narrative, formed to reflect the drafts that emerged from the mind’s process of pandemonium, was drawn to follow the diffuse and evasive path that we see in the poems.

Because the consciousness of the poem is not directed upon the objects of its perception but is pulled along by these objects or randomly encounters them, we may use Bennett’s theory to complete our analysis. The perceived objects themselves demonstrate a peculiar pull upon the poetry’s attention; the relationship of poetry’s consciousness and the textual objects which it perceives thus operates as an *assemblage*. The agencies of (poetic) consciousness and of (textual) objects combine, whether the objects are those mentioned in “The Invention of the Night Watch” or “The Invention of the Mirror.” Consciousness in the poems does not choose its way among the objects it perceives—rather, its agency and the agency of the attracting objects and historical inventions mutually impact one another.

This results in surprising, unpredictable works of verse. As Bennett writes, concerning the diffuse nature of causality within an assemblage, “[Material, non-human]

elements in themselves probably never cause anything.” (Bennett 33) The opposite side of her argument is similar: human (and poetic) agency in itself also never causes anything; causes result only when elemental objects and conscious agents mutually affect one another within an assemblage. Swensen creates such an assemblage within the intricate workings of Goest, as perception operates without external direction, and agency and causality become muddled within the consciousness of the verse.

## **Section Five: Conclusion**

This thesis is not to be considered an exhaustive or finalized work, but merely an initial step towards outlining a theory of poetry which analyzes its functions in terms of the workings of the human mind and consciousness. There are many topics of great relevance within studies of consciousness that I have not referenced: does poetry function (as some say the mind does) like a computer? Does the consciousness of verse evolve over time, as it encounters new types of objects and is drawn into new, as-yet unforeseen syntactical and phenomenological combinations? How does poetry's consciousness function in the case of confessional verse, which uses a strong and persistent persona or narrator who speaks as an "I"? As it stands, this thesis is an initial step into a field exploring a Poetics of Consciousness. This is a field which has seen little exploration but which may be tremendously fruitful as thinkers attempt to find new ways in which to understand the function of verse and new ties between poetry and philosophy.

The link of similarity between Swensen's verse and philosophy of mind is both significant and productive. Although there are other theories of consciousness which could adequately describe the poetic function of Such Rich Hour, Try, and Goest, Dennett's Multiple Drafts Model has emerged as the theory which most accurately describes both the workings of consciousness and verse in their similar natures. Its focus on a non-centralized, non-mediated conscious "stream"; a temporally undetermined and

flexible order of perception; and the probing of conscious drafts via a process of pandemonium, resulting in a polyphonic, non-determined consciousness (yet one which is viewed by memory as a linear narrative) allows a productive theoretical analysis of Swensen's verse.

Furthermore, although the theories of Intentionality and Phenomenology which we discussed and applied to Swensen's verse were not designed to coincide in their operations with the operations of the Multiple Drafts Model, they did so to a surprising degree. In both cases, the philosophical theories provided a suitable lens through which to view the workings of verse. The "incomplete" intentional states (as described by Searle) and the occurrence of Bennett-esque assemblages within Swensen's three books complement and further the manners in which her verse functions like consciousness. In fact, these elements heighten the sense of her work *containing* consciousness, as we have come to see.

Such an analysis is not meant to rob poetry of its own autonomous nature or to force it to conform to certain theoretical texts. Rather, the philosophical theories are meant to highlight the already mind-like operation of Swensen's verse and to draw out this previously unexplored aspect of the texts' function. Consequently, we have seen how Swensen's verse, like human consciousness, operates via a method of non-directed multiplicity, play, and pandemonium.



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