Paying attention| Time and form in the work of James Galvin

Henrietta S. Goodman

The University of Montana
The University of MONTANA

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

** Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature **

Yes, I grant permission
No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature

Date

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
Over the past twenty years, James Galvin's four collections of poetry and his prose work, The Meadow, have established him as one of the most thoughtful and lyrical writers of his time. His work both stylistically and thematically evades a regionalist tag, but because he focuses upon one rural location and its inhabitants, he has often been critically received as limited in scope. A close examination of Galvin's work, however, refutes this view and brings to light the universality of Galvin's concerns.

In this paper I examine the connection between Galvin's treatment of time on a thematic level and a structural level. I am concerned primarily with The Meadow, but since much of that work expands upon and reworks situations and themes that occur in his poetry, I consider the poems as well when they add to our understanding of Galvin's approach in The Meadow.

I first address the contrasts Galvin presents between linear time and circular time, and between human perception of time and geologic time. In the second section, I explore Galvin's choice of Robert Duncan's poem "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" as a preface to The Meadow, and I discuss Galvin's use of an organic formal technique that recalls the structural approach of the Black Mountain poets.

In my third section, I examine Galvin's ongoing concern with modern physics and the interconnectedness of space and time, focusing upon his third book of poetry, Elements, as well as The Meadow, to illustrate his post-Euclidean outlook and approach. I end by discussing the two primary metaphors Galvin presents for the structure of The Meadow, both of which suggest a strong connection between content and form. Throughout this paper, I stress the broad scope and depth of Galvin's work and posit his writing's complexity as directly counter to reductive labels such as "regionalist" or "pastoral."
Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................. ii
Table of Contents .......................................... iii
A Note on the Text ........................................... iv
Text ............................................................. 1
Endnotes ....................................................... 35
Works Cited ................................................... 36
In 1997, James Galvin's *Resurrection Update: Collected Poems 1975-1997* was published. This book contains the complete text of Galvin's first four books of poetry: *Imaginary Timber* (1980), *God's Mistress* (1984), *Elements* (1988), and *Lethal Frequencies* (1995), as well as the "Stations" series of twelve new poems. Because *Resurrection Update* is readily available, I have used it, rather than the individual books, for page citations in this paper. For convenience, when quoting from this text, I use the abbreviation RU, followed by the page number on which the poem appears.
Introduction

When James Galvin's first prose work, *The Meadow* appeared in 1992, critics and readers responded with almost unanimous praise, hailing the book a masterpiece. But agreement stopped there, as they found themselves determined, yet unable, to fit *The Meadow* into a category. Is it pastoral fiction, as it is labeled by The Mansfield Library's catalogue system at the University of Montana? Is it "nature writing"? Is it a novel, or does it fall into the rapidly growing catch-all category of creative non-fiction? The jacket of the book itself hedges, calling it simply "literature." *The Meadow* is frequently considered fiction, though this judgement overlooks the fact that Galvin casts himself, as well as his wife, the poet Jorie Graham, as characters, and that all of the accounts included in the book are based on historical fact, on stories Galvin has heard firsthand. Critic David Romtvedt bypasses the fiction/non-fiction debate and calls the book an elegy, a partial, but provocative and useful description (188).

Mary Clearman Blew, in her memoir *All but the Waltz*, tells stories not only of her own experience, but also that of her parents and other relatives, using techniques of fiction--created dialogue, scene-setting, and glimpses of character's thoughts--to describe events she has learned of secondhand, the same way Galvin knows the
stories of Lyle, App, and Ray. Galvin does precisely the same thing, though he creates a memoir of place, rather than Blew's more traditional personal memoir. He applies techniques of fiction, but his result is not a fictional work. To reduce the stories in The Meadow to fiction robs them of their deserved impact. They are powerful partly because they are true.

Fiction/non-fiction debate aside, The Meadow's style and structure still raise questions. Though Galvin insists he perceives a difference between portions of The Meadow and prose poem structure, a page from The Meadow also appears in Galvin's book of poetry, Lethal Frequencies (1995), suggesting that the lines between poetry and prose are not so clear. In fact, in formal and thematic structure, The Meadow more closely resembles poetry than novel or essay.

Even prior to the publication of The Meadow, Galvin's poetry defied categorization, partly due to the ease with which he slips between several distinct voices and styles. His work combines straightforward lyric or narrative meditations focusing upon the natural world, in which characters from The Meadow frequently appear, with poems as surreal and complex as any by "postmodern" figures like John Ashbery or James Tate. As a result, Galvin cannot be dismissed as a "nature poet," concerned with topics of only regional interest, though he is often lumped with such company. The recently published Norton
Anthology of Postmodern Poetry does not include Galvin, nor do several other current "cutting-edge" anthologies. Galvin fits comfortably into neither narrow category. He avoids extreme experimentalism, yet his best poems are more edgy, more reflective of both urban and rural concerns than one might expect of a poet who still chooses to live a portion of each year in tiny Tie Siding, Wyoming.

In this paper I examine the formal and thematic structure of The Meadow, paying particular attention to Galvin's treatment of time in human and geologic terms and his use of non-linear forms to suggest his concept of the elasticity of time, a theory directly reflective of, and indebted to, modern physics. I also discuss Galvin's formal approach in terms of the influence of the Black Mountain poets and their recasting of Emersonian notions of organic form, focusing upon points at which the formal and the scientific overlap. Since the prevalent critical response to Galvin has seen him as working within the pastoral tradition, a view I believe is reductive, I also address the ways Galvin participates in, but also revises this tradition.

Because much of The Meadow expands upon and/or reworks situations and themes that occur in Galvin's poetry, I present close readings of several poems that add to our understanding of Galvin's approach in The Meadow.
Part One

The thematic concerns of The Meadow both echo and expand upon ideas central to Galvin's poetry, from his earliest work in Imaginary Timber (1980) to his most recent poems, the "Stations" series included in his 1995 collection, Resurrection Update. Over the past twenty years, Galvin has focused upon several central ideas: the passage of time in both human and geologic terms, death (as it affects the dying as well as those who observe it), and the natural world, which he alternately presents as unaware of or indifferent to us, or casts in human, domestic terms through the use of metaphor and personification. Galvin's poems and The Meadow, like rocks turning in a stream bed, continually roll over the same ground, illuminating it first from one angle, then another. His subject matter might appear limited: in Imaginary Timber he introduces his characters--Lyle, Ray, his parents, his lover(s)--and they recur throughout his work, but this recycling of similar material in no way limits his thematic scope. Just as contemporary fiction writers such as Michael Ondaatje and Ellen Gilchrist recast characters from one story in another, portraying them in entirely different times and situations, so Galvin presents his cast of characters from many angles. Such focus serves as a background on which he can thoroughly explore his broad metaphysical themes.
Galvin's task, as he expresses it, portraying Lyle as his instructor in matters both practical and philosophical, is to "Pay Attention," as Lyle does (Meadow 214). In practical terms, Galvin discusses the dangerous nature of Lyle's work, the "gears and sickle bars...old wire [that] can snap under the stretcher and come at you like a snake" (214). But this ability to raise one's awareness of the concrete evolves a page later into a more philosophical, mental sort of attention, one Galvin's work also exhibits:

Lyle learned to pay attention, to think things through and not get ahead of himself, not to lapse into inattention ever. After a while he couldn't not pay attention, shaking a stranger's hand, tasting Mrs. So and So's pickles, setting fenceposts. It endowed all his actions with precision. It gave him total recall. It obliterated time. (215)

Of all the lessons Galvin tells us he has learned from Lyle, this is the most important, encompassing each aspect of his task and goal as a writer--to write with imagistic and metaphoric precision, to tell stories fully, with the completeness they require. Such close attention to detail and memory does, in some sense, allow Galvin to triumph over time by creating a lasting record of a way of life and the individuals who have lived it.

Lyle first appears by name in section II of
Imaginary Timber, a section made up of ten prose poems, all but the last of which are set in the land where Galvin grew up. The tone is matter-of-fact and conversational, as in "A Poem from Boulder Ridge," in which Galvin states, "The first winter Lyle wintered on Sheep Creek with his brothers, sister, and mother was 1937..." (RU 30). Galvin ends the poem on a much less prosaic note, however, with the image of the arrowhead serving to introduce Galvin's consideration of the way humans respond to the passage of time:

You pick it up, almost touching the hand that held it last, that gave it flight. You turn it over in your palm. It is like opening the door to a warm house. Someone is passing through it as if it were made for him, as if he made it.

Such a moment of connection over time on human terms, however, occurs only one other time in Galvin's work: in The Meadow when Ray, as an old man, fells a tree for firewood and finds "his father's bullet in the tree's heart" (146). Much more often, we remain focused on the linearity of our own brief lives, unable to comprehend time as something infinitely greater than our own experience within it.

In "What Holds Them Apart," one of the many poems in Galvin's second book, God's Mistress (1984), that contains characters who later appear in The Meadow, we
see Galvin as a young boy, learning from Lyle the art of building retaining walls, which function as a metaphor for geologic time: "You might think cement is what holds the / stones in a wall together. / Masons know it's what holds them / apart. / ...I couldn't imagine the mountain as a / slower kind of river." (RU 141). Unlike the young Galvin, Lyle is attuned to both human and natural time; he understands the imperceptibly slow but constant state of flux in which the natural world moves, as well as his own minute place within it.

In Elements (1988), Galvin's third book, his concern with the passage of time becomes even more central. Alluding to Thoreau's well-known passage from Walden, "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in..." (351), Galvin uses the metaphor of time as a river in "Against the Rest of the Year," a poem contrasting Lyle's approaching death with the passage of time in nature outside of human terms. Galvin begins by setting the reader off balance, questioning, as he later does in The Meadow, which world is most real, the human or the natural:

The meadow's a dream I'm working to wake to.

The real river flows under the river.

The real river flows

Over the river. (RU 147)

The real river is time, not the human duration of Lyle's life as it comes to a close, but the time in which, after
Lyle is gone, "The tall native grasses will come ripe for cutting / And go uncut, go yellow and buckle under snow / as they did before for thousands of years." By the end of the poem, anonymity has taken over, leaving humans nameless in the face of geologic flux and change:
"Someone dangles his legs off the back of the flatbed / And holds, between his knees, his hands, / As if they weighed fifty pounds." The poem strikes a tone midway between despair and resignation—a death will simply happen, and the rest of the world will simply continue.

Galvin addresses a similar theme in "Trapper's Cabin," combining religion and science in his description of a cabin built in a meadow which has become, over time, a beaver pond. Unlike humans, God sees change as both linear and simultaneous, sees the layers of events a single place can hold. In this God's eye view, "Green fire burning the snow is just the woods in time lapse" (RU 190). In contrast, earthly creatures are bound to view time as both linear and personal. Like a human, "all a beaver wants out of life / is...a sense of been / and going when he goes." Working in the middle of a meadow, "a man fashioned a shelter of trees and mud, log ends / axed off sharp, the way the beavers leave them." After the man dies and his cabin is looted, the beavers dam the creeks, and the shack now stands in the middle of a pond. "The way God / sees things," Galvin says, "it would look like everything--water, grass, house, /
water—succeeded out of the ground to be held unharmed in cold, / green flame." Galvin then turns from religion to physics to remind us that constant change is, in some sense, bound to constant stasis: matter and energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed from one into the other. The equivalence of ongoing cyclical motion with permanent, predictable change is a familiar pastoral truth, but Galvin varies this concept by expressing it through laws of physics rather than cycles of visible nature, and he introduces a human element capable of interrupting environmental, if not physical cycles:

The man whose life awhile this was appears as a dull aura the cabin has at first, like an electron cloud, that dully glows and dims. Turned from matter to energy, the man's presence still lingers, unerasable, but beyond human grasp.

Galvin restates this idea, and also supports a reading of The Meadow as poetry rather than prose, in an interview for the Iowa Review in 1994:

The whole sensation of the linearity of the passage of time is something I tried, in that book (The Meadow), to resist...I was also thinking about the difference between poetry and prose. If you're going to tell a story, before you've written a word, you have already addressed—or enacted—one idea regarding the passage of time. And poetry doesn't
necessarily do that...I was also thinking
about the degree to which we perceive events
as linear just because of how we read—the
physical action...Now if you've never seen
anything written down and you were listening
to someone talk, couldn't it seem just as much
like a stack of words going straight up? (125-
126)

On the other hand, time in a God's eye view, layered
though it may be, is still linear, still one thing after
another. Galvin is getting at something beyond this:
I was thinking that from the point of view of
the meadow, this hundred years did not pass.
Cause and effect did not operate. Events were
not linear. It didn't exist in the human-
desire-for-order. It was, possibly, more like
a deck of cards than a hand of cards. Or more
like a closed book than an open one. (126)

This view of form, then, is an important part of Galvin's
task--take change and death (and The Meadow is full of
death), and try to transform them, obliterate them,
even. But we cannot place ourselves outside of time, no
matter how we might long to do so. We construct homes
and barns, or we write books hoping these things will
last, but we still operate on a very human scale.

In "Materialism," Galvin portrays the way that
intense love, both physical and emotional, can
momentarily take one out of oneself, out of time. This poem again contrasts geologic time with human time: "Everything, / ... Is the direction everything / Moves in, seeming / not to move." (RU 175). The world is in flux; no object is stable. Materialism, then, or fixation on objects or matter, is futile. In this poem, however, relief from this bleak truth comes in the form of a female figure, identified with rain, who offers pleasure and very material, physical comfort:

Your long dark
Hair sweeps
Across my chest
Like sweeps of prairie
Rain. Loveliest
Of motion's possessions,
Hold me still.

The poem ends in a plea to a lover: take me outside of time. Motion here is Godlike; it is natural law, which we must obey, though we long to have time stand still.

In *The Meadow*, Galvin undercuts this hope of finding transcendence in a lover's arms when he describes the phenomenon of virga, "when rain falls and fails to reach the earth, beautiful and useless as the vista it elaborates" (148). In both contexts, rain is female, beautiful and unattainable, belonging to the world of nature or spirit rather than that of the human and domestic. Galvin says, "God loves / the rain, not us" (RU 93), and in *The Meadow* he tells us,
...flotillas of sheepish clouds sailed in and tried to look like rain. They turned dark and sexual. They let down their hair, like brushstrokes on the air, like feathers of water, like the principle it was named for, sublime indifference its gesture, its lovely signature over us. (148)

In the poem "Druthers," one of the many in Elements which deal with death and its aftermath, Galvin expresses a longing similar to that of "Materialism." The speaker wishes to be outside the human world of time and emotion, telling us, "A deep separateness / blesses the evergreens" (RU 158). The evergreens appear to be outside the cycle of seasons, of life and death. They do not appear to suffer change. The speaker longs to inhabit such a world:

I never asked
for choices or desire.
I never would have turned.
I'd harvest snow
to live on like the timber does.

Days would go by, unrestrained. (RU 158)

This detachment, requiring little, only "snow" and passivity, is unattainable, perhaps undesirable even, for while it removes us from loneliness, from death and grief, it also prevents us from participating in the pleasures and pains of normal human existence.
Galvin acknowledges the truth of this emotional trade-off in "Postcard," the last poem in Lethal Frequencies, a poem which weighs the pros and cons of human versus geologic time, as if we could choose between the two. Because this poem exhibits Galvin's deceptively simple poetic style and also addresses his central philosophical ambivalence, I will examine it thoroughly before returning to a direct consideration of The Meadow.

The poem begins with a tone of false certainty. In the same way that a postcard is a square, a two-dimensional frame of a single instant,

Days are cubes of light
That equal each other
Whether anything happens in them or not,
No matter what anyone did or didn't do,
They are equal. (RU 256)

In the next stanza, Galvin gives us the human truth, rather than the imagined ideal:

The emptiest are lovely,
Though one is drawn to the bright-edged shards
Of days that cracked
From disappointment and longing.

The urge toward emptiness, a purity of vision beyond emotion, contrasts with the urge toward feeling, which makes days unequal--some joyous, some filled with sharp pain.
The next stanza evokes the same drama of time-lapse as "Trapper's Cabin." As a lifelong inhabitant of the mountains that rise at the edge of the Great Plains, Galvin is intensely aware of the geologic upheavals that created his landscape; throughout his work, he compares the prairie, with its wide expanses of grasses and currents of wind, to the ocean which once occupied the same territory. He describes clouds that "lapped against the ridges and made them look like islands" (Meadow 61), and drives past "the picture rocks, those sandstone sculptures that were once an ocean floor" (Meadow 63). The prairie "swells under a few small churches...like rowboats" (RU 11). In "Widow Osborne," Galvin describes a house that "slipped its moorings and drifted out" (RU 69). In "Navigation," the evergreens are "like pilgrims on the shore / of an unexpected ocean," and the speaker's mother stands "like a sailor's wife" (RU 71). In "Dark Angel," Galvin tells us, "When an ocean goes away / the prairie is just its shadow staying" (RU 106). In "Booklearning," the schoolhouse is "a wooden raft" (RU 232), and in "Western Civilization," the "dim barn...floats like an ocean liner" (RU 237). Further examples abound.

Reading "Postcard" with these lines in mind, we understand that when Galvin says "Some days I go looking for oceans," he means land as well as water, and we sense the passage of geologic time. The stanza moves in an
associative, time-lapse fashion, creating the poem's only concrete image from the abstract concept of the ocean:

If I find one [ocean] I search the beach
For the teeth I left
In a glass of water
In a motel room in Nebraska.

The teeth, false or real, suggest fossils, remnants of the ocean that once filled the prairie, evidence that time is, indeed, linear rather than non-linear, that there is, after all, a discernable past and future. Galvin closes the poem cryptically: "Some days I go looking for the sky."

What is this sky, and why might one look for it, as one would look for oceans? Galvin tells us in The Meadow, "that high in the mountains a man lives less on the land than in the sky" (224), and in his work the sky almost always resembles or represents a river. In "Left-Handed Poem," "wind scrapes overhead / like a river I'm at the bottom of" (RU 159). In "Small Countries," the poem from Lethal Frequencies which also appears as a page in The Meadow, clouds pass overhead "like they're floating down a river we're under" (RU 226), and in "Testimony," "the earth silvers like a river we're in" (RU 146).

If the sky is a river, and the river is time, then we are constantly under a dome ruled by time, by linearity. In "Cache la Poudre," named for an actual
river, "Matter is a river / That flows through objects; /
The world is a current / For carrying death away" (RU 73). Here again Galvin relies upon physics to support his assertion: we live in a constant state of flux, of conversion from matter to energy and vice versa. In "Postcard," when Galvin goes "looking for the sky," he is looking for life itself, however painful a confrontation with mortality its discovery might incur.

What, then, is behind Galvin's insistence that "from the point of view of the meadow, this hundred years did not pass?" Is he simply trying (as in "Materialism") to remove himself from time, or does he, working within but also undercutting the tradition of the pastoral elegy, admit the futility of his task, and attempt it nonetheless?

Part Two

In form, The Meadow is clearly unlike a novel or an essay. The book is broken into short sections—none longer than four or five pages, some only a paragraph in length. The breaks between these sections sometimes mark a transition from one scene or train of thought to the next, but just as often, they split a scene where the scene would not logically require splitting, just as a stanza break in a poem may function as an obligatory pause, but not a thematic shift. Some of these sections
are written in Lyle's voice; others are made up of actual journal entries kept by Lyle and his sister Clara; most are Galvin's own voice, telling stories of the meadow and the people who have lived there.

A reader who approaches *The Meadow* expecting a traditional, linear narrative might at first find the book choppy or difficult to follow. In his review for *The Sewanee Review*, George Core calls the book "near-perfect," but insists that "Galvin should have written a preface to help the reader, and his publisher should have also insisted that he add an appendix to account for the many figures... that move in and out of his narrative" (lvii). Perhaps Core gives the reader too little credit, for even a reader put slightly off balance by the first several sections of the book would surely, if he/she kept going, discover its cyclic, web-like structure. We learn as we go; if a character perplexes us, we will understand him/her better when he/she next appears.

Galvin does in fact provide a preface to *The Meadow*, but in a telling gesture, he chooses Robert Duncan's widely anthologized "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" rather than the prose explanation George Core might prefer. The poem explains a great deal about the structure of *The Meadow* and how we are meant to read it. As one of the group of Black Mountain poets, Duncan shared with Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, among
others, an open and organic approach to formal concerns that resulted in his role as a forerunner of much of contemporary American poetry, especially that of an experimental nature.

Though Galvin, in his one available interview, does not make reference to the Black Mountain poets or discuss his own work in terms of organic form, his consideration of form as a "higher power" or "energy" to which the poet gives himself up (110) strikes the same chord as Duncan's assertion that form "is not something the poet gives to things but something he receives from things" (qtd. in Nelson 103), and taps into a tradition of organic form that dates back in American writing to Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, who based their own ideas on those of Coleridge and the German romantics. The Black Mountain poets felt that the poetic work would find its own unique form, that as Emerson believed, form and idea are inseparable. Olson, who began working with the concept of organic form several years before Duncan, focused upon poetry at its oral, rather than written, origins. He viewed the line as a unit or measure of breath, and stressed that breath and speech patterns would and should influence line length and line breaks. Olson also coined the term "composition by field" to refer to poetry written in "OPEN...as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form,...the 'old' base of the nonprojective" (Olson 614). The field itself, for Olson, was "the large
area of the whole poem where all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other" (Olson 616). In his chapter on Olson in Understanding the Black Mountain Poets, Edward Foster points out the non-linearity inherent in Olson's concept of "the poem as a field of action rather than a sequential ordering of materials" (74).²

Foster also discusses at great length the circular structure of Duncan's work, particularly in "Often I Am Permitted...". He notes that the poem arose from Duncan's recurrent dream of children dancing in a meadow, so that the scene is in fact "made-up by the mind." Duncan's poem encapsulates several of Galvin's concerns, primarily the paradox of circular versus linear time. The children's game is "ring a round of roses"--they dance in a circle, but the "secret" is that the dance, like life itself, takes place in time and must end in death, when "all fall down." Rather than address this death in the structure of the poem, Duncan opts to leave the children in suspended animation, still circling.

Foster analyzes the "Lady," the "Queen Under The Hill," as Kore, "queen of the underworld and goddess of spring" (151) and/or the androgynous Dionysus. Foster views the children's dance in its historical context as a ritual designed to ward off the plague, but also as an invocation to the muse, and he discusses Duncan's treatment of formal issues introduced in the poem: "The
grass is...a source of life. The grass...points east away from the sun; in so doing, it turns away from Apollo. The implication is that this poetry is not Apollonian—a poetry of pure but static form, denying change—but Dionysian, a poetry of 'a proposition in movement'" (151).

Though as Foster notes, "the dance is no more than an hour's reprieve from catastrophe" (152), the poem contains an almost Biblical tone of awe and praise. Because the meadow is a "made place," it is in some sense "eternal," outside the realm of time and death, immortal in the same way that works of art may outlast their creators.

Cary Nelson also points out the circular form of "Often I Am Permitted...," evidenced by its repetition of the title in the second to last stanza of the poem. Nelson notes: "Returning to the beginning suggests that the several stanzas were only the circular unfolding of the first line, a disturbance within its words. The poem is like a first field on which we ventured forth, at once an origin and an initiation" (123). Galvin is certainly aware of this play on the words "field" and "meadow," meaning both a literal piece of ground and also the poetic ground a particular work both rises from and covers. His meadow is a real place, but it also functions symbolically to set the bounds of the book.

In the same way that Duncan describes his "meadow"
as "eternal" because it is a made place rather than a natural place, Galvin treats his material in *The Meadow* with reverence, aware that he is, in a small way, making the lives he records immortal. His task, to pay attention, is made doubly important by the fact that he is obligated to get it right not only for himself but for the people and place he loves. Ironically, of course, mere language *can* last longer than a human life, and when one is writing truth instead of fiction, one's role as record-keeper and preserver is constantly dependent upon one's awareness of mortality and loss.

Near the end of *The Meadow*, Galvin addresses this issue, alluding to Duncan's poem when he describes Lyle imagining his own death:

>The sweet release of giving up occurred to him, how easy it would be never to rise again, to harden and become crystalline, like a made thing, to freeze in sitting position until spring when someone would come along and find him, just resting. (213)

In death, Lyle would become what he is not in life, a "made" thing, an object, like a photograph or a sculpture, no longer time-bound. Galvin's responsibility, then, is to create a "made" version of Lyle that remains true to the actual mortal Lyle, and to do so he must "pay attention."

Duncan, too, felt the necessity for heightened
attentiveness, though more on a linguistic than a mimetic level: "I evolve the form of a poem," he writes, "by an insistent attention to what happens in inattentions" (qtd. in Nelson 103). Again and again, Duncan stresses the importance of listening--to voices around us, but especially to the voices in our heads. He emphasizes the plurality of meanings language, and individual words, can hold.

In stressing the constant changeability of language, Duncan shows his kinship with Emerson, who also believed that all of nature, including language, existed in a constant state of flux. In "The Poet," Emerson says, "What we call nature is a certain self-regulated motion, or change" (316), and in the same essay, he says, more directly, "all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and horses are, for homestead" (322). Duncan also opposed revision, and instead valued the utter spontaneity and instinctive movement of the writing process, calling for a poetry "not carefully made but enraptured in making" (qtd. in Nelson 102).

Form, however, is a sort of "homestead," a fact both Duncan and Galvin are well aware of. Language alone may be purely "vehicular," but the "made place," the meadow that they each create is a formal location, constructed to resist change and death. This tension between using
language to participate in the motion and flux of nature while also using it to create forms that provisionally ward off the passage of time sets up an unsolvable paradox central to Galvin's work.

Part Three

The ideology which stresses process over product and emphasizes the mutability of language is a defining feature of American poetry in the organicist tradition. Writers working within this tradition often draw parallels between literature and nature, or science, and use terms, concepts, and metaphors from the sciences to support their poetics. Just as Emerson often describes forms in nature—"the beehive, or the spider's geometrical web" (315)—when he is discussing form in language, Olson and Duncan also make frequent reference to biology and physics, suggesting that for them the term "organic" implies, as it did a century earlier, a close connection to the rhythms and qualities of the natural world. In his essay "Toward an Open Universe," Duncan borrows from the work of the physicists Schroedinger and Dirac, while Olson, in coining the term "composition by field," drew upon the term "field theory," central to modern particle physics. Similarly, Galvin takes the name of his third book of poetry, Elements, from Euclid's Elements of Geometry, and titles a poem "The Uncertainty
Principle," (RU 188), an obvious reference to the work of physicist Werner Heisenberg. In his study of the Black Mountain poets, Foster touches briefly upon the importance of physics to their work. With this as a background, I will examine the role physics plays in Galvin's work as well.

Foster cites Olson's admiration of Melville's ability to "loose himself in space and time" and offers this as Olson's goal as well. He explains, "it was...important for Olson to find conceptual agreement between his poetics and, say, the work of the physicists..." (33). Foster compares Olson to Thoreau, who used an older, more concrete, and primarily biological science to lend support to his ideas: "Thoreau's science was a science of nouns...he looked to specific facts and events for conformation of higher truths" (34). For Olson, on the other hand, writing nearly a century after Thoreau,

science had less to do with microscopes and classification than with the abstractions of mathematics. Olson therefore turned to the geometry of...Reimann, who rejected Euclidean geometry and laid the mathematical foundations for the general theory of relativity...But unlike Euclid's universe, which was Thoreau's as well, Reimann's cannot be seen... (34)

Thoreau's world was also Emerson's, a world in which
matter and energy, and space and time, were opposing concepts. With the rapid advances of modern physics, these dualities have dissolved. We live in a more abstract, but perhaps more consoling world. Thoreau knew that when we die we decay, that we enter the soil and the water cycle, but we now can explain this in terms of physics as well as biology. When we die, we leave matter behind and become energy.

The Euclidean geometry that influenced Thoreau and Emerson was "flat" geometry. According to Motz and Weaver, in their book *The Story of Physics*, Euclid's thirteen volume *Elements*, made up of axioms, definitions, and theorems, "was accepted, for hundreds of years, as the correct geometrical framework on which to formulate the laws of nature" (3). To examine Galvin's use of Euclidean and post-Euclidean concepts, a brief overview of the difference between Euclidean-based physics and modern physics is necessary.

Motz and Weaver go on to explain, "The break with Euclidean geometry occurred when the great 19th century geometers...began to challenge Euclid's fifth postulate, which states that given a line and a point outside it, only one line can be drawn through the point parallel to the given line" (3). For Euclid, space was flat, and "one can never demonstrate by measurements of angles of triangles or circumferences of circles that Euclidean geometry correctly describes our space...Such a
geometrically laid-out array of events has meaning only at a particular instant (an instantaneous photograph) during which nothing moves" (54).

In straightforward and accessible language, Motz and Weaver explain the important distinction between the three-dimensional physics of Newton (Euclidean physics) and the four-dimensional modern physics of Einstein: "In Newtonian physics, the space-time concept is Euclidean (flat geometry) and space and time are absolute...In relativity theory, space and time are treated on the same footing and become intermixed in such a way that neither space by itself nor time by itself is absolute...In Newtonian physics, the geometry is three-dimensional Euclidean...and determined entirely by spatial relationships--time plays no role in it" (260-262).

As Franklin Burroughs notes, Galvin's *Elements* "points toward the elemental world of horses, weather...but also toward Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, which figures explicitly in the volume" (154). Clearly, Galvin at times wishes to inhabit the sort of world Motz and Weaver describe, in which time plays no role and matter exists in only spatial terms. His *Elements* contains the already discussed poems "Against the Rest of the Year," "Druthers," "Materialism," and "Trapper's Cabin," all of which are concerned with issues of time and space, as well as the striking poem "Death at Work," with its triple play on noun/verb possibilities: it can
be read as if death is a noun, making the poem a description of a death that has occurred during a day of work, or it can be read as if the poem is a description of death itself at work, of the way that death works. The poem can even be read as if death is the speaker, Death as a proper noun, who says in a voice of sinister consolation, "Hush now / I promise not to tell any stories / With everyone afraid and trying not to be" (RU 184). The fact that the poem contains several possible interpretations lends it much of its disturbing power and underscores Galvin's concern, on both a linguistic and a philosophic level, with the interrelatedness of space and time. His Elements is a new, post-Euclidean set of propositions, its author fully aware of the links between matter and energy, space and time, but still mourning the lack of anything eternal.

Part Four

In The Meadow, Galvin attempts to thematically and structurally expand the post-Euclidean propositions he introduces in Elements. He presents two primary metaphors for the book's non-linear structure--a galaxy and a collection of scraps. Galvin describes the "egg-shaped, egg-smooth boulder that floats out in the middle of the meadow's widest field." "Between the sky and the...boulder," he says, "everything has its own
green...all circling around, with that boulder at the center, as if the meadow were a green ear held up to listen to the sky's blue, and there is an axis drawn between the boulder and the sun."

The meadow, then, is like a galaxy in miniature, an entire solar system revolving in a circular rather than a linear fashion: "Lyle's meadow is...a green clockwork of waterways and grasses, held up to the sky in its ring of ridges, held up for the sky to listen" (229). Time does exist, but it is the circular time of nature, the cycle of death and rebirth, rather than the singular and finite progression of an individual human life. The book's form mirrors this idea: the meadow itself serves as the center, and each section circles around it. Such an approach does not negate the fact that humans such as Lyle and Ray die and do not return, but Galvin's evocation of the cycles of nature does temper the tragic qualities of the book, providing solace and acceptance by suggesting our own participation in these cycles. Galvin also reminds us, however, that those cycles we perceive as permanent actually hang in a delicate balance, vulnerable to our destructive blunders.

Like the individual poems in Galvin's books, the sections of The Meadow are ordered associatively. In Lethal Frequencies, a poem such as "Listen Hard" ends with an image of a closing book (RU 204), and the following poem, "A Portrait of my Roof," begins with an
image of another book, this one left open but turned face
down (205). In *God's Mistress*, the poem "Virga," with
its simile of lightning burning the trees "like cigarette
burns in a green dress" (*RU* 89), is immediately followed
by "The Importance of Green," in which a green dress
reappears in a different context (91). The sections of
*The Meadow* are linked this way also, without regard for
the linear nature of events. Instead, they move in much
the same way as memory moves. A character may die in one
section and reappear in the next section years before his
death. App is a young boy, then an old man, then a young
boy again. Point of view changes, as does verb tense. A
passage in past tense describing Lyle's father's
abandonment of his family (20) moves directly to a
present tense description of the entire family, including
the father, digging out of their sod house after a
blizzard (21). As a young boy, App visits the meadow for
the first time and feels "the cold air...pooling there"
(52). In the next section, Lyle sits in his house "where
the cold air hangs still down in the meadow" (53).

The dual threats of death and careless land
development most frequently link sections: a description
of Frank's funeral (105) precedes a description of Ray's
funeral (106), which in turn precedes a section titled
"Lyle, 1981," in which Lyle describes Ferris, an owner of
one of the new forty acre land parcels who, without
conscience, moves onto his land and systematically
degrades it. In this way, Galvin undercuts the pastoral tradition which portrays nature as cyclic and permanent in comparison to human life, and instead elegizes the landscape along with its human inhabitants. He further undercuts this tradition by stressing the work involved in the rural lifestyle he describes. The meadow is not a place of Edenic repose; instead, it is made hospitable only through hard physical labor.

The second metaphor Galvin offers for the structure of The Meadow appears after Lyle dies, when we learn, "Lyle never threw out anything that might someday have a use. He didn't have it in him...I know Lyle thought of his own being the same way (like one of those boot tongues or scraps of wire). He thought someday, probably after he died, his own purpose might finally be revealed to him" (202). In one of the book's bleakest moments, Galvin describes the aftermath of Lyle's death, when these scraps, "considered useless...were loaded into Eddie's horse trailer and hauled away to the dump" (202). Lyle is concerned with his spiritual rather than his physical purpose, but the dumping of his material goods underscores the sadness of his physical passing and also presents another map of the book's structure—a collection of scraps Galvin has gathered with the hope of preserving them and giving them purpose. Galvin treats the same subject in the preceding section when Lyle restores a grindstone not because he needs it but "to
keep a beautiful stone from becoming a lawn decoration, or worse" (201). At the end of this section, as Galvin repairs Lyle's fence, he says, "I pieced together the short lengths of wire that lay on the ground" (201). This act also works metaphorically to suggest his goal: he will make The Meadow into something useful; he will collect fragments and piece them together to keep them from being lost. Galvin states this goal more overtly in his interview with the Iowa Review: "Initially it [The Meadow] was just written as a way of saving things—like stories, things people said, images I see disappearing" (111).

These metaphors for the book's structure and intent occur near its end, suggesting that the book's form is indeed organic, not preconceived at the outset, but discovered through the process of its creation. While Elements addresses the complex duality of space and time on a philosophical level, in The Meadow Galvin engages this duality structurally as well; its form takes on modern physics, in agreement with its theories, but attempting, still, to transcend linear time. Like Emerson and Thoreau, Galvin is concerned with both the arts and the sciences and sees no clear line of demarcation between the two, an admirable position when placed in contrast to the isolationist mode of much of today's literature and theory.
As a Western writer who purposefully grounds his work on the same terrain where he was born, Galvin runs the risk of being dismissed as a poet of merely regional interest, naive in terms of the larger, more urban picture. D.W. Fenza makes just such a case in the article "Two Representative Poets: The Provincial and the Metropolitan." Though Fenza does admire Galvin and describes *God's Mistress* as "a significant collection [that] should not be missed" (101), he (she?) ultimately concludes:

> Although Galvin's countrysides and countryfolk are his assets, they may also appear to be his limits...his poems may seem to be a series of anachronistic tales of a lifestyle that, for many, can no longer be lived, but merely dreamt...a pastoral existence in which one could almost will innocence back into being. (101)

To Galvin's credit, however, his work is rarely in the pure "pastoral" mode, and he is more frequently concerned with the loss of innocence than with innocence itself. Fenza attempts to reduce contemporary poetry to two opposing categories, one rural, one urban: "The first makes a poetry which resolves distressing moments in tranquility; the latter addresses confusion by imitating and satirizing confusion" (101). Galvin seldom does the latter, but he does not fit into the former category.
either; in fact most of contemporary poetry falls somewhere between these two extremes.

Galvin's work is neither urban nor rural; the fact that he grounds himself in one location and addresses the traditionally western, elegiac theme of the passing of a way of life doesn't prevent him from transcending locale. Throughout his work, he makes connections between literary, scientific, and religious ideas, applying a twist to our common notions of death and resurrection. In "Watershed" Galvin addresses resurrection in purely natural terms, saying "When I die and turn to rain, / I'd like to fall into the distance / and stay awhile" (RU 80). In the prose poem "What I've Believed In," he describes a Packard engine that powered a sawmill "since 1925": "Just because it hasn't been run since 1956 is no reason to think it won't run now: waves have traveled thousands of miles to give us small gifts; pine trees have waited years to be asked" (RU 27).

Resurrection is possible, but it involves a change in form, a conversion over time from matter to energy or vice versa.

In The Meadow, after describing Ray's death, Galvin makes an immediate move to resurrection, a thematic, non-linear shift in which Ray is alive again. Galvin begins the section, "Between the dead gray tree standing in the forest and the tree of smoke that resurrects itself from the chimney, each piece of wood is handled
six times" (198). The actual, material tree in this way becomes a tree-shaped billow of smoke, converted from matter to heat energy, not gone, merely transformed.

Galvin ends the section by drawing a parallel between the forty year old wood Lyle burns near the end of his life and Lyle himself, as Lyle "paused over the cookstove with the lid-lifter in his hand and said, 'You know, there's more heat in that old rotten wood than you'd think'" (199). Though Lyle is old, he is still a powerful figure, still full of life.

Although Galvin is aware of the contrast between our view of natural cycles as ongoing and permanent and our potential to destroy nature beyond repair, he offers with meticulous attention the meadow itself as an ordering force both in his work and in the lives of those who have occupied it. As Duncan writes:

> Often I am permitted to return to a meadow as if it were a given property of the mind that certain bounds hold against chaos.

In the world Galvin both mirrors and creates, chaos is held off; he gives to *The Meadow* the order that he finds there, both human and natural, both physical and metaphysical.
Endnotes

1. In matters of pure style, Galvin's poetry is a unique conglomerate, influenced by a diverse range of voices, from Dickinson to Frost to Neruda, from George Herbert to James Wright. Tracing Galvin's stylistic influence would be the subject of another paper entirely. For Galvin's own thoughts on his influences, stylistic and otherwise, see his interview, conducted by Barrett and Young, in the Iowa Review.

2. Foster is, of course, citing William Carlos William's essay entitled "The Poem as a Field of Action." Both Olson and Duncan drew heavily upon the work of the modernist poets. See Foster for an exploration of Olson's "Projective Verse" in relation to Pound and Williams. Though beyond the scope of this paper, it is also interesting to compare Galvin's approach in The Meadow to the modernist "collagist" technique.
Works Cited


