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Section: Hospitality in art and society

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Bad guest poetics: against abstractions

Lonnie Monka[1]

Abstract

This essay proposes *bad guest poetics* as a way to examine how artistic practices resist philosophical abstractions of hospitality when applied to literature and performance. Rejecting phenomenological terminology derived from Levinas, the essay returns to an ordinary understanding of invitation and hosting in order to analyze David Antin's improvised "talk poems." Delivered in institutional settings and later adapted into texts, these performances present talking as poetry while deliberately testing the expectations placed on invited speakers. Focusing on Antin's 2006 talk poem "hiccups," performed at SUNY Buffalo, the essay shows how Antin responds obliquely and comically to Levinasian poetics advanced by his host, Stephen McCaffery. Grounding poetic meaning in bodily interruption and ordinary language, "hiccups" exposes how theoretical vocabularies can become inhospitable to artistic practice. *Bad guest poetics* thus names an ethic of artistic responsibility enacted through refusal rather than accommodation.

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Introduction

Can philosophical reflections on hospitality, informed by the ethical claims of Levinas, lead to a perverse outcome when applied to literature and the other arts? The writings of Levinas have inspired an expansive discourse about hospitality that, in turn, has been extended into the arts.[2] Rooted in the phenomenological tradition, this discourse has developed technical vocabulary – such as "radical alterity" – which is meant to invite further analysis of hospitality's ethical conditions.[3] But what if such ethical analysis prompted an artist to subvert those conditions – for instance, by *enacting* a radical form of alterity? This essay examines this possibility through the modernist practice of David Antin, which I present as a key exam-

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[2] For an extended discussion of hospitality inspired by Levinas, see Dufourmantelle and Derrida, *Of Hospitality*. For a recent contribution to this discourse of hospitality, applied to literature and artworks, see Pimentel, *Aesth-ethics*. My references to Levinas are often informed by Colin Davis' book *Levinas*. For the courage to discuss Levinas in an academic essay, I must thank ha-Rav Daniel Epstein whose lectures – hosted by the Agnon House in Jerusalem in 2025 – illustrated, among other things, that engaging with the work of Levinas does not require the use of his technical vocabulary. Lastly, I want to acknowledge my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of this essay who offered gracious feedback that helped me fine-tune my thinking.

[3] The phrase "radical alterity," arises in Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, such as on pages 35-36, 121, and 141, alongside a number of similar phrases about "absolute" forms of "otherness." Radical alterity becomes a central feature of Pimentel's discussion of art in his *Aesth-ethics*, which is informed by Derrida's discussion of the "absolute other" leading to consideration of "unconditional hospitality," in *Of Hospitality*.

ple of what I call *bad guest poetics* – a principle of artistic responsibility that seeks to unsettle theories of hospitality in the arts.[4]

Despite the initial reference to Levinas, the idea of the *bad guest* is discussed here according to a more intuitive understanding of hospitality. Before, or perhaps alongside, abstract notions, such as the above-mentioned "radical alterity," everyday life is structured around countless acts of hosting. Through ownership or institutional authority, someone who controls a space – who possesses the power to determine what happens there and when – permits or even invites others to enter and dwell within it. In this ordinary sense, a host welcomes and cares for guests. This simple framework helps clarify what makes a guest *bad*: acts that test the limits of hospitality. *Bad guest poetics*, then, names a deliberate transgression of the behavioral norms governing situations of hospitality. By analyzing one poet's embrace of this role, this essay will trace the boundaries of *bad guest poetics* and reveal the complex forms of critique that this stance can enact.

Antin as a bad guest

A provocative example of *bad guest poetics* arises in the avant-garde oral improvisations of David Antin. From the early 1970s until his death in 2016, Antin developed his "talk poems" – a series of performances and texts that present talking as poetry. This practice challenged people's perceptions of poetry by exploring new modes of oral composition under distinctly modern conditions.[5] Invited to present in institutional settings – i.e. academic lectures, poetry readings, and art talks – Antin would speak at length, in an improvisatory manner. He also recorded the audio of these performances, which he later adapted into texts. Even though he called them poems, these performances and texts embraced a conversational register, suggestive of ordinary, everyday language. Stories, reflections, and digressions coalesced along with personal anecdotes, metacommentary, and more. Through this dynamic hybrid form of communication, Antin generated his thought-provoking work. Underlying their spontaneity, these talks were governed by formal rules. Yet, instead of traditional linguistic constraints – such as rhyme, meter, and stanzaic patterns – Antin relied on performative constraints, wherein rules guide human activity or, in Antin's case, they shaped his talking.

The invitation, as one of these performative constraints, embeds hospitality into Antin's practice. Many of these talk poems include reflections on the conditions of their invitation. For instance, during many of his talk performances, Antin named the host who invited him, as well as the hosting institution, which foregrounded their influence on the performance. An explicit illustration of this point arises in the beginning of Antin's textual adaptation of his talk poem titled "talking at the boundaries" (Figure 1).

when i agreed to come here to indiana barry alpert didnt
have a title for what i was going to talk about i think maybe he
forgot to ask me which was i suppose just as well
because he had an idea i had given it to him of the
kind of thing i was now doing and i had an idea too of going
places to talk to people i was seeking an occasion for the
kind of talking i want to do which would of course modify the
kind of talking i wanted to do and how i was no longer so
clearly a poet a linguist an art critic all of which i had
so clearly been and how my work was therefore no longer so
clearly a poem a criticism an investigation but somehow lying
between them or on their borders and then it came to me

Figure 1: How Long is the Present*, 31.*

[4] My use of the term "modernist" here refers to modernism as an ongoing proposition, instead of a historical period, and draws on Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism*; Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism*; and Bruns, *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy*.

[5] For an engaging overview of Antin's practice, see his book length dialogue in Antin and Bernstein, *A Conversation with David Antin*.

In a later essay, where Antin responds to a talk performance that was continually interrupted by members of the audience, he explicitly links these invitations to hospitality. "I was an invited guest, invited to speak," he explains, "invited speakers are usually accorded the courtesy of being listened to, especially by the inviting hosts, who have a bond of acquaintance and hospitality, which sets up constraints on their behavior."[6]

The invitation, as a constraint on the performer's behavior, incorporates a number of cultural critiques aimed at artists, poets, and theorists alike. In short, these talks cast a critical gaze on modern forms of expression, often buttressed by concepts such as disinterested art or art-for-art's-sake.[7] Opposed to the practices of many writers and artists, Antin did not compose in solitude and, instead of an imagined audience, he always addressed particular people in a shared physical space. These constraints responded to theoretical concerns about the tendency in various fields of research – such as folklore and literary studies – to treat texts as structurally self-contained.[8] The invitation, for Antin, foregrounded the social context of these talk performances, compounding whatever he said with layers of situational meaning. Each one was supported by a host, representing an institution, inviting Antin to speak.

This underlying structure of hospitality enabled Antin to embody *bad guest poetics*. In both content and manner, these talk performances applied pressure to the limits of the hospitality extended to him. Occasionally, those who invited him were unaware of his intentions to appropriate the situation as a site to compose an improvised conceptual poem. Furthermore, transcending the usual sociological structures discussed in philosophical discourse about hospitality, the talk poems expanded the usual host-guest pair by introducing a second kind of guest: the listener(s). Thus, even if the inviter was *in the know* about his practice and, hence, expected a transgressive talk poem, the audience was often unaware of Antin's avant-garde aims. *Bad guest poetics*, accordingly, refers to challenging the expectations of the host as much as those of the fellow guests. In a sense, Antin's performances resemble a distinguished guest at a dinner party refusing to eat – a breach that tests the host's tolerance and exposes the ritual's limits. Sometimes, however, the host knowingly invites the bad guest to perform this gesture, hoping to make an impression on the other guests.

Antin often digressed, within these talks, to explain how his improvisational talking was poetry. He pointed to historical precedents which, peculiar as they may have seemed, sketched a selective tradition of artistic talking. From the 20th century, a figure like John Cage, he noted, opened the conceptual door to a range of indeterminate performances as art.[9] Homer and the rhapsodes of Ancient Greece, he emphasized, improvised extended narratives in front of audiences.[10] This meta-commentary serves as another expression of *bad guest poetics*. Arriving at an event where people expect poetry or a lecture to be read to them, members of the audience were faced with a perplexing experience. Implied in these self-reflexive explanations, Antin embodied a Socratic stance, nudging people towards the aporia of not knowing what poetry is.

Whether or not these talk poems are poems is still open for debate. What matters for this essay is how they enact *bad guest poetics*. Following the above summary, we can now turn to analyze a single talk poem and review

[6] "A response to Ellen Zweig," 187.
[7] For a review of these artistic concepts, see Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.
[8] Antin reflects on these critiques in his essay "The Beggar and the King," in *Radical Coherency*, 258–270.
[9] See Antin's *john cage uncaged is still cagey*.
[10] See, for instance, Antin's talk poem "the sociology of art," in his *Talking at the Boundaries*, 157–210.

even more complex forms of undermining expectational structures. By tracing the context and implications of a particular invitation, we will see how Antin's talk poetry can generate a thought-provoking critique of hospitality in the arts.

"hiccups"

One talk poem is structured as a response to Levinas, making it an especially fruitful example of *bad guest poetics*. Titled "hiccups," this talk was performed at SUNY Buffalo in 2006, where Antin was invited by Stephen McCaffery, the head of the English Department.[11] Like all of the talk poems, "hiccups" enacted *bad guest poetics* by challenging the expectations of the audience with its counter-intuitive claim that improvised speech is poetry. The following analysis highlights how this talk posed particularly intricate challenges to its host, testing the boundaries of his cordiality by calling into question the intelligibility of a Levinasian poetics.

The talk poems often exhibit philosophical registers but they rarely mention particular philosophers. In the case of "hiccups," Antin ascribed the introduction of Levinas to his host. He recounted how McCaffery had given him some of Levinas's commentary on poetry to review before the talk. Antin immediately expressed a dismissive attitude, claiming that the well-known French philosopher had a debilitatingly narrow view of poetry. This combative stance illustrates the kind of pressure that can be applied to the conditions of hospitality. Antin publicly rejected the philosophical grounding of his host, but he did not clarify the extent to which McCaffery was invested in the relationship between Levinas, literature, and the talk poems.

Before inviting Antin to present at SUNY, McCaffery had already published an essay titled "The scandal of sincerity: toward a Levinasian poetics."[12] Drawing on Levinas's theories of ethics and language, the argument sketches this Levinasian poetics as a lens through which to analyze a number of late 20th century English-language writers, ending with Antin as a performative case. "In the genre of the talk poem," McCaffery declares, "Antin offers a practice of open address – a spontaneous, uninhibited outflow of speech toward the Other."[13] Given McCaffery's welcoming theoretical embrace of the talk poems, as an illuminating illustration of Levinasian poetics, the beginning of Antin's talk performance is startling.

"The Scandal of Sincerity" demonstrates McCaffery's familiarity with the talk poems, and their underlying critiques. But did this host anticipate his own literary theory coming under attack when he invited Antin to speak? Additionally, was the audience keyed into this tension? In his initial remarks, Antin addressed the audience as if they were unfamiliar with his practice.[14] It's possible that they – or at least some of them – had read McCaffery's essay or studied the relationship of Levinas and literature with him. Nevertheless, regardless of Antin's or the audience's familiarity with McCaffery's essay, the argument in "The Scandal of Sincerity" provides points to which Antin's talking responds. As we will see, McCaffery's essay helps clarify how "hiccups" presented a rejection of Levinas. Even if McCaffery knew

[11] The audio recording of the talk, "C324: Hiccups, 2006, Performed at SUNY in Buffalo, New York," is archived in the Getty Library, *Selected audio and video recordings from the David Antin Papers.* A textual adaptation of the talk, titled "hiccups," was published the same year in *Critical Inquiry.*

[12] McCaffery, *Prior to Meaning*, 204–229.

[13] *Prior to Meaning,* 223.

[14] Early in the recording, "C324: Hiccups, 2006, Performed at SUNY in Buffalo, New York," Antin insists that, despite sounding like a lecture, he would present "thinkings out loud," intimating to members of the audience that they were unaware of what they were about to witness.

that he was inviting a *bad guest* both his essay and the unsuspecting audience provided expectations that enabled new levels of subversion.

Antin extended this affront to Levinas through a comical, seemingly anticlimactic meditation on hiccups. In a literal sense and then as a metaphor, hiccups became the thread tying together the increasingly disparate sections of this performance. Given the complexity of the talk, with its disorienting movement through nested digressions and narrative leaps, the initial rejection of Levinas becomes concealed by the talk's protraction. It seems, in other words, as if the piece aims at overwhelming listeners (or readers) so that, by the end, they forget the introductory reference to Levinas. The following summary and analysis of this talk poem foregrounds the way that hiccups emerged as a critique and then sustains a multi-layered, roundabout rejection of Levinas.

The initial criticism of Levinas honed in on his affinity for transcendental longing. Levinas's narrow view of poetry, Antin argued, stems from his focus on the writings of Hölderlin and Rilke as prime examples of poetry that respond to modernity's "death of god" with anxiety-ridden expressions of the desire for transcendent experiences: Hölderlin indulged in reaching for the God whom he was sure was inevitably out of reach, while Rilke famously captivated people with reference to angels and their ability to induce terror.[15] Antin pointed to John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, two leading members of the New York School of poets, as noteworthy alternatives. Drawing on Charles Altieri's distinction – useful here for clarifying the stakes of Antin's critique – we can see this contrast between German and American poets as an illustration of an aesthetic shift from symbolism to immanence.[16] These New York School poets, as "immanentists," eschew spiritual meaning expressed through transcendent forms. Instead, they constrain themselves to experiential language, seeking meaning in acts of perception and composition. Antin employs this aesthetic shift in a swift and somewhat superficial manner. It points, however, in a number of promising directions that elucidate his critique.

This shift from symbolist to immanentist aesthetics brings to light features of Antin's own poetic practice. His improvised talking as a claim to poetry, with its experiential everyday language, resonates with the aesthetic of these New York School poets. One of the Levinas quotes, included in McCaffery's essay, highlights the significance of this shift: "Poetry can be said to transform words, the tokens of a whole, the moments of a totality, into unfettered signs, breaking the walls of immanence, disrupting order."[17] Even though Levinas suggests that poets apply pressure to "the wall of immanence," his point about the linguistic transformation that disrupts order implies a transcendental longing. Antin's shift, then, suggests the following question to McCaffery: Given the tension between transcendence and immanence in Levinas's thinking, how can a Levinasian poetics adapt to poetry operating with a more strictly immanentist aesthetic? McCaffery's essay, with its analysis of writers uninterested in transcendental longing, appears less narrow than Levinas's own analysis of poetry. However, this question also insinuates that McCaffery's approach risks injecting symbolist concerns into the works of immanentist writers. Accordingly, this casual shift between two groups of poets reflects the discomfort Antin likely felt in response to McCaf-

[15] "hiccups," 755-756. All of the quotes refer to the textual version of this talk poem, published in *Critical Inquiry*. Despite the focus on the performance of "hiccups" for most of this argument, references to Antin's speech cite the published text.
[16] See Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple*.
[17] In Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 156; quoted in McCaffery, *Prior to Meaning*, 214.

fery's analysis, wherein talk poetry audiences transform from particular people into an encounter with the numinous-sounding "Other." These details reveal the increasing hostility that Antin's talk appears to have directed towards its host.

From this aesthetic shift arises "hiccups," as the theme and name of the talk. Antin recounts an autobiographical story, set in a waiting room in Southern California, where he picked up a copy of the *New Yorker* magazine and was struck by one line of an Ashbery poem (Figure 2).

"its different when you have hiccups" and everything is
and i dont think levinas would have cited this line or this
poem as fundamentally poetic and it occurred to me that maybe he
should have and i kept thinking why doesnt he cite frank oharas
encounter with mortality in front of a newspaper kiosk where he sees a
picture of billie holiday in the *new york post* and a headline announcing
BILLIE HOLIDAY DIES "the day lady died" or perhaps
the one where he reads that LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED that
ends with the wonderful line "oh lana turner we love you get
up" now it seems to me that thats as much poetry as "every single
angel is terrible" which i find a little harder to take than "lana
turner please get up"
so the question that comes up for me is how do you deal with
poetry if you start from an idea of hiccups and i do start off with
the idea of hiccups

Figure 2: "hiccups," 756-757.

Hiccups and the newspaper headlines of famous people dying become linguistic vehicles that can achieve Levinas's poetic standard of "disrupting order." They jolt people into an awkward awareness about their own bodies and, as the introduction to this talk implies, serve as an antidote to the construction of imaginative figures rooted in transcendental longing. Antin was showing how the same modern anxieties that spurred German Romantic poetry are also present in the poems of these New York School poets. Their response, though, is different. This immanentist aesthetic grounds its expressions in everyday language – starting from certainties which, due to their simplicity, run the risk of appearing trivial. Hiccups as a poetic principle thus emerged from Antin's analysis of immanentist poets, as well as his own adherence to this immanentist aesthetics.

This idea of hiccups as a poetic principle serves as the overarching theme of the talk poem. Exposing the sincerity, humor, and literalness of his approach, Antin recalled the famous case of Pope Pius the Twelfth suffering from hiccups. The introductory analysis of different poets took a brisk turn as Antin posed the following questions: Could the spasms of a theological figure simply be ignored? Could those hiccups affect the meaning of dogmatic utterances, making hiccups worthy of hermeneutic attention? This show of irreverence foregrounded the comedic dimension of this talk performance, which adopted an autobiographical stance for the remainder of the piece. Antin broke into a series of narratives, all connected by hiccups: he recounted driving to the pharmacy with his wife before she needed to fly to Boston; followed by an account of his own arrival at the Buffalo airport; and the final scene of being treated for a head wound in an emergency room. These quirky stories and reflections may have enticed members of the audience, casting Antin's conceptual poetic proposition as a set of comedic delights. Yet, after the introductory remarks, Levinas was never mentioned again. The relation of these narratives to the theme of hiccups, though, indicates how they were still framed as a rejection of the French philosopher.

Hiccups as a poetic principle, Antin argued, could challenge a Levinasian poetics. An explicit connection to composing artworks only took shape as the literal meaning of "hiccups" unraveled. Here we can see the story-telling momentum derailed by a reflection on hiccups which, in turn, transformed the literalness of the theme into a philosophically-oriented metaphor of artistic practice (Figure 3).

Following a common avant-garde tactic, Antin blurred the line between art and everyday life. Once hiccups are taken up as a metaphor, bodily spasms become a mechanism for transforming consciousness into a collage. An instance of self-reflexive potential emerges

as the loosely connected stories in the talk could exemplify the very fragments of life that they evoke. In other words, could Antin be suggesting that his style of talking enacts a principle of collage – that is, it transposes collage from a spatial dimension to a temporal form of experience? This question foregrounds the distinct richness of the talk poems, staking out modernist claims by overlaying literature and performance. In this particular case, once this "aesthetic of interruption" emerges it both justifies itself and unsettles the very narratives that sustain its invitation.[18]

> but i was still hiccuping and i thought anything could happen anything could have been the case because the spasm interrupts your sense of reality and turns your consciousness from a coherent field of awareness into a kind of collage hiccups reduce your life to a collage turning the rational course of events you would normally follow into a succession of arbitrary fragments and you cant even dialogue with your hiccups as a historical process because each individual hiccup claims your complete attention and cuts you off from the preceding hiccup and even from the clear anticipation of a future hiccup which would more or less give you a sense that you could deal with it but no a hiccup is pure interference it cuts your body off from your mind and there is nothing you can do except wait it out till your mind returns you cant even frame an idea of poetry while hiccuping

Figure 3: "hiccups," 760.

Commentary from a later scene adds depth to this poetic principle. Referencing a somewhat dated, but still 21st-century experience, Antin reflected on a disorienting incident at the airport in Buffalo: He felt anxious about the arrival of his luggage; the screens were supposed to guide him to the appropriate baggage carousel; but they didn't make sense. He approached an airport employee, who told him that the airlines knowingly induce this confusion, assuming that people enjoy – even expect – the sense of surprise and wonder while traveling. Adapting another artworld idea, Antin named this experience the "dada trip."[19] Again, the content of the talk suggests itself as a model to understand the talk, as Antin's improvisatory process appears like an example of the *dada trip* that it describes. A rejection of Levinas, supported by a switch from German Romantic to New York School poets, may not be spiraling off towards an unclear destination for no reason – the dedication to experiential analysis, with sporadic meta-commentary, might account for a conscious embrace of disorientation.

Following these two artistically reflexive digressions, the literal meaning of hiccups is substituted for the commonplace metaphoric meaning – i.e. hiccups as mistakes to be ignored. This dissolution of the literal led to a climactic parody of the symbolic longing for transcendence. Antin mocked how, if cellphone technology were available to him, Hölderlin would probably try to call God. Then Antin launched into an extended satire of theological speculation, imagining a caricature of God, suffering from Alzheimer's Disease. A series of parodic Biblical scenes, mired in awkward amnesia, culminated in a retelling of King David's triumph over Goliath. God, according to Antin, accidentally killed Goliath by placing a pebble under his foot – an accident he called "a historical hiccup."[20] Along with the disorienting treatment of hiccups as a theme and principle guiding the exposition, this return to German Romantic poetry echoes the initial critique of the "narrow-minded" Levinas.

The ending of "hiccups," however, spiraled off from this winding theoretical trail. Antin recounted how he fell in his garden, struck his head, and, bleeding profusely, made his way to an emergency room. There, unwilling to explain the full chain of events to the medical staff, he simply lied, claiming that hiccups had

[18] Though rooted in Antin's own language, the notion of an "aesthetic of interruption" resonates with currents of modernist discourse. See, for instance, "Realism, modernism, and the aesthetics of interruption," the last chapter of Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism*, 179–241.
[19] "hiccups," 765.
[20] "hiccups," 766.

caused the fall.[21] This final mention of hiccups returns the term to its literal meaning – but only in part. Antin used the idea of hiccups as a convenient fabrication, a quick substitute for a tedious technical explanation. The lie became the talk's unlikely destination: a dada trip ending in misdirection. For anyone who recalls how the theme of hiccups first appeared in the piece, the moment invites a final, unsettling question.

What does "hiccups" reveal about the limits of hospitality?

Even though "hiccups" is structured as a sustained rejection of Levinas, Antin's relation to the French philosopher is mediated less by direct engagement than by the situation and, hence, its invitation. Hiccups, as an immanentist poetic principle, counters the transcendental longings Antin associates with German Romanticism – poets he encountered not independently but through Levinas's favorable remarks, given to him by the host of the performance. Complicating this situation further, McCaffery's analysis in "The Scandal of Sincerity" suggests that Antin was not invited to speak *about* Levinas but to *enact* a Levinasian poetic. Therefore, it is plausible that Levinas functions in "hiccups" less as a philosophical target than as a provocation aimed at the host.

In McCaffery's defense, the temptation to read Antin through Levinas is understandable. Certain passages in Levinas's writing, like the following quote from *Totality and Infinity*, seem to resonate strongly with the improvisatory conditions of the talk poems:

> A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge.[22]

It's easy to imagine the sparks connecting these two nodes as Levinas's words appear to elucidate the ethical dimension of Antin's performances but also how the talk poems can serve as a concrete illustration with which to better understand Levinas's thinking. However, equating a talk performance audience with "the other" in order to discuss the ethical dimension of a poetic performance introduces a score of problems. For instance, in an interview with Charles Bernstein, Antin discussed his relationship to his audience in terms that challenge a Levinasian sense of the ethical:

> I always had the feeling I should put up a sign over the entrance to any of my performances: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here," because I don't feel obligated to "entertain" – though I reserve the right to tell shaggy dog stories or even common jokes as part of what I'm doing. But I also don't give a damn if half the audience walks out.[23]

[21] For those familiar with the details of Antin's life, this lie probably invokes a retrospective pathos. Antin was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease and then, ten years after the performance and publication of "hiccups," he died of a fall.
[22] *Totality and Infinity*, 43.
[23] *A Conversation with David Antin*, 46.

Despite his dedication to the constraint of speaking in the presence of an audience, Antin's remarks suggest a relation that is responsive but pointedly non-obligatory – one that sits uneasily with Levinasian notions of ethical asymmetry or responsibility.

McCaffery himself warns readers, early in "The Scandal of Sincerity," that applying Levinasian ethics to literary analysis risks "procrustean formulations, if not blatant misinflections and lacunae."[24] This warning echoes Colin Davis's observations about Levinas's technical vocabulary: its terms both name abstractions – such as totality and infinity – and perform the ethical paradox of gesturing toward what remains beyond understanding.[25] When McCaffery transposes this vocabulary from the discourse of phenomenology to literary criticism, however, the gesture shifts from an opening toward the unknown to an explanatory framework. Thus, McCaffery generates commentary, such as the following: "Owing to its real-time and improvisatory nature, the talk poem enjoys the status of a Saying without a deposition in the Said – a true poetry of site-specific community that unfolds with parousial force as the approach to the Other."[26] This approach, enticing as it seems, falls short of its goal. Instead of exposing an ethical limit, McCaffery adapts Levinasian terminology in an attempt to explain Antin's practice.

Against this reading, "hiccups" resembles a form of theoretical slapstick, performed at McCaffery's expense. Presenting literal hiccups as a poetic principle parodies the tendency – less of Levinas himself than of his followers – to elevate figures of alterity into metaphysical abstractions with explanatory powers. The comedy sharpens when the critique folds back on itself: Antin eventually abstracts an "aesthetic of interruption" and a "dada trip" from his own narratives. Introduced as mockery, these art-theoretical reflections acquire a self-reflexive force whose explanatory power upends their own initial critique.

These reflections can tempt readers to embark on a new Levinasian reading of the talk poems, wherein Antin's practice aims at alternative forms of otherness than those implied by the ethical primacy of the audience. The "aesthetic of interruption," for instance, hints at the collage-like structure of Antin's own performance with its overlaying of tangential narratives. Whereas McCaffery equates "the Other" with the audience of a talk performance, Antin suggests that encounters with the unknown can arise from the uncontrollable movements of one's own body. Antin's case of language disrupted by spasms could lead to a Levinasian poetic that construes an ethical encounter with the "other" as emerging within oneself. Furthermore, the "dada trip" casts Antin's own talking as a late capitalist Pop Art performance: the shock of the unknown has been domesticated through attempts to enact otherness – or *radical alterity* – to an audience as much as to oneself. Read in this way, hiccuping is abstracted as a model that justifies the embrace of digressive, improvisatory speech. In other words, these artistic reflections become models to provoke encounters with the unknown – though, instead of people's faces, the talk poems locate otherness in the interruptions and surprises of one's own speech.

Enticing as these abstractions may sound, they are misleading. Antin never explicitly frames these artistic principles as meta-commentary on his own practice. Moreover,

[24] *Prior to Meaning*, 204–205.
[25] For Levinas' own treatment of these terms, see *Totality and Infinity*. This interpretation follows Colin Davis, *Levinas*, especially the first 2 chapters – "*Phenomenology*" and "*Same and Other*: Totality and Infinity," 7–62. Given Davis' account, wherein Levinas proposes and demonstrates his critique of phenomenological certainties, it's possible to explore Levinas in light of *bad guest poetics*.
[26] *Prior to Meaning*, 224.

these explanatory models do not exactly describe this talk performance: Antin's talking is not hiccuping or disturbed by hiccups; even if the story lines seem to interrupt the argument and each other, the fact remains that he spoke *uninterrupted* throughout the performance.[27] Similarly, calling the talk poem a *dada trip* might highlight a sense of uncertainty experienced by the host and audience, but it ignores some simple facts about "hiccups." The most surprising – and easily overlooked – feature of Antin's approach is its simplicity. This gesture of ordinary talking presents an inviting register not expected in most poetry readings and lectures, especially in academic settings. Despite the various meanings attached to "improvised speech," Antin likely had a sense of where the performance would end from the outset. It is plausible, for instance, that Antin planned for the talk to culminate in the story of his lie to medical staff about the cause of his fall.[28]

The emergency-room scene crystallizes the irony in Antin's response to McCaffery. Faced with demands for explanation, Antin invents one: hiccups. This lie avoids exhaustive narration and becomes, in miniature, another theory of his art. The cumbersome details he withholds may stand in for phenomenological discourse itself, with its exhaustive terminologies and exhausting initiatory demands to master those terms. Attentive to ordinary language, in a Wittgensteinian sense, Antin resists vocabularies that promise ethical seriousness at the cost of accessibility.[29] In this light, "hiccups" is less a rejection of Levinas than an esoteric jab at McCaffery, the host who invited Antin and tried to box his improvisatory speech into cryptic philosophical categories. *Bad guest poetics* foregrounds this refusal – a comical response to the discourse of philosophy which suggests that the failure of hospitality lies not with the guest, but with the host. The comedy invites a rude question with its own ethical weight: why does philosophical discourse about hospitality often feel so inhospitable?

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[27] Antin made a number of statements that support this skepticism of an "aesthetic of interruption." For instance, in the essay "The Beggar and the King," in *Radical Coherency*, 258-270, he argues for narrative as a means of overcoming modernist collage. In an extended epistolary exchange with the editors of the journal *boundary 2*, Antin and one of the editors reflect on his earlier claim that poetry is "uninterruptable discourse" – "A correspondence with the editors, William V. Spanos and Robert Kroetsch," 626 and 630.

[28] In his essay "Talking criticism with David Antin, or criticism at the boundaries," Alex Kitnick discusses Antin's talk poems in relation to the complicated task of giving people *the impression* of improvisation.

[29] Some of Antin's thoughts about the connection of Wittgenstein and poetry are available in his essay "Wittgenstein among the poets," in *Radical Coherency*, 305-330.

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