I think there is an important shift going on in the work of many younger American poets. These poets seem fascinated by the possibility of shifting from a view of the poem as primarily an aesthetic object to re-imagining the resources available if they treat poems as primarily rhetorical acts. This shift does not mean ignoring form; it only suggests that the pleasures and intensities of formal strategies need not be located primarily in the analogies with the other arts entailed by discourse emphasizing aesthetics. In effect these poets turn to the rhetorical effulgence that dominates the poetry of Ashbery and Bernstein and ask whether that work can be adapted to less ironic attitudes so that it might place the craft of poetry in closer proximity to general social agendas.

This simple shift can have enormous stakes, especially if we follow the poets efforts to redefine our understanding of what the role of rhetorician can offer the poet. First, it calls into question a strange consensus among “conservative” and “experimental” poets because both emphasize this ideal of the poem as aesthetic object—the former through the interpretations of Modernism offered by the New Critics, the latter through what objectivist poets from Williams to Zukofsky to Olson made of those same Modernist permissions. It may be time to recognize that any significant definition of poetry has to muster the full resources of language in ways that aligning poetry with an aesthetics shaped largely by the non-verbal arts could never accomplish. Second, it suggests that we treat the equation of poem with aesthetic object as a strange historical event by which the modernists recast poetry to emphasize its link with the other arts, and so violently repudiated rhetoric. We can still honor Modernism for how it raided the other arts and transformed our sense of the materiality of language in the process. But at the same time the work of these younger poets suggests that the modernist aesthetic is likely to prove limited, as is perhaps evident in how work in modernist experimental traditions seems to have to become increasingly radical for increasingly smaller rewards.

There are several veins of an emerging fascination with rhetoric in the work of poets as diverse as Ben Lerner, Joshua Clover, Karen Volkmann, Graham Foust, and Geoffrey O'Brien. But I want to represent as straightforward a version as possible of the historical shift that I see occurring. So I will concentrate on recent work by Juliana Spahr and Jennifer Moxley that in many respects is quite far from the experimental traditions in which both poets were trained. But I think it is fair to say that these two poets do not renounce that tradition so much as put the spirit of experiment to new use in trying to work out how poetry might take on more overt social responsibilities. In the process, they hope to redefine received opinions of what rhetoric might both entail and enable.
This shift is most evident in how both poets treat ideals of authorial sincerity. Those ideals have long been valued only by quite traditional lyric poets. However these two poets try innovative means of recuperating sincerity by rending voices that embrace awkwardness, doubt, and confusion. It is as if sincerity authorized a refusal to emphasize aesthetic finish and so could pursue instead a resistance to “artefactuality” that promises to allow actual historical experience a more pervasive presence in the voices their poems adapt. Spahr’s sincerity depends on making the self’s encounters with historical circumstances so transparent and so elemental that she can directly invite participation from her audience, therefore bypassing any need for manifest persuasion. Moxley, on the other hand, for most of her career equated sincerity with a scrupulous self-consciousness painfully seeking transparency for what typically exceeds our powers of representation. Then she develops a rather strange and moving rhetorical stance in which plain speech seems to correlate the personal and the transpersonal. Moxley shows that poetry can sustain a level of prosaic discursiveness immediately linking author and audience. But at the same time Moxley preserves sufficient traces of poetic pattern to invite participation and give a weight to the phrasing not typical of prose. The resulting sense of communication does not have Spahr’s direct engagement in the political consequences of poetic choices, but it does produce a marvelous synthesis of transparency and awkwardness that affords a distinctive subsumption of authorship into a shareable sense of the values attendant on careful attention to where one stands.

I could not have developed my ideas about a new rhetoric without Spahr’s prose text Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity. Therefore it seems reasonable to begin testing the value of these ideas by asking how they might affect our reading of Spahr’s poetry—especially by demonstrating the possible force of her characteristic stylistic choices, and so making a case for the extraordinary artistic intelligence informing her somewhat controversial resistance to traditional lyrical devices.

The most striking of those choices is what we might call the presentation of very thin states of subjectivity—thin in the sense that her “I” in both Fuck you-Aloha-I Love You and thisconnectionofeveryonewithlungs expends very little effort to cultivate any kind of life for the self that might challenge the adequacy of ordinary language. Subjectivity is describable in elemental terms—as a register of both its pleasures in an intimate household arrangement within the garden-settings of Hawaii and its pains at the isolation of Hawaii and, more pressingly, at the paralyzing distance epitomized in that isolation from any capacity to engage those forces that create suffering for various societies around the world. And because of these strikingly elemental frameworks, there appears little that blocks the subject from sharing these conditions with those addressed as “you’ and as “we.” More important, there is little to defend about the self.
under these conditions, so there is no need for efforts at a mastery that protects the self and not much value in imposing private meanings on public situations. Instead the lack of defensiveness makes the poems read as offerings in search of community. And community comes to depend not so much on empathic identification as on simple awareness of the degree which momentary subject positions can be shared. In fact there is little to empathize with beyond the moment or situation. So the sense of “we” can be maintained even if people decide to do very things with the information her poems provide.

Each poem in *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* begins with an emblem from *A Teacher’s Manual for Tumbling and for Apparatus Stunts*. These stick figures parallel what we learn about selves—that their elemental forces constitute the fundamental building blocks for a society with a much more flexible exchange of roles possible than we typically credit. And once we can treat the subject in such structural terms, these possibilities of interrelatedness prove to be not at all casual but rather constitute amazingly stable structures for the exchange of energy.

The verbal force potential in such exchanges is most fully elaborated in the last poem of the book, “WE” (where we find also the most complicated stability for the stick figures). I want to concentrate on how this elemental rendering of the subject position builds to a climax that is also a compelling version of a kind of figurality perhaps only possible within this kind of effort at “sincerity.” The opening seems simple, but presents a deeply intelligent and purposive version of that simplicity:

> We have moved to a remote yet populated space.

> On this space things are different …

> Here things grow around and into each other

> What this space feels like is that it is the middle of the night and we are deep asleep in our beds, dreaming. Our we, our spouse, our mother, our father, our caretaker, comes into the room and turns on the light, flooding our eyes, our minds, blinding us leaving us confused, lost, wondering where the dream, which feels more solid and real than our story went.

> This growing around and into
each other and the anger and the aloha of this growing together. (79)

It is crucial that the poem begin with this combination of apparent concreteness of self-description and an abstractness impossible to locate in anything but the sheer idea of space, or, more properly, the sheer idea of “this space.” Spahr has rendered an affective condition as rarely remarked as it is central—the subjective sense of a “here” that in fact is comprised of a porous abstract space. That space can only be described in terms of what it feels like. And here we feel as subjects, but we do not feel as primarily individual subjects since the objects are so common. Our efforts to locate the self in affective space here flow naturally into a self-consciousness that seems inseparable from orientations anyone can take.

Literally the particular situation here presents a moment of being awakened and losing the dream. But literal action is framed by the potential collectivity which can share the state, and which can find emotional definition in this projected sharing. The “We” here is ingeniously constructed out of several linked elements, all sharing a mobility correlated with a complex and uneasy sociality. This “we” involves an intricate combination of a shared sense of space, a shared sense of social dependency that affords this space an identity as a psychological event, and the sense of transition because the entire dream sequence depends on integrating the abstract sociality of language with the confused and somewhat tense reality of social differences. It is crucial here that Spahr’s “we” does not emerge in the mode of triumphant romanticism (like Wordsworth’s “nor shall we then forget”). This “we” is much more elemental and fragmented and confused. But Spahr realizes that these very features make the “we” plausible for contemporary audiences: any subject can recognize participating in these aspects of sociality—not just as social roles but as internalized psychological dispositions. The confusion is not a failure of community or even a mark of latent community but simply is what characterizes the form of our sociality.

Having established a kind of socius, the poem must face the challenge of projecting why that act matters. What can agents do when they recognize how sociality is inseparable from the confusion of partial identifications? Spahr’s second section offers one feasible answer by turning to the possible affects involved as the self tries to affirm how this “crooked” series of connections becomes a source of love. Then her third section takes the opposite tack. It moves from summary to intensification of the moment where the light goes on. Now the light initiates a refracting process that begins physically, then quickly moves to how the mind also takes account of the differences emerging in social space. And the refraction soon leads well beyond the room to what an idea of refraction can contain virtually on its own. This passage, like many of the finest moments in Spahr’s poetry, manages to build Whitmanian expansiveness out of Steinian repetition:

… WE are bathed in the light of the
prism, all over the room. We are bathed in the light of waking up. This is awareness. This light bathes we who are concerned because we have to make room for we who are lost or leaving other places, we who claim land, we who came from somewhere else, we who are famous … we who are large with food … we, we who are I, we who want to claim an independence and superiority of our we, we who live in a certain place in a certain time and are confused about history. (81-82)

There are two reasons I end this quotation with one of Spahr’s line breaks that coincide with syllable breaks within a word. First, this formal decision provides a powerful trope fostering a fleeting experience of how we can acknowledge separation without denying connection. In fact it is continuing pressure of separation that provides the background for the poem’s uncharacteristically triumphant assertiveness in its climactic section:

The light is we. The prism is the space known for its romantic associations where things grow around and into each other. The list of we is the prism of light.

We examine the light we have written and are confused because we can’t see the singular in it and then we realize there is no personal story without we.

Or if we can see a singular story it is only for a moment as it appears in the periphery of our vision as a mirage while our eyes attempt to separate the light into its separateness and fail. (83)

Here failure takes on considerable power because the entire volume is haunted by a sense that her pleasures in the immediate world cannot compensate for two limitations that pervade her experience-- a social inability to participate fully in
movements for social justice accompanied by a practical, cognitive inability to find such movements in which she can fully believe. Even the effort at visionary poetry cannot overcome these fears. Rather the poem now simply, and gloriously, elaborates for this fear of failure a material analogue that shows another possible direction for thinking: the light projects a figure for justice because it cannot be separated into individual elements. Therefore this light embodies the possible community built on a shared recognition that it is within the very nature of ideals to produce a sense of failure. Here this recognition deepens her sense of the power of the light to compose appearance and to extend the physical domain almost to include the presence of singular stories. That we cannot separate the light does not mean that there are not singular presences within it. Quite the contrary, since we have to acknowledge the strange correlation between diverse bodies (with their singular stories) and the emerging collective awareness of those differences produced by the light.

I especially admire how Spahr handles the echo here of Dante's final visionary moment near the end of his Paradiso when he sees the essence of divinity even as he utters his disappointment that sight is failing him. Here this possibility of allusion need not even be noticed. This is not Eliot's assertive and troubling allusiveness that insists on the painful and alienating self-consciousness of the authorial position. Rather this seems generous allusion. An audience aware of Dante's text can appreciate its relevance to this much more domestic scene. But at most the allusion is simply an extension of the sociality that the poem enters. The allusion offers a reminder that poetry too is a domain of "we's" in a shareable enterprise so long as languages of adulation and imitation can safely be put aside. And it reminds us of how the power of light affords a magic supplementing the simple physics of the scene--as description and as invocation.

I like to see Spahr's next book as testing what she can build once she has developed a rhetoric capable of linking the poetic with social space. In effect this connectionof everyonewithlungs asks, "Now that I can put the "we" plausibly on a lyric stage, what powers can I envision that figure taking on and what accomplishments can it produce?" Characteristically she does not allow much celebration. What seems to matter is less what the "we" actually accomplishes practically than how this condition of plural agency can develop attitudes capable of at least recognizing and putting to work the various oppositions that haunt her work: Hawaii vs mainland, "this on the map off the map feeling" (64), separation vs identification (21), and the forms of union that enrich domesticity but can't extend to having desired effects on public life. She chooses the serial lyric as her form because the sequence of dates as the US prepares for war in Iraq can give considerable power to the place these oppositions came to have in practical life. The openness of the form allows focusing on how these oppositions continually return even as they modulate into one another. In fact the openness has the odd effect of turning the Steinian repetition that for Stein secures the autonomy of art
into a process of coming to grips with political reality. And the emotional intelligence of her poetry illustrates how there can be modes of direct speech there that are neither propaganda nor sentimental appeals to a shared pathos.

I will use the last section of *Poem Written from November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003*, to elaborate why I think this work is innovative, moving, and significant. This section starkly confronts her basic structures of opposition as they come to pervade every feature of her narrative. We can track the movement here by dividing it into five units. The first unit stresses a satisfying domestic order of “life … as usual” achieved by Spahr and her lovers in Hawaii. Then history enters, with surprising affective consequences: “This makes us feel guiltier and more unsure of what to do than ever.” Through line 12 the anaphoric register shifts from exclamation to the passivity of “we” trapped apart from the events the lovers care about. Then the third unit begins with the last anaphoric phrase: “we count numbers attending and numbers arrested.” For seventeen lines the poem just lists numbers and places, like “one hundred in Beijing.” But it is striking to the reader that these numbers evoke a much more engaged sense of history than the lovers can share since these numbers refer to people on the front line, doing and not watching or writing letters of protest.

No wonder then that when the figure of “we” returns, it is under the sign of “a huge sadness” that overtakes us daily because of our inability to control “what goes on in the world in our name.” The semantic units get more complex in this fourth part, largely to measure the feeling of being trapped in what seems the only form of activity available to them—ironic utterance and general talk to compensate for their lack of particulars that can bring their passions beyond the domestic order. Gradually that history comes to participate in their banter, as if there were neither escape nor effective action available, and their words become empty symbols for a history that can neither be owned nor rejected. I cite the eighth of nine similar passages as repetition comes to border on obsession: “WE get up in the morning and the words ‘Patriot missile systems,’ the Avengers,’ and ‘the US infantry weapons,’ tumble out of our mouths before breakfast.”

The final transition gives the poem compelling affective substance because it directly sets this invasive history against the center of their domestic life, the pleasures of their bed and feelings of pluralizing the intimate “you”:

And it goes on and on all day long and then we go to bed.

In bed when I stroke the down on yours cheeks, I stroke also the carrier battle group ships, the guided missile cruisers and the guided missile destroyers. (74) Then Spahr uses three more similar “when” clauses to set up this conclusion:

Guided missile frigates, attack submarines, oilers, and amphibious transport/dock ships follow us into bed.

Fast combat support ships, landing crafts, air cushioned, all of us with all of that. (75)
Now the war images are the active agents: “we” can only try to escape. But there is no escape. More important, there is no reconciliation of opposites. History brooks no Coleridgean miracles of imaginative labor. However there can be an expansion of consciousness worthy of the increasing intensity in the anaphoric gestures characterizing each of the structural moments. What poetry can do is refuse to settle for any fictions of resolved opposition, and also refuse any consolation that will ultimately allow the proprial sensibility to subdue the alienating voices that render insufficient every gesture of intimacy. Poetry can eventually gather in one phrase a summary of everything it has been trying to say: “all of us with all of that.” Rather than achieve a position where it can reconcile opposites, poetry achieves a sense of a totality consisting simply in the testifying to the inevitability of these opposites. But now the mode shifts from complaint and irony to lucid acknowledgement, as if a vision of something like eternal return were necessary for the embrace of the history that will haunt you however you try to evade it.

Spahr’s work does not offer a theory of rhetoric or engage classical texts on the subject. Yet I think it is worth our while to develop an understanding of rhetoric that can accommodate or thrive on resistance to the effects of well-madeness or artefactuality as well as to more complex versions of how aesthetics enables a distinctive mode of experience. Let us then imagine what Spahr offers in this domain by placing her poetic strategies in a context of the elemental building blocks any classical theory of rhetoric would have to provide.

I envision rhetoric as the study of how speakers provide discursive means of correlating persuasive powers of argument with demonstrative powers to take up certain attitudes that embody the effort at persuasion in a distinctive character. This contrasts sharply with Modernist versions of the aesthetic object that comes to possess in itself the capacity to create conditions of experience independent of what seemed the purpose of the author. So the first concern for the rhetorician must be to counter this aesthetic orientation by establishing an “ethos” that becomes present as the self-image constructed by the work. We have to ask what roles ethos can establish, and we have to speculate on what overt satisfactions those roles produce as persuasive features of the work. Second, those same questions have to be posed for the audience. How can rhetoric stage the conditions of address to a “you” and establish the kinds of bonds that allow projecting the “we” of community without which there can be no persuasion? Finally, there are questions about the rhetors’ relations to their subject matter. How do they manage to give a sense of accuracy about historical fact while developing clear attitudes toward those facts that have the capacity to be persuasive and elicit the desired beliefs and actions? This demand to move from fact to value poses substantial tasks for figurative language because the language must supplement the facts while remaining under the control of the larger purposes. Classical rhetoric presents
metaphor and simile as sustaining typologies and so cultivating exemplary qualities of experience, so there is a considerable challenge in bringing these figures to bear on what are marked as highly contingent circumstances. The rhetorician claims the power to treat specific actions as figuring general villainy or marked heroism.

So I begin with how Ciceronian tradition in rhetoric takes its view of the rhetor’s ideal identity from a shared sense that its primary task is use the full resources of language and tradition to persuade audiences to take up particular paths of action. The rhetor must develop an ethos in speaking that exemplifies virtues capable of adapting to what audiences want to hear, even as the speakers often suggest modifications of those virtues. Truth is less important than effectiveness; description less important than the evocation of attitudes created by the speaker’s eloquence in elaborating figures of speech and the manipulation of perspectives capable of moving the audience. Think of Mark Antony’s speech over the dead Ceasar. Self-consciousness here involves the sense of mastery in producing identifications with an audience that lead it to want to act in accord with the speaker’s desires. “You” is an overtly fictive promise of intimacy, and “we” an idealization constructed for particular effects. History becomes the set of reasons why an action proves necessary, and metaphor is primarily the working out of examples that sustain the reasoning.

Modernist writers tended to equate such rhetorical performances with another quite different set of values that almost entirely undermined the appeal of the classical position. In their picture, the effort at persuasion has the ironic result of the rhetor getting caught up in a process of interpellation. To persuade one must first risk taking on the values that he or she wants the audience to embrace. The main danger of rhetoric is that it encodes a blindness to the play of mind and encourages the righteousness of claiming one can speak for others and represent a community. For the modernists rhetor largely meant apologist, especially apologist for outmoded religious beliefs where the performance in effect is little more than a celebration of the power to make judgments that exclude people who might hold different values.

Indeed if one takes Pound and Eliot as representative one can say that modernism idealized something like scientific method because it could plausibly claim to represent what is experienced without the mediation of any designs on the audience. And the discourse of aesthetics provided just the models of concrete experience that would enable them to borrow ideals from science while specifying quite different objects of attention, different but no less concrete or intricate. In fact they could stage themselves as scientists whose domain was the non-discursive. In such cases the “I” has only a theatricalized self-consciousness blind to anything but the roles the preferred identifications offer. “You” and “we” can only be constructed as the sharing in clichés and bromides, with almost no pressure to get beyond what gives comfort and relief to the agent’s needs for identification. And history shifts from being the object of analysis
to becoming the governing power manifestly shaping the very roles the speakers celebrate as mastery.

Now poets like Spahr seem less interested in the intensity of concrete experience in itself than in the interpretive powers poets can bring to such experience. Sensuoussness alone simply cannot carry sufficient information to gain poetry an interpretive hold on actual historical processes. So while the aesthetic domain projects powerful capacities to engage experience, it cannot sufficiently account for the entire domain of interpretive imaginative gestures that make discursive or hermeneutical sense of such experience (without necessarily claiming any kind of demonstrative knowledge). Therefore there may be no escaping a return to rhetoric as the richest accounting of what poets do. But simply going back to classical rhetoric will not do. Poets brought up on discourses of indeterminacy and readerly freedom simply will not settle for the role of rhetor as masterful persuader shaping the values of audiences to lead them to specific actions. Poets want a more dialogical view of the rhetor’s task. So they have little choice but to revive, and revise another problematic principle for modernist writing—the virtues of sincerity.

It is no easy task after Sartre and de Man to attribute sincerity to anyone, let alone those who accept the rhetorician’s work. But it seems limited to assume that the agent using the resources of rhetoric must be the one who seeks control and so manipulates the audience to produce a desired result, as if the agent were at the boundary of the world free to shape and master the conditions of representation. Instead the agent may have the aim of simply making vital or precise or compelling an actual emotional situation. Then the author need seek only the kind of responsiveness from the audience that takes the form of participation. Authors want their audiences to identify with their situations, but that identification will be at most provisional as the audience tries also to bring such identifications to bear on what remains its senses of the world. What binds author to audience is not so much the product composed by the rhetorician as the rendered situation, where complete agreement is far less important than the kinds of responsive participation which may in fact provoke various degrees of disagreement or withdrawal.

The “I,” in other words, is definable as pursuing a sincerity that seeks not to project meanings for situations but to solicit participation in the effort to clarify the forces to which author and audience might both have to respond. With that change in the figure of the author, the figure of the audience also shifts substantially. The “you” and the “we” are not created by agreement about some conclusion or ideological participation. Rather these pronouns define projected positions for participation. Successful rhetoric does not necessarily persuade but it makes it possible to see what identification might consist in, and thereby allows or even encourages cultivating differences in what might arise by means of the participation. The important thing is that
an audience is made to appreciate the effort at sincerity and the demands of the situation eliciting that sincerity.

Finally the working of figurative language will take on somewhat different emphases. Classical rhetoric, and classical poetics shaped by rhetoric, envisions the primary figural process as metaphor that expands the reach of the particular and allows audiences to see in it something more general: Yeats's Leda and the Swan” is ultimately “about” the relation between history and violence. In the emerging understanding of lyric rhetoric the focus is less on powers of generalizing from figures than on producing an *enargia* that makes vivid what can take on immediacy for consciousness. The staging of reflective consciousness proves less important than producing affective urgencies capable of influencing how audiences care about what is at stake in particular situations or in adapting particular beliefs.

For most of Moxley’s career I suspect she would have had disdain for how Spahr envisions the poets task or presents ideals of sincerity. Moxley wanted not an elemental self but a highly distinctive one attuned to the full intricacy of self-consciousness and seeking to make that as transparent as possible. In fact, Moxley seemed so committed to that intricacy that she was willing to risk flaunting traditional standards of unity and of elegance. She seems to ask “Whose self-consciousness runs on so few tracks that it can seem unified”? And “whose self-consciousness is not turned manipulative and self-blinding by a devotion to elegance and a pronounced commitment to the well-made artifact.” For self-consciousness in art cannot be subsumed under any framework stressing objectivity without turning into manipulative bids at shaping readers’ sensibilities. It seemd far better to play the ancient mariner introducing audiences to the pains of full self-reflection. There might be moments of self-comprehension, but these will be much more rare than the fear that the only peace will come from complete “negation of mind” (e.g. L 48). But this attitude would eventually exhaust itself, perhaps from success, leaving Moxley with a challenge to turn self-scrutiny into a model of attention to speaking that might project beyond the self.

Her commitment to staging self-consciousness puts Moxley’s work in a complex relationship to that of Ashbery and Creeley, two of her acknowledged masters. I quote the beginning, middle, and conclusion of “Fear of an Empty Life” as an example of how those models interrelate—Ashbery as inspiration for the dense metaphoric texture and elaborate syntax, here deprived of his characteristic quasi-impersonal lightness that manages to keep consciousness fluid while honoring its intricacy, and Creeley as the figure for the corresponding heaviness of being that takes the form of a dogged and often doomed quest for satisfying deeply personal needs bordering on the unspeakable:

Along the imprint of a smooth utterance a single adhesive word slips away, snuggles beside the accusatory newborn thought which, barking from lack of care, might trap in a moment
of serious sorrow me and my dirty heart, we twist the arm of friendship 'til the ancient swing by the nonchalant body is rewritten as a trembling angry grudge. Split along the physique axis of wrested love …

I am content when I do not think the disclosure of love is weakness. I imagine myself invincible like a bully who sees in the fear he coerces from his weaker brother the only version of truth he'll believe—satisfied sleep. I awake drenched, the sweat between my breasts that are so small they cannot touch is slick as mucous. The surface of beauty is awful and enormous to all of us who are left behind and yet we seek our coordinates …

Who cannot push the life-sustaining rationalization away without remembering, as though an error of judgment, the callow power of preservation turned to resentment of the race.

It cannot, no matter, in verse, be real. Fucked up beauty subtracts the awkward ugly plain ache of tripped-up memory stores where I see you as a taut wing of fragile older skin whose pride of effort flaps in an attempt to fly amidst its own disintegrating structure, a sight so ridiculous that all but the buried are unable to suppress their laughter and turn away. That’s an image hovering above me here where there is still in my imagination cool carpet underfoot, a flavor of drug’s seductive distances, the expense of early exits but no gun, never a gun. That weapon steals time for it knows not what’s in a minute. Tiny blindfold box of selfish stomach, parasite life, the measure of a second is insufficient to leave you behind, you and all your crippling indifference. (SR 47-48)

The poem begins with the appearance of spatial relations that we soon see are not in a concrete scene but in a mindscape that is changing and doubling back on itself even as it emerges. What becomes present seems simultaneously to be slipping away. That slipping in turn creates an uneasiness that leads to the desire for accusation, which in turn creates the necessity to deal with all kinds of unpleasant affective states. And even as “we twist the arm of friendship” there emerges an intensifying split between what is desired and the resentments that desire breeds for self-defense because of the fear that friendship will fail. Moxley is brilliant at keeping in focus how desire and resentment risk becoming inextricable from one another.

The second stanza turns to the “I” as a means of controlling this tumult. It seems to find a stance where it can assert that disclosing love need not be a weakness. But the
posture will not long allay anxiety. And the sense of insufficiency of her small breasts, one mark of vulnerability brought on by the attempt at self-assertion, produces efforts to provide a more objective anchor for the scene—first by raising it to questions about behavior in relation to beauty and then by establishing a “we” adequate to that abstract dimension. Yet because the “I” is so incompletely in possession of the scene, any collectivity seems at least in part a product of compensatory fantasy and so cannot produce any satisfying sense of community within the poem. Why not blame “the crippling indifference” of the person addressed for the poet’s own failed efforts to compose a self adequate to what “love” demands.

Moxley seems unable to escape modernist suspicions that no rhetorical stance can establish reciprocal roles and commitments for the positions of subject, auditor, and the potential “we” comprising a community. Every gesture of the mind toward the world and toward an audience seems to require an equal attention to how the self provides the originating condition for the attitudes involved. She could then perhaps turn from an audience to the sheer satisfaction of capturing such states in intricate object relations—every rift loaded with ore. But that would be to turn from the addressee completely and pursue a form of self-sufficiency, at least for the object, that is another kind of surrender of self-consciousness, this time renouncing any hope in the ideal of communication: “The mind is the life that will die by consent/ to the hand but in strategy held” (SR 46; c.f. SR 39).

Now look at two significant moments in The Sense Record where Moxley tries to project her way out of the dilemmas perhaps inherent in her equation of sincerity with supreme self-consciousness. I think she recognized that so long as one equates sincerity with self-consciousness one is trapped in an endless series of provisional moments, each inadequate for a full picture of where one stands because consciousness cannot be transparent to itself. But speech can be transparent since it does not promise a picture of consciousness but rather embodies a state where one can take responsibility for what one offers as a self. That does not mean one speaks absolute truth. One simply speaks as clearly as one can as an offering to an audience of what can testify to about one’s own state. Therefore toward the end of The Sense Record and then again in the second half of Clampdown Moxley comes close to Spahr in her refusal of artefactuality as a condition of sincerity and in her attention to aligning that sincerity with an audience, even though the two poets still take on very different attitudes toward experience.

The first moment is a projection of the power of poetry to handle the recurrent sense of despair that haunts her sensibility. It seems as if that sense of pain becomes for Moxley a hope that poetry can be sufficiently awkward to elicit from its audience a willingness to take this stumbling as a mark of authenticity, or at least as a mark of the poet’s willingness to run the risks of refusing the constructed community to which the well-made artifact can aspire:
The poem therefore must be
a fit
condolence, a momentary
and ordered form of the emphatic
question, around which continues to gather
despite habitual despair
the moving
and needful Company of
thought, attentive
to existence, quiet and ever
perpetual. (SR 6)
Here the form retains a tortured regularity of placement, but largely as a staging ground for the leap from attention to existence to a state that can sustain talk of “perpetual.”

My second moment is probably the most positive passage in The Sense Record, at least if we define “positive” as the sense that the speaker can fully identify with what seems to fulfill basic desires. In this conclusion to the expansive love poem “Impervious to Starlight” there seems a possibility that self-consciousness can formulate a commitment based on how repeated patterns of connection allow it space to relax and resolve its destructive urgencies:

All was bright, nevertheless I worried
that by the time I got out of the shower
the sun would be gone for the day.
under the spray of warm water
I invented menial tasks to feed
my sense of self-importance, mentally
enacted the miracles of daily maintenance,
which might, I thought, linger to fill
not only those hours but all our years. (SR 22)
Yet one cannot but wonder whether the poetry here is anything close to the richness of the other passages I have quoted. The spirit of acceptance seems to destroy the intensities of self-examination.

However I think there is something moving and even profound in this effort to rely on the prosaic as the vehicle for letting her guard down and allowing herself this sense of conviction. Notice for example how the final line not only completes the simple narrative but finally leaps to another temporal level which projects an extended future. Imagination is at work building on the possible implications of what can be miraculous in this simple description. Notice too how this substantial transformation of her life is made credible by her refusal of all fanfare and all theatricality? In fact there is not even the staging of a decision. Her sense of commitment seems discovered rather than
willed. But even talk of “discovery” is probably too melodramatic. “Recognition” is better because more quiet and better attuned to the elemental qualities that the prosaic sense of “daily maintenance” can project.

Finally while the language is prosaic; it is decidedly not prose. The lines do not scan, at least for me, but there are pronounced stresses often forming patterns of three or four per line. And, more important, there is careful use of line-endings that move from repeated enjambment to an emphasis on the weight of each phrasal unit constituting an individual line. The pauses make the language difficult to read as simple speech, and that produces at once a sense of awkwardness in relation to naturalistic values and a complementary sense of formal weight. There emerges a relation between language and time quite different from the common flow of speech. It is as if the flow of self-consciousness runs back on itself and affords it the sense of determination sufficient for making this commitment. Decision-making an adventure within the poem and provides a focus for identification—of self with its own mobility, of self with temporal forms, and of self with what can provide a kind of ritual center for working out bonds with other people.

Although this tone and this pacing are quite rare in *The Sense Record*, it does indicate the possibility of a mode of sincerer for Moxley that is less bound to the complex intensities of self-consciousness and more attentive to how persons take on substance. So it should not be surprising that her next book *The Line* is devoted to prose poetry and deeply involved in the abstract rhetorical roles of “you,” “I,” and “we.” And her most recent book *Clampdown* adapts and refines this prosaic mode for its concluding section. Here I only have space to interpret the significance of these shifts by focusing on a poem typical of that concluding section. This is “On The Face of It”:

It is not the complex trick
or vivid spools of thought
we’d miss, were this all to be
ruined, were all this to be
shattered by foolish executive
verdicts. The difficulty of saying
something vaguely profound,
and the small triumph of
actually doing so, would be
dim memories indeed, were
everything to change, were,
in a second, every assumption
drowned beneath the waves.
The complicated game of wits
We play with our credulous
lovers would seem rather silly
in retrospect, were they
to be obliterated. As would
the smug contentment we feel
when making vacuous overtures
to people we don’t actually respect.
In the end none of this will matter.
We’ll be made of none of those things,
nor of the larger sum, not
in the moment when,
body pavement bound,
downed by a slight dizziness,
disoriented, dignity lost,
the world we assumed to rule
suddenly changed and odd,
we turn our eyes, our fearful eyes,
like those of a displaced animal
endangered by outdated instincts,
and give ourselves over with gratitude
to the care of anyone who’s there. (Clampdown 70-71)

Again this poem seems very flat and non-consequential, much like what it talks about in its opening sections. But by the end the poem delivers a substantial impact. First there is the leveling of rhetorical expectations—for life and for art. The flattening of speech into barely patterned prose is only a small part of the poem’s insistent emptying out of dramatic interest in most of our human actions. There is a secular point, in other words, to recognizing the smallness of our lives in relation to what might survive our dying—especially when that seeing still depends on intricate possibilities of syntax and mood. Then there is the work the three part structure does. The first thirteen lines are disturbingly vague, general, and internally unsettled, as if the mind were trying to resist its own recognition that we would not miss very much of what in our lives typically occupies our passions. The next nine lines directly present two scenarios to clinch the point, one concerning the world’s claims upon us and the second concerning the triviality of our own self-constructions. Finally the speaking gathers itself into an actual vision of something like final days, where the ground for all the negatives will be recognized. And then we will have a measure of what does matter.

This measuring divides what matters into aspects of behavior and aspects of the rendering of such behavior. The crucial feature of behavior is the poem’s demand that the speaker prepare for those ultimate conditions when we no longer can assume to rule the world but “we turn our eyes, our fearful eyes/ … and give ourselves over with gratitude/ to the care of anyone who’s there.” In such circumstances, our need is likely to trump any positive constructions we might make for our lives—hence all the
negatives the poem registers as it surveys our values. This is the bare truth rendered in the simplest possible language. But the rendering modifies these negatives by calling on the work poetry can perform even within this commitment to the prosaic.

For example the strange internal rhyme in the last line seems to me much more than an ironically dismissive touch. For it serves to highlight a crucial ambiguity in the closing sentence. I first read the poem as the speaker’s conviction that one will succumb to any person’s care in one’s final desperation. And I still think that is the primary reading. But in accord with the traditions of modern poetry, there is good reason also to try out the imaginative possibility that we can be the subjects rather than the objects of such care. All the negations in the poem make us prepared for what we can do that make these last days valuable. Moxley’s volume enhances the plausibility of this reading because caring for life is a recurrent concern, as is the need for community that can be founded on this simplest and most elemental correlation of interests. Again the awkwardness and indirectness of the positive possibility makes it more rather than less compelling because there is no triumphant moral discovery on which to celebrate imaginary versions of selfhood.

Here the celebration is much simpler and much more impersonal. What must pass as community is again not chosen but realized in the form of something close to necessity. Community depends on the barest accidents that bind us because of poverty and because of our needs. And what must pass as wisdom has that same muted quality, rooted less in the poet’s consciousness than in what poetry can become when it reaches this kind of rapprochement with the prosaic. Consider two other endings of poems near the conclusion of this volume:

The custody of living things is but a bloodless shell, unwilling to abide the smallest inconvenience. (83)

and

it is crystal sanity trapped in sad okays …
in knowing knowledge the soul’s sole sustenance
and knowing all knowledge must be undone. (87)

These lines seek a scope and epigrammatic authority that is the privilege of traditional lyric, as if the prosaic could find its place in poetry and at the same time save it from false eloquence. It is as if the iambic structure never lost from the background reminds us of the traditional right of poetry to offer a straightforward and basic wisdom. The last passage in particular seems to take on substance or embodiment by means of a complexity of diction characteristic of metaphysical poetry. And in the process the lines provide a secular embodiment of that poetry’s desired union between flesh and spirit—now spirit resides in how knowledge can be undone.

Spahr would not allow herself this level of generalized assertiveness or this level of sheer ontological speculation. But the differences between these poets help indicate
the variety of perspectives and resources that are emerging in relation to what may be the most important new dispensation in contemporary poetics.

---

i I am not criticizing Modernist poetry: that monumental body of achievement is all too obvious. I am criticizing the natural tendency to try to appropriate such power by drawing abstract models from its poetics, in this case from a formative aesthetics largely left in the background in the Modernist’s major work. So I ask the readers just to notice how thoroughly the idea of the poem as aesthetic object took hold at the time and now seems to have virtually trans-historical authority. I quote Arthur Symons rendering of Mallarme’s ideal that “every word is a jewel, scattering and recapturing sudden fire, every image is a symbol, and the whole poem is visible music” (69) because of Symons’ relationship to Yeats, Pound, and indirectly to Eliot and because this vision depends on a sharp contrast between spirituality and rhetoric. Here is Symons again from the same brief essay invoking Mallarme’s “attempt to spiritualize literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority. Description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked, magically” (5). Rhetoric could never be music, could never take on the aesthetic power to foreground how art might parallel the non-discursive fluid materiality of the other arts. Instead rhetoric becomes what blocks spirituality in favor of practical abstractions devoted to persuasion rather than to contemplation. It goes without saying, by the way, that the modernists were not taught to write in accord with modernist principles but had some education in the values stemming from rhetorical training in literature, whatever they came to think of the exercise of rhetoric in social life. Their understanding of poetry was also shaped in part by traditions that stressed not the aesthetic object but the character of the poet, which was the focus of almost all traditional poetics.

ii Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” can be seen as telling the story of rhetoric from the perspective of someone who experiences only its limitations. And Pound’s “An Object” defines the social logic of what it means to have “only a code and not a core.” For more elaborate rhetoric against rhetoric there is no better example than the first issue of Blast. I have tried to spell out modernist critiques of traditional ideas of rhetoric in two essays—“Rhetoric and Poetics: How to Use The Inevitable Return of the Repressed.” Walter Jost and Wendy Olmstead, eds. A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004: 473-493, and “The Fate of the Imaginary in Modern American Poetry,” American Literary History. 17 (2005): 70-94. Also I want to mention Oren Isenberg’s powerful readings of the lengths to which modern and contemporary poets will go to escape the stink of the artefactual.

iii I have to acknowledge that this argument brings me very close to Walter Michaels’ opposition between “experience” as a domain shaped on non-verbal models such as things and possibilities of understanding works as meanings made possible by the attribution of intentions. But a concern for rhetoric can also clarify the limitations of Michael’s binary opposition that has “meaning” determined by attributing intentions while “experience” depends on the empirical factors that invite speaking about cultural identities. In my view there is no such thing as “experience” in itself. There are only modes of “experience as” that situate the experience in relation to some kind of activity, including the activity of trying to see how rhetoric might try to correlate guidelines for experiencing something as meaningful. Some intentions are only visible by means of the event, and some intentional states, notably Kant’s
purposiveness, become manifest not as separable meanings but as forces that produce complex meaningfulness within experience. So attending to rhetoric gives us a way to preserve the roles of experience in art while avoiding the idea that the basic signifying properties of imaginative writing must be non-discursive. Think of how eloquence itself becomes a vehicle for experience in a poem like “Tintern Abbey as the mind registers the expansive potential of spirit embedded in how it builds on nature.”

How Moxley handles self-consciousness has been the focus of my two previous essays on aspects of Moxley's work—a review of *The Line, Chicago Review*, and