



## Article

# Read with Me/While We Wait—A Community of Voices in Percival Everett's *Trout's Lie*

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**Abstract:** In *Trout's Lie*, Percival Everett seems to be once more exploring pure form as part of a quest for abstraction. Yet the effect of the poems in the collection largely relies on the materiality of language characterizing all poetry—mostly a play on sounds and the visual dimension of the text. How to conciliate the quest for pure form and the unruliness of the bodily? It will be argued that Everett brings them together through a work on forms not only in space but also in time, focusing on endings in both the abstract and the concrete sense of the term.

**Keywords:** Percival Everett; poetry; contemporary US literature; continuity; abstraction; time

*Trout's Lie* (Everett 2015) includes thirty-three rather short poems of one or two pages whose titles for some of them bring to mind a number of Everett's known concerns (geometry, in "Point", "Surface", "Limits") or more largely resonate with his work ("Against Sense" appears as a crucial phrase in Everett's reflection on and playing with meaning, both its making and its undoing); some of the titles may also be referred to aspects of his life ("Jim" is the name once given to his crow, an animal flag against segregation, while "A Trout's Lie" may relate to his fishing hobby).

In *Trout's Lie*, Percival Everett seems to be once more exploring pure form as part of a quest for abstraction. According to Brigitte Félix, "Everett's poems work as a field for research and experimentation with 'pure form' (to borrow the title of a poem from *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*)" (Félix 2015), a study whose influence may be perceived in his fiction, which to that extent is organically related to his poetry. Yet, one of the characteristics of poetry is its resort to the materiality of language, mostly through a play on sounds and the visual dimension of the text so as to create non-rational, more deeply seated relations with its readers. *Trout's Lie* is no exception, and its deft play on shifting vowels and consonants along word declensions running throughout the collection allows it to impress the reader with sensations that modify the meaning drawn from the words' configurations, thus creating, over the course of time, the reader's own vision of the poems, which is unique to each reader and liable to change. How to conciliate the quest for pure form and the unruliness of flesh and, more generally, of the bodily? The aim of this paper is to try to show that Everett brings together an ideal of pure form and the bodily by considering and enacting forms not only in space but also in time through an extensive variation of endings.<sup>1</sup> While language always seems to fall short of allowing for genuine understanding, each person runs the risk of remaining so engulfed in their own thoughts and feelings that life comes to be acutely perceived as developing under the threat of the tragic condition Eudora Welty called "separateness". It will be argued that the play on continuity and discontinuity in the poems makes up action on time as well as in time, offering at least the symbolic illusion of resisting the stern reality of human finitude.

Through the study of the various ways of challenging the inexorable, linear passing of time, the limits and powers of poetry as a genre will be enhanced, as well as Everett's talents as a storyteller. Indeed, though he is known first and foremost as a novelist, his poetry collection *Trout's Lie* still offers a kind of quintessential illustration of his art of writing.



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The various devices disrupting the linear while opening out other possibilities of continuity have been divided into three categories that will be considered individually even though they interact and generate mixed effects that cannot always be clearly disentangled: suspension (including repetition and ambiguity), sounds, and voice.

### 1. Suspension

The poems develop a tension between rupture and continuity.

The very format of a poetry collection, with pauses between poems, creates a singular reading pace and configuration, as the reader is repeatedly left hanging between poems, sections, and words. Most endings are open endings, favoring polysemy (through multiple choices left to the reader); moreover, throughout the collection, enjambments, true to the etymology of “verse” (from the Latin *versus* “a turn of the plough, a furrow, a line of writing”, from *vertere* “to turn”), create both continuity and suspension. This happens repeatedly, since narrative structures abound in the collection, encouraging the reader to grasp sentences over the course of several lines of poetry. End-line words often receive a wider, longer reach as their effect is allowed to reverberate, multiply, and diversify through possible connections both implied (before the next line is read) and enacted—sometimes confirmed—on reading the next line. Such is the case at the end of the second section in “The Second Quartet”:

No length is all length is  
 No length at all,  
 It is you, you say, slash  
 It, slash it, slash it.  
 Make it new again. (13)

“No length is all length is” may read per se, as two equivalent statements of abstract existence, but the enjambment completes the negation to oppose “no length” to “all length”. Similarly, “slash” may first be read as a voicing of the oblique bar sign, but then acquires its meaning as a verb as soon as the complement “it” is added, a meaning confirmed through the repetition of the phrase.

In “Birds” (43), the nearly obsessive repetition of “like” followed by “so much” or “that”, almost reminds one of teenagers chatting, or in its forceful insistence might also conjure the click of approval on social networks. The broken rhythm of the poem, visible in its layout and underlined by enjambments, creates a frantic pace that in itself conveys criticism of a society manipulated by the media:

### Birds

happen upon birds,  
 hawks, owls,  
 far above our heads or  
 stone after stone  
 ledge up to some  
 medium height,  
 wrens, crows.

Then home to hear  
 the box, like  
 so much bad music,  
 chin-high like that,  
 like so much

drama, breast-high  
 like that, like  
 so much yawning,  
 crotch-high like

that is the way  
of all men, isn't it?

piled on one another  
like stones.

Transitions from one line or poem to the next often rely on the repetition of words or sounds.

### 1.1. Repetition

The repeated word changes meaning with its second occurrence, creating ambiguity—Everett's specific "bothness", in Anthony Stewart's terms<sup>2</sup> (Stewart 2013)—and more largely polysemy, favored by two-way structures and open endings.

Thus, in this collection, both on the smaller and larger scales, repetitions and echoes create suspension effects while enhancing its global coherence through the action of memory. Stimulated by the identification of a repeated word, memory sets the collection of poems into motion, disrupting its linear course, and thus creates meaningful or at least suggestive associations: "stone" brings together the father's face in "His Glasses", beginning with "His face was never stone" (22), and the above quoted "Birds" (43); "walls", as part of a largely represented semantic field of limits and edges, relates "Hurricane" to "Against Sense", among others; moreover, references to "songs" run through the collection.

Reading unfolds in tension, more precisely in an oscillation between the multiple and the one as the reader selects one meaning among several choices or two meanings, as a secondary suggestion often remains associated with the dominant meaning and the hierarchy between the two is sometimes reversed over the course of reading. Thus, the reader makes hesitant progress into the collection, as the sequence of words is prolonged through addition and variation, or what amounts to a declension of sorts, of several words with the same root but belonging to different grammatical categories.

In the first section of the poem entitled "Surface", a process of fragmentation and combination enhances the diversity of semantic possibilities:

something, some thing, indeed,  
for a time, a time like ours,  
for a time like this one,  
vowing as never vowed to never  
let a picture be taken  
of the picture that's been made. (32)

From "something" to "some thing", separation triggers the analysis of meaning through a closer look at the origins and composition of the word while letting its different connotations unfold and resonate.

Yet, such devices also create an effect of going in circles, or an effect of stasis, both suggested semantically through the noticeable presence of the lexical fields of "stall[ing]" and "coils" or "spin[ning]". Stasis also results from suspension dots and unfinished sentences, perhaps embodying the poetic persona's desire to "rid[e]/Off" (31), as occurs in "On the Walk down My Drive". The tension between suspension and continuation may be resolved into an aspiration to vanish, itself perhaps a correlation of the desire for abstraction known to be animating much of Everett's work. Such aspiration may also be read in the pervasive play on planes and surfaces as if they were calling for a vanishing point from their two-dimensional medium.

Indeed, recurring references to geometry suggest a movement of abstraction, away from referential space. As Brigitte Félix comments about Everett's (2011) collection *Swimming Swimmers Swimming*: "no matter what degree of referential reading is allowed by the description of the object of the poem, the movement of the text is centripetal; no reading can stay in the outside world; we are permanently redirected back to the inside, to the linguistic universe of the poem". She adds, "Even those poems that seem to open up onto a

referential external place, like the poems evoking natural elements [. . .], finally fold back upon a semiotic space, which is that of the poem itself" (Félix 2015).

### 1.2. Ambiguity: *The Concrete and the Abstract*

The dominant drive toward abstraction corresponds to a metapoetic reflection about the very nature of poetic space and language—language in general, as will be argued, rather than poetic language specifically, poetic formats offering fruitful configurations, or conditions to investigate language at large. More widely, the many references to geometry, through such terms as “points”, “lines”, or “planes”, conveying a rich polysemy, allow two parallel levels or dimensions to develop, the concrete and the abstract, or the visible and the invisible,<sup>3</sup> which are recurring concerns throughout the collection. Granted, the two distinctions are not equivalent, yet they both participate in the same questioning of representation (and reading). The oscillation between the concrete and the abstract opens out a field of investigation having as an object both the medium or milieu of representation and the processes at work there. This is operated through an evocation and exploration of the life of the mind in a human subject whose discourse questions its own point or purpose. Thus, the lexical field of geometry also possibly brings out the subject’s enterprise of locating himself in and in relation to the world.

For instance, in “On the Walk Down My Drive” (31), a tension between the concrete and the abstract seems to call for an assessment of pictorial and mental representations as compared to the concrete-represented objects: “It was a pastoral setting, one that I had worked/Hard to paint, to rebuild from a line shack to this”. The move from “my presence on the other side” to “my fence was on my other side” suggests the poetic persona’s relocation in space, shifting centers while pondering over “the other side”—of the canvas and life—through the inversion pattern. The next poem, entitled “Surface” (32–35), prolongs the meditation about “the thought, the notion/that to make an image of the image/is to kill the image” (32) and concludes:

but surface is never  
more than mere  
simple surface,  
surface clear through  
to the center,  
beyond to where  
the other side  
is surface, too. (35)

Even death appears as a representation over a course of possibly endless reversal processes or mental ruminations going in a circle. The concrete event of death, an undeniable organic reality, is displaced, its abstract nature as a mental representation coming to the fore. Reality, the world, and what we are, think, and do becomes a matter of perspective. The main question of self-location or orientation also takes the form of a variation on modals.

Throughout the collection, the insisting play on modals and “Modes”—the title of one of the poems—emphasizes the importance of how to envision ourselves and our actions. Together with the very layout of the collection—a whole made of successive poems standing by themselves as so many initiatives or orientations taken by the subject and contributing to the fashion of his or her identity—such exploration of language uses may duplicates or mirrors the subject’s existential questioning, including an ethical examination of (life) choices.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the recurring concern for measurements and counting perceptible in the poems (while also suggesting a possibly unacknowledged—and vain—desire to master time in imagination) may convey an ethical preoccupation. Indeed, the all-but-obsessive return of the verb “to count” highlights the contrast between rigid reckonings or assessments, on the one hand, and plastic imagination, on the other, the first taking account of the world and the second adding to the world, while also opening the space of representation to the projections and speculations on which ethics partly relies. For instance, in “Maybe Even

Clouds" (49–51), "to count", in the sense of "to matter" or "have intrinsic, absolute value" differs from the numbering activity, although the two meanings may be conveyed by the same word.

Moreover, the concern for measurements and counting may also be emphasized better to overflow frames and "Limits" (the title of a poem in the collection) through the flux of poetic voice while launching a call for such transgression. As the poetic text doubles or duplicates itself, so to speak, splitting between abstract and concrete, what the reader visualizes or conceives remains in suspension, in an undecided environment animated by a ceaseless pendulum move or more exactly a move akin to a spiral, still pushing ahead through tensions and contradictory impulses while constrained by the overall structure. Through and beyond moments of suspension or pause, poetic speech never stops or freezes in *Trout's Lie*.

The acknowledged limits of representation bring about a compensatory resort to sensations or appeal to the senses, mostly hearing and vision, and the fluctuating meaning of the poems are partly fashioned by their layout, as well as sounds or the music of words.

## 2. Sound

### 2.1. *Between Language and Music*

The reader/listener of *Trout's Lie* is influenced by the material qualities of the specific arrangements of words submitted to them, both their visual and sonorous qualities, as acknowledged in the hybrid nature of reading theorized by Derrida in *Mémoires d'aveugle*: reading combines vision and hearing, "écoute en regardant" (Derrida 1991, p. 10) or "listens while looking", through a form of silent or internal voicing. As is always the case, especially with poetry, the materiality of words in this collection introduces additional levels of sensations and impressions that reinforce semantics or at other times recall less visible concerns, such as death and loss, or even challenge semantics to create an ironic comment. In "Homeland Security" (48), the "big bugs" crawling out at night make a triple noise when their "legs go snap:" "Krittle, Krick, Krack, the legs go snap", all three onomatopoeias beginning with a "k", which visually and sonorously lets the violence of the Ku Klux Klan irrupt into the poem.

Everett illustrates the suggestive powers of sound patterns through recurring passages reminiscent of nursery rhymes:

Will you my honey be,  
For you are a honey bee.  
Be my honey, honey bee. (62)

Here, from three regular segments abiding by the rules of grammar, confusion is created through cuts, word order, and the sonorous, not visual, ambiguity between the verb "to be" and the noun "bee". The fluid, repetitive three lines immediately affect the reader through sound and rhythm, before they can analyze meaning, and convey an impression of light softness, evoking a baby's babble or children at play. Revealingly, ironically, those three lines are taken from "Against Sense" and come right after six lines stating the crushing, massive power of "sense", an idea not only conveyed semantically but also rhythmically through the hammering beat of repeated monosyllables:

We stand against sense,  
Against far walls of  
Sense, beneath  
Great piles of sense,  
Along massive rivers  
Of sense, sense, sense. (61–62)

While poetry offers far more flexibility than fiction on the syntactic level, Everett already showed in *The Water Cure* (Everett 2007) how distorted words or syntax may still make sense. Indeed, in this novel on torture, a number of distorted paragraphs appear like

the distant echo of others, written in a normalized form, like a different, garbled version of them, with missing, changed, or added letters. The end result still makes sense through processes of identification of the echoing paragraphs and assimilation with the regular form of words, which the reader is able to reconstitute thanks to their visual likeness and closeness in sounds. Throughout his work, Everett has been bringing out what amounts to reflexes or automatic processes in reading, in which missing letters or words are provided and misspellings or typos edited spontaneously, the reader's activity largely relying on their expectations.<sup>5</sup> In *Trout's Lie*, although no normalized version is offered and distortion does not go as far as in the 2007 novel, the same more or less conscious drive to find meaning when facing a text allows the reader to derive some signification in what may have originally appeared as nonsense. Nonsense makes sense, according to a similar phenomenon that may allow lies to deceive the listener, as suggested in "Against Sense", revealingly, the last poem in the collection:

A truth might  
Find rhythm, though  
Fall hard on the ears,  
But a lie possesses  
A familiar grammar. (58–59)

Nonsense, and lies, if one is to trust the poetic persona of "Against sense", sound like a known phrase and may thus, respectively, make sense and elicit one's belief.

## 2.2. Nonsense

Thus, the sonorous qualities of language or its physicality offer a safeguard against the absurd. According to Maulpoix: "Poetry is a writing of resistance. A writing which could be said to draw its worth from its physical qualities: its solidity, its sharpness, its weight, as much as from its resonance or its brightness. . . And because its form *holds*, it cannot be cut into nor eroded by meaninglessness. It resists the absurd".<sup>6</sup> (Maulpoix 2009, p. 40, emphasis in the original). Poetry resists the absurd while making the absurd perceptible. The sometimes nonsensical play of sounds and rhythm in *Trout's Lie* could be interpreted as one way to approach the idea of death, as the most striking manifestation of the absurd, despite the failure of words to represent it or convey our sense of death semantically. If finding "notions that speak of a thing in itself" (28) seems impossible, it is even more the case when the thing is death. Still, some of the impressive, sometimes haunting, rhythmic patterns in the collection may conjure up the presence of death, for instance through hammering rhythms expressing the urgency under which any life finds itself. The limiting structures of language also work as incentives for the multifarious qualities of language to bloom, sprouting especially from its evocative material qualities, both visual and sonorous, impressing the reader's mind, memory, and senses. The recommendation formulated in the second section of "Surface", "record the song" (34), may correspond to an all-but-automatic phenomenon for the reader of poetry—or the reader who reads poetically—and whose mind and body are marked by sonorous segments of text akin to songs or lyrics put to music. The reader may find themselves haunted by such errant phrases, jingle-like refrains likely to crop up at any time and suggest to them words of their own, a special nodding of the head or a few dance steps becoming part of the music of their lives, according to a process corresponding to one of the ways in which poetry could be said to be performative.

The notable presence in the collection of nonsensical turns of phrases or motifs patterned after nursery rhymes may then not indicate a surrender to the absurd or a detachment from the practical concerns of life. Rather, nonsense seems to reflect a playful manner with language cheating with the limitations of words when trying to express intimate experience.

### 2.3. Relation

More specifically, poetry resists the absurd by creating relation: relation to readers first and foremost, who are also offered to reconsider their relation to language. The example set by the poems invites readers to trace a singular path into the collective language; they are even initiated or guided along that way. The emphasized material qualities of language in poetry enhance its musical dimension while the singular usage and configuration of words, transgressing norms to create a unique poetic discourse, bring out the presence of a voice raised in song in the poems.

## 3. Songs and Voice

### 3.1. Songs

Songs are present referentially, as topics in the poems “Homeland Security” and “Against Sense”, among others. The reader is thus encouraged to pay attention to the concrete manifestations of voice in the poems in addition to references to voices. Voice is an impalpable element in literature, reaching far beyond its definitions by narratology, and its evocation seems bound to remain disappointingly evasive, much as are attempts at evoking “the music of the text”. Well aware of the difficulty, and even more aware of my incapacity to shed much light on those complex issues, I shall still address it because of an intuitive sense of the interest if not relevance of the notion in relation to Percival Everett’s poetry. While repetition is not enough to create music, which requires among other things modulations in pitch, intensity, and volume, the musical qualities of a text do not automatically turn it into a song in the reader’s perception of it: the words need to be organized like lyrics, with rhymes and identifiable rhythmic and stress patterns, some presence or suggestion of breath should be perceptible, and a personal voice heard.

To Maulpoix, poetry is “a matter of voice, a certain *diction* of the written text. It is not so much intent on communicating nor imagining, but rather on extending and stretching language the better to bring out its properties and possibilities” (Maulpoix 2009, p. 44, emphasis in the original). In other terms, poetry can be viewed as trying the limits of language, shaping it according to the delineation of a singular personality and carving one’s individual path into a common language through the expression of one’s voice.

Following his lead, I would argue that by introducing suppleness or space(s) into language, by breathing animated life into it, poetry becomes akin to a song, to be interpreted by readers not completely freely but with some freedom. To that extent, even though Everett’s poetry radically differs from Whitman’s, it may still recall the American bard’s free verse for its organic rhythms and insistence on breathing, as both an action referred to and a formal, rhythmic characteristic of their respective poetry. A form of community is thus created, relying not so much on dialogue as on a complex, fluctuating system of borrowing and lending voices. The reader’s “inner voice” called upon by the voice heard rising from the poems silently breathes imaginary life into the poem. The qualities of such an inner or silent voice may change (and indeed go through an ample range of variations) depending on a number of factors, among which tone seems paramount. Having no claim to define such a complex notion, especially in the limited space of the present article, let me briefly refer to Judith Roof’s enlightening essay on this largely neglected though crucial, indeed highly operational notion in criticism, which is even more appropriate if one is to read/regard the poems as songs. Roof sees tone as contributing to “the personality—the feel—of the narration: the style, mood, voice, and tone of its telling. This more impressionistic quality is the sum effect of the ways the text’s constitutive linguistic elements—diction, grammar, and the complexity of sentence structure—are combined with cultural associations and connotations to produce more subtle feelings, impressions, and implications that constitute something like the text’s ‘aura.’” (Roof 2020, p. 2) Roof further specifies that this combination of linguistic and cultural elements is “produced by the text and not by the specter of an originary author” (Roof 2020, p. 2). In addition to the definition provided over the course of her analysis, supported by close readings of a great variety of recent literary texts, Roof also raises crucial questions for

the literary critic, such as, “In what ways does tone extend texts beyond themselves, sustaining the audiation that merges text and reader?” (Roof 2020, p. 3). The question itself is of interest in the perspective of the present paper insofar as it corroborates the earlier submitted hypothesis of a relation developing between text and reader through various manifestations of voice. From one poem to the other, or within a poem, words are repeated or undergo slight variations or modulations, sometimes coming close to singsong. For instance, in “The Hurricane” (28), a sequence of alliterative monosyllables running down the poem catches the reader’s ear and eye: “wake”, “wide”, “wall”, “wane”, and “wake”, the last word as part of a line that is taken up from the beginning of the poem. “But for the wake/of a tenacious dream” evolves into “But for the wake of it all”, in which “wake” in the sense of “aftermath” may also suggest a vigil or alertness. This is not sheer repetition but variations likely to create in the reader’s mind similar effects to those of a song, leaving behind a mixed—possibly synesthetic—sensation made of phrases, fragments of tunes, and rhythmic segments, which are liable to evolve over the course of time.

The reader is thus prompted to bring out the relation between what the author intentionally put into the work and what comes from the text itself, which is also what a literary commentary should do, according to Derrida, in *De la Grammatologie* (Derrida 1967, p. 227). Beyond paraphrastic commentary, reading adds something to the poem by opening out its possibilities. For instance, the reader or listener may notice the kinship between “death” and “breath”, two recurring words in the collection, the shift from “face” to “fade” and from “sigh” to “sign” in “His Glasses” (22), and the progression from “Read” to “Regard” (57) yielding “gr”. Why not be playful when Everett invites us to be so and, following in his steps, submit language to dynamics of expansion, abstraction, fusion, and absorption? Here, the possibly interlinguistic play on words—“regard” in French referring to vision, in a poem entitled “His Glasses—” takes part in a potentially infinite mesh of links and echoes, tapping the deeper substrata of language within readers and writer to create a vicarious form of identification and exchange, a resonance or reverberation that is all the more powerful as it escapes rational control and even awareness in some cases, grounded as it is in the organic core of beings, probably their lowest common denominator. Beyond the communication of meaning, or what sense the readers may find in or make of the poems, as they will do, unable as they are not to look for meaning when facing language, other modes of transmission operate in the poems, as something—call it sound, vibrations, sensations, emotions, a flux, or a current—passes from the poetic text into the readers, not quite making sense but being definitely experienced as a more or less intense force.

On the larger scale of the collection as a whole, declensions of shifting words or variations on sounds help the reader weave such relation between what the author may have intended and the text of the poems themselves: “lie”, “like”, “line”, “lie”, “die”, “tie”, and “time” run through the collection, creating continuity between words, the text, and the reader. Similarly, “Homeland Security” (48), with its “bugs”, seems to follow from a previous poem, “These Bones” (42), followed by “Birds” (43) in the alliterative sequence. Within the poem “Homeland Security” (48) itself, sonorous and rhythmic webs of monosyllables dense with consonants give the poem a deceptive surface akin to a nursery rhyme, despite its gloomy topics of rotten politics, corruption, and violence—some of the invisible “sins” that once revealed may chase the bugs away (“But the big bugs pause in the light/scurry only after being seen”):

The big bugs crawl when the  
lights go out.  
Sing a song for freedom.  
The dogged winged ones round corners.  
Sing a song for the night.

Kriddle, Krick, Krack, the legs go snap,  
The buggies drag and yodel.  
The limping ones stride away,  
Dancing into the night. (48)



What is it exactly that the reader may add of their own to the text of the poems? A voice is heard rising from the collection. In its turn, it borrows the reader's voice, or to be more precise, their "inner voice", as part of "the 'sound system' inherent in silent reading, the inner voicing and hearing of language", in Brigitte Félix's terms.<sup>7</sup> By thus mentally superimposing their own larger pattern of echoes over the text of the poems, the reader fashions its space and voices its words according to their own personal inflections, creating a more intimate relation with the poetic text and wrapping themselves in its fabric, so to speak. Such intimacy is favored by the play on pronouns and strategies of address in *Trout's Lie*.

In "These Bones" (42), by the dint of repetition, the demonstrative adjective "these" comes closer to the possessive adjective "his", while the outside pointed out by the former tends to merge with the inside suggested by the latter. The effect of the shift in point of view is reinforced by a tension between the personal and the general, for instance "He hopes his bones/will last the journey". The definite article "the" refers to the common, absorbing the difference between the visible from outside, "You see/he has these bones", and the intimate inside of one's invisible body, "muscles, these bones/that he has never seen". Finally, the poem seems to deny the mystique of the body:

His bones  
are his bones;  
they build,  
like a game,  
the posture  
he calls myself.

The created tension between "His" and "myself" points toward what humans have in common: the self as "a posture" built out of bones (not psychological features), "like a game" played with the reader, the relation to whom comes out as crucial to creation. From the opening "You see" to the conclusion "myself", the poem draws a portrait of the artist (as his bones), inventing a form of lyricism all of its own. The personal dimension conjured up in the poem, for instance by shifting from the demonstrative "these" to the possessive "his", formally and semantically a close kin to the verb of possession "has", is enhanced at the level of the collection through the repeated form of the address.

### 3.2. Addressing

Addressing the lover in "Limits" (47) or providing instructions for burial or more largely the time of death in "Box" (26), developing a dialogue about the color of the sky with a child, most likely one's child, with whom a form of mutual, silent understanding is suggested. All of those stages are close, almost intimate relationships. Moreover, the poems address intimacy; for instance, when an "I" tells of his grief at the loss of his father in "His Glasses" (22), of his dreams to "ride/Off", and of his search for "some other darkness" ("Limits" 47). In French, the poems would conjure up a "tu" rather than a "vous" as an ideal addressee in their close ongoing dialogue; or to be more precise, they conjure up a "nous", a collective entity made of individuals tightly kept together by what they have in common: their awareness of their mortal fate, the fact that they are language, and the poems they are offered to share.

### 3.3. Tone

Ranging from (sometimes bitter) irony (as in "Against Sense" or "Homeland Security"), which bespeaks both resignation and resistance through humor, as well as through the ongoing life of the mind and of emotions, to the off-handedness or lightness suggested by nonsensical play, *Trout's Lie* offers a mix that is to be found in Everett's work as a whole, alternating between the vis comica of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* and the stern statements of *The Water Cure*. Yet all in all, this collection echoing Eliot's "Second Quartet"—giving its title to the second poem—for its tone and topics is dominated by a form of gravity, which

is tempted to call lyricism, after Jean-Michel Maulpoix's conception of the notion, which may be aptly illustrated by the following passage from *Pour un lyrisme critique*:

"Lyricism is a resolutely positive word, which bespeaks a desire to adhere to the world and to language with all one's strength. It conveys the vigor and enthusiasm of the writing enterprise, as well as the hope to drive the infinite from its finite cover. [. . .] Lyricism is a word that ceaselessly launches poetry anew: about all that may be said or written about it, it repeats that it is never that, never enough, never reached. . . It engages a perpetual quest for the subject, of the language of the figure of things, and opens wide the space of an indefinite quest which wholly coincides with the very adventure of living." (Maulpoix 2009, p. 34, emphasis in the original).

Such a combination of an individual, even intimate, expression of reflexivity seems characteristic of *Trout's Lie*, whose ambiguities and silences ceaselessly question and challenge the possibilities of language while addressing the experience of loss and emotion at large. Voice meets metapoetry, or becomes instrumental in developing metapoetic discourse, while conversely, metapoetic discourse conveys the poetic subject's inner life and concerns. Far from denoting an overwhelming dynamic flooding the subject, lyricism thus understood implies not so much detachment as intense awareness.

In addition, the repressed or unconscious may be brought to light through the reader weaving webs of echoes largely suggested by the materiality of the poems, conjuring up what may be embodied in the term "refrain" as a verb and a substantive, meaning, respectively, "to contain or thwart an impulse" and "the burden of a song". With its moral connotations of a task or duty, "burden", in the context of the collection, and from the perspective adopted in this paper, may resonate with our latent, unrelenting awareness of being mortal (as one of the motivations for singing, in spite of all, with spite for it all?). Simultaneously, if one emphasizes the connotation pointing toward repressed or latent emotions, ideas, or presences in the poems, "refrain" may bring to mind the "remainder" in language as theorized by Jean-Jacques Lecerle (1990), or what escapes linguistic analysis. What remains after the structures of discourse and its semantic surface value have been identified. According to such definitions, voice would seem to be part of the remainder, growing in the reader's mind while they read and later staying with them, as the human presence reaching out to them from the poems while they read and beyond.

Indeed, voice in *Trout's Lie* appears as the continuous expression of a ceaselessly changing subject addressing another. In the already mentioned poem, "Maybe Even Clouds" (49–51), the poetic persona's discourse moves from "counting" to "each other", or from rigid, immutable quantities to the quality of relationship as an absolute value in life intricately woven to the absolute value of life. In this poem, discourse also shifts from radical negation or refusal, conveyed through the epistrophic "not" to "doubt":

They look like nice  
Boys and bad boys,  
From Vermont-and-Montana-  
Following-orders-dumbshit-  
Non-blinking-soon-  
To-kill-soon-to-die boys,  
Who might or might  
Not, should or should  
Not, but never would  
Not and never can  
not.

*Not sure* doesn't matter.  
Doubt is a penniless  
Customer, conscience  
Waits for the weather  
To change. (49)

Further in the poem, doubt develops into questioning and subtle distinctions, such as between “I die” and “I am dead” (51), or gradations of changes, such as between personal pronouns, from “one” to “I”, “someone”, “me”, “I”, “me”, “them” (immediately echoed by “then”, as an occurrence, a consequence, a fatality, unavoidable otherness), “I”, “me”, and “each other”, creating a community within which the subject may adopt other points of view.

Relation indeed is initiated and kept alive through play, playing with the variations of perceptions and envisioning action, as exemplified, for instance, through the subtle shifts in the way of envisioning reality at the beginning of the appropriately named “Modes”: “As if a dream, /as if in a dream, /as in a dream”. The various forms of envisioning action are also conveyed through shifting modals in the poem entitled “We Should” (41), offering a list of possibilities introduced by “could”, unfolding, and expanding the possibilities of language and life as a counterpoint to the normative or compelling injunction conveyed in its title. Such shifts or “successive adjustments of the subject and his relation to the world” correspond to what happens in the experience of lyricism according to Maulpoix; indeed, “Lyricism develops in a perpetual in-between. [...] It experiences the limits of discourse by endlessly sending the metaphoric and the prosaic back to back. To lyricism, what matters is the trajectory, the coming and going from one to the other, this kind of successive adjustments of the subject and of his relation to the world, the flickering and the caesuras which are rhythm and figures” (33). Such “successive adjustments of the subject and of his relation to the world” are made possible through a changed relation to language.

#### 4. Conclusions

Known to have said that he writes poetry to show that he does not know how to write poetry, Everett does it rather than theorize about it. A “changed relation to language” is, among other things, what Everett’s oeuvre has been offering his readers for over forty years. With *Trout’s Lie*, he plunges them into the puzzles of a poetic musing about change, death, and language inventiveness, resorting to the physicality of voice to flesh out the relationship between readers, text, writer, world, or worlds, abstract and concrete. “Pure Form”, an earlier poem of his taken from the collection *Abstraktion Und Einfühlung* (Everett 2008), sheds light on both the quandaries of expression and communication and the persistence of human attempts to reach out, stitch up, and bridge the gap between oneself and others:

some things can’t be said  
Not an inadequacy of language;  
but a failure of speaking.  
Not a bankruptcy of words,  
but a rupture in thought,  
a miscarriage of intent,  
a lead balloon. (49)

Thus, language is not viewed as being “inadequate[te]” but extremely flexible and expandable, putting its powerful, enigmatic resources to the service of the human obstinate quest for meaning; but the quest itself is bound never to be completed.

Perhaps the “rupture in thought” poetry is meant to mend and consists of the logical tension between, on the one hand, the conveying of emotion and of meaning that cannot but be subjective, and on the other, the structures or forms of language. This paper had as its purpose to try to suggest that such tentative mending is enacted not only thanks to individual deviations from syntactical frames and language rules in general, which material, poetic language subverts and enriches, but also by putting in motion the abstract patterns woven throughout the collection along a web of echoes, variations, or declensions. As those patterns are thus allowed to develop in time, they branch out in unpredictable directions, making for continuity both between poems and within each of them. The various agents of continuity at work—suspension, variations in sounds, and voice—interestingly echo those identified by Jean-Paul Goux in his essay *La fabrique du continu*. In his essay aimed at demonstrating that the features once identified by Paul Valéry are characteristic of poetry—the creation of relations, energy, and motion, and the work on voice—there

is a certain type of prose, and Goux emphasizes how fiction is an art of time by working against time, as well in time and with time, which happens to be the case of *Trout's Lie*, as this paper has tried to show. This may be viewed as a confirmation of the intrinsic link between Everett's poetry and fiction, the former harboring further explorations of form and abstraction coming to feed the latter, although both genres relate to time in quite different fashions. In *Trout's Lie*, the play on rupture and continuity may invite readers to "Remember what/The living do" (*Trout's Lie*, p. 55), and thus create continuity, in space and time; survival is only offered by the living's or survivor's memory and art.<sup>8</sup>

"Remember what/The living do". The living fear, desire, dream, and sing—and write—of life and death so as to bear their fear better.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Granted, a poetry collection and a novel are set in radically different relations to time, which affects reading. Each poem in *Trout's Lie* running over one page or two at the maximum, it offers its readers an experience that is closer to an instantaneous impression, while fiction allows enough time and space for echoes to arise and the threads of a whole network of meaning to be pursued. Moreover in *Trout's Lie* there is no built-in necessity that all poems should be read in a row while in Everett's fiction the reader is compellingly drawn to read on by the call of suspense and his storytelling craft.
- <sup>2</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Everett's strategies of ambiguity and variations, and the subsequent revisiting of literary notions and categories, see (Stewart 2013).
- <sup>3</sup> Such preoccupation is present throughout Everett's poetry. See for example, in *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, "Ritual Dance": "There is a canyon,/a river with trout/no one has ever seen/and will never see/and so they do not/exist" (61).
- <sup>4</sup> The reflexive dimension of poetic discourse here may suggest the critical value of lyricism, as theorized by Maulpoix, who views lyricism as an intense engagement with the world going partly through an exploration of both the powers and limits of poetry, as will be developed further in this paper.
- <sup>5</sup> About those processes and Everett's poetic play on the plasticity of language, its shifting and missing letters, see Sylvie Bauer (2007): "The music of words in *Zulus*", *Percival Everett Transatlantic Readings*. Editions Le Manuscrit, 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> Translation mine, as is the case for all texts in French in this paper.
- <sup>7</sup> In her already quoted paper, "Of weeds and words: Percival Everett's poetry".
- <sup>8</sup> "What the living do" rather than what the living are, Everett thus typically focusing on concrete facts and actions rather than abstract theoretical considerations.

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