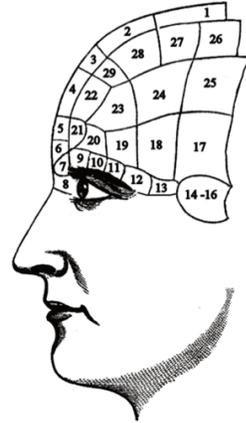


## Assemble, Like So (Instructions from the Phrenologist's Lover)

*Daniel Scott Tysdal*

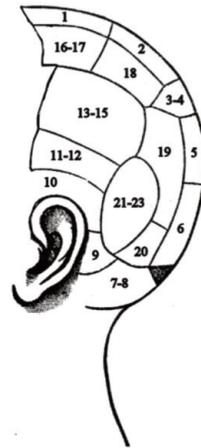
*The spirit is a bone.*  
—Phrenologist's Adage

1. Know that not being afraid of  
exposing myself for you
2. means clearing my skull of  
obstructions,
3. stopping not with my  
eyebrows or curls
4. but peeling away the flesh with  
them,
5. the muscles and tendons,  
laying raw
6. my bone's subtlest expression  
of tendency
7. and fate. No lips, true, but no  
misplaced kisses
8. either. No curls, but no more strands to get tangled
9. in the headboard. Eyelids will be my greatest sacrifice.
10. When I turn from your disappointment—at an ominous
11. dimple in the region of my "Memory of Things,"
12. or an unsightly bump above my "Sense of Metaphysics"—
13. my eyes will slip loose from my skull and wait

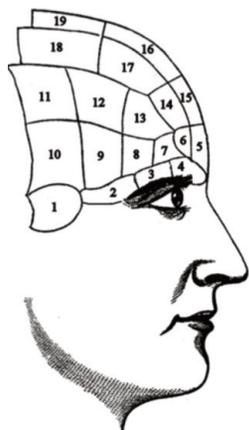


14. for my body to emerge searching, this blind bulk  
 15. palming at air as it lumbers away from  
 16. what it cannot see to find. Could we ever  
 17. be otherwise? Just as grips must obey the principles  
 18. fists set forth for them, so phrenologists' lovers  
 19. must free their skulls for love. Laughters must fast  
 20. on sadness. The living must not remain  
 21. at funerals forever, falling into coffins  
 22. and ending up buried, while the dead hang around,  
 23. not even nibbling on the feast laid out  
 24. at the reception, and leaving the roads un-roamed  
 25. by anything but flurries.

1. Believe that exposing myself will be  
 2. easy. Our minds  
 3. are the underneath and ontop of the  
 4. same  
 5. shared shard. Both of our sciences are  
 6. dead,  
 7. and as seekers we fumble to make  
 8. them new, to show  
 9. that what's archaic or killed lingers in more than the gut  
 10. of what survived to stress over the work  
 11. of murder and adornment. The hidden, into the hider,  
 12. trickles. The day phrenologists first put faith  
 13. in the fact that finger-traced bone said something true  
 14. about a self, poets pistiled words against the world's  
 15. cranial mortar—its bodies and its things. They made  
 16. measurable the graced. They said truths are palpable,  
 17. open to the residue of fingerprints, the endless elasticity

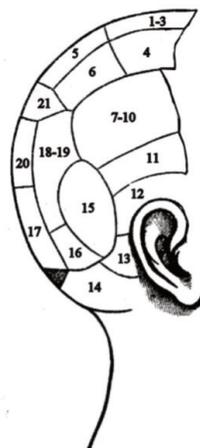


14. of seeing. Imagine there's a day when we are identical,
15. and we travel two centuries in reverse with today's top
16. surgical techniques to smooth all the unfit skulls, to mar
17. the crowns that found themselves on the page labelled
18. "Just." Imagine the day we are indivisible, studying
19. the snow as though bootprints were traces
20. of a universal synapse, as though snow angels were
21. MRIs of the soul, these icy impression limning
22. eternity, though the arm-thrashed wings melt
23. and the hemlines in the heat fail to hold.



1. Decide whether it matters that I misread you, even ask,
2. "Do you realize I was never moved by the claim
3. that saintly skulls sustained saintly proportions,
4. or that bumps betrayed burglars and hurdlers alike?"
5. If necessary, go further, catalogue what your probes
6. are really after: "The lost origin of inspiration for
7. Darwin's symphony of fitness," "the phrenological bust
8. that first hinted at a self's sentence to the pulpy perdition
9. of brain matter," "taught men how to tear a prisoner's skull open
10. and stimulate these neurons to set loose a confession, those
11. to make him howl." You wouldn't have said that last bit,

12. I know. I only wanted my authorship to fit with your authority.
13. I only want to author unfitting actions for your accurate
14. respite: if phrenology had taken a headless subject
15. as its model, would your pioneers have studied
16. the circumference of a neck's mangled stump
17. to determine the contours of a corpse's capacity
18. to do good? Would we range after the faded remains
19. of absences in order to find what is right here?



1. Pull my hands to your skull and guide them,
2. teach them a way to get free from touching
3. themselves, their strangling of the sources
4. of any living adhesions, like the self-study
5. the scream unleashed on itself—ears sheltered
6. by scalp-scouring hands as the voice ripples
7. the world away in waves of many-volumed
8. scars (as though making a friend of horror
9. meant only making ourselves horrific (as though
10. hope were truly effaced by the gilding despair
11. that keeps it hidden)). Make us fit
12. together. Make us as malleable as the dolls
13. redeemed in the dream of the child who
14. lost them. Fingers must fight through the canopies
15. of skeleton and penchants that keep them

16. from grasping the hand that ascends
17. from elsewhere. Each sigh is the silhouette
18. of such tactility. Each kiss lights a small cinema
19. on our skin, a home for the movie
20. with the lovers who remain reeling forever
21. in their failure to ever fall apart.

For the day I die, I leave you these instructions. In the age  
when no nearness remains squinting around our wishes, and  
the only tangling left  
are the hairs still tangled in the headboard, strip my skull  
clean for real. Then cut from these pages  
the words I have written and paste them in the places  
marked out for them. Or ink each phrase  
over my cranium by hand so the skull can express  
unequivocally the bond the longings no  
longer lingering inside wanted to be true. Break these lines  
into pieces and assemble, like  
so, , the way you asked me to assemble  
in you assembling in me, whether after waking together late  
in the morning or while passing our hands through the clear  
of our bodies  
in the night we drank and clutched and cursed  
and collided and flickered and fell to sleep.

## Exploring the Poetics of Phrenology in Daniel Scott Tysdal’s “Assemble, Like So”

*Elizabeth D. Harvey*

Daniel Scott Tysdal’s intricate, luminous poem, “Assemble, Like So (Instructions from the Phrenologist’s Lover),” imagines a legacy. The poem’s speaker offers directives to her/his beloved, a phrenologist, providing instructions we customarily associate with furniture or toys (“some assembly required”) that will enable him/her to reconstruct—and presumably reanimate—the lover after her/his death. The lover’s directions mimic and ironically critique the language of phrenology, the early nineteenth-century pseudoscience that sought to map the regions of the brain and to correlate specific neurological “organs” with character, emotion, and mental faculties. Like a testament or will, the poem stretches its consciousness into a future after death. Suffused with an anticipatory elegiac tone, these instructions are designed to reconstitute a mind or spirit that has fled, to rekindle love with the instruments of science. Even as the lover outlines the task, its futility is betrayed everywhere: in structure, in language,

in the eventual collapse of the very endeavour the poem seems designed to sustain.

The poem begins with the command to assemble, and we might usefully linger for a moment on the verb; to assemble means to join, to collect, to bring together, even to couple sexually. But it also carries the cognate meaning of likening or resembling. “Like so,” then, suggests that the lover’s instructions will provide a template, a map that will guide the phrenologist in the task of reconstruction. Embedded within the directives are fundamental assumptions about relationship, what the poem elsewhere calls “living adhesions”—between language and action, between words and numbers, between science and love, between medicine and poetry, between phrenologist and lover. Likeness is a way of organizing the world. Yet, as the poem suggests over and over in different ways, likeness is continually pierced by difference, by the incommensurability of such correspondences. This disruptive instability is announced in the title, where the impossibility of the task is rendered precarious by the coupling of phrenologist with lover, of science with poetry, categories that seem fundamentally mismatched.

At the end of the poem, the lover imagines “the day I die,” and abandoning the numbered schematics, s/he invokes the multiple senses of breaking and assembling: “Break / these lines into pieces and assemble, like / so,” “the way you asked me to assemble / in you assembling in me.” The words and rhythms transmute the technologies of phrenology—touching, mapping, numbering, cate-

gorizing—into love poetry: “whether after waking / together late in the morning or while passing / our hands through the clear of our bodies / in the night we drank and clutched and cursed / and collided and flickered and fell to sleep.” Phrenology’s cranial touch extends to the whole body in this erotic assembling, and consciousness encompasses multiple states of being (waking, sleeping, intoxication, eroticism, even death). “To assemble” conjures not just the impartial act of following instructions, but evokes rather the intimate interweaving of the lovers’ minds, “me to assemble / in you assembling in me,” a passionate mingling that is at once sexual and syntactic.

The title is followed by an epigraph: “*The spirit is a bone.* / —Phrenologist’s Adage.” The epigraph is a borrowed residue of thought that attempts to capture in a simple equation phrenology’s central premise: knowledge of the mind could be obtained by observation, palpation, and measurement of the human skull. Phrenologists thought that they could chart the ineffable spirit and know the nature of character by “palming” the cap of bone that cradles the brain. According to Johann Spurzheim, disciple and colleague of Franz Joseph Gall, the Viennese physician who first theorized phrenology, the brain could be divided into sections that corresponded precisely to particular faculties or functions of mind. The epigraph equates spirit and matter (bone) through the copula “is,” shrinking in the phrenologist’s account the mind’s mysteries to bumps. Hegel famously contested this assertion in

his *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a reduction of spirit to matter, diminishing unique subjectivity to a set of protuberances on the cranial surface. The skull is the vestige of the human, a signifier of death, as in Hamlet's meditation on Yorick's skull. Gall and Spurzheim collected and measured hundreds of skulls, supposedly converting these icons of death into mirrors of the living mind animated by such attributes as benevolence, wonder, "adhesiveness," and "philoprogenitiveness." The phrenological skull epitomizes the dialectic between death as inert bone and the vital qualities that define the mind, just as the poem uses the imagination to shuttle between lived experience and its afterlife.

### Numbers

The poem's ostentatious display of numbers, which tag each line in the first four stanzas, and its apparent keying of the neurological diagrams to poetic lines seem to privilege science. "Assemble, Like So" offers instead, a very different kind of topography, a mapping of what escapes systems and a vibrant critique of phrenology's reduction of the mind. The lover instructs the phrenologist to cut and assemble the lines: "[C]ut from these pages / the words I have written and paste them in the places / marked out for them." Yet the poem continually contests phrenological assumptions, baffling, for instance, in the first stanza the symmetry between lines and numbered spaces on the cranium: there are twenty-nine positions on the skull, but only twenty-five lines. The lines themselves seem to resist the numbered schema, refusing the

clean logic of end-stopped lines, which progressively give way to enjambments or run-over lines, as if syntax, thought, and poetry had a mind of its own.

The first four stanzas have line numbers that seem to correspond to the visual images of the skull, but by the fifth stanza, the line numbers disappear altogether, abandoning system. Phrenology relies on the belief that the brain nestles inside the skull, displaying its outline on the outer layer of the cranium, as the shape of a hand reveals itself in the glove that encloses it: “Our minds / are the underneath and ontop of the same / shared shard.” Even as the numbers appear to promise structure and symmetry, they move in different directions; conventionally, numbered poetic lines have a self-referencing rationale that allows citation. This poem is difficult to cite because the lines correspond awkwardly to the numbers, for both poetic line and syntactic unit have other allegiances. Are the numbers integral to the poem or to the system of correspondences aligned with the cranial diagram? The numbers repeat themselves in the first four stanzas, making reference confusing. When we export a part out of its context, how can we identify that part, the residue, the quotation, if we cannot designate it by number?

Phrenologists, the poem’s voice tells us, tried to make “measurable the graced,” reducing the human to the measurable, numerical, topographical, insisting that “truth” could be “palpable,” something to be felt with the fingers or seen with the eyes. But the “they” could as easily refer to

poets, giving a different interpretation to making “measurable the graced.” Numbers typically designate the music of poetry, the division into feet and beat that creates a poem’s subliminal rhythm. The reader is pulled between scientific and poetic systems, aware on the one hand of the overt, even tyrannical, presence of the numerical, but listening increasingly to the poetic pulse of the lines. The lover pits phrenologist against poet in the second stanza: “The day phrenologists first put faith / in the fact that finger-traced bone said something true / about a self, poets pistiled words against the world’s / cranial mortar—its bodies and its things.” “Pistiled,” cognate with “epistle,” is a word that first entered the English language in the sixteenth century. Associated with satire, the Oxford English Dictionary now considers it to be obsolete, a nonce word, used by one author on a single occasion. Yet it appears here again, brought to life in Tysdal’s poem, just as phrenology, a relic of a moribund science, is revived. It is as if the act of writing an epistle or a poem could breathe life into the dead or as if the poem’s fantastic premise—that the phrenologist’s reassembly could reanimate the love—could happen.

The overall effect as the poem progresses is sensory and cognitive confusion, a disruption of the very schema the poem seems to be offering. If satire excoriates vice in order to teach, “Assemble, Like So” exposes the dangers not just of phrenology, but of any neurological technology that might diminish the immeasurable capacities of the mind, reducing to “measure” the properties of “grace.”

The lover/poet enjoins the phrenologist to imagine a day in which “snow angels” are “MRIs of the soul,” as if the fragile impression could “limn” or record a “universal synapse” or “eternity.” Less a sermon and more a defense of poetry, the lover engages poetic technology as antagonist to a science whose schematic understandings might freeze our understanding of evanescent mind and spirit. We might usefully examine several categories of disruption—breaking and assembling—that the poem weaves into its structure.

### **Alliteration, Breath, Repetition**

Alliteration creates linkages among different things through sound; the echo emphasizes connection but not necessarily sameness. The lover uses alliteration as an apparent poetic analogy for phrenology’s symmetries: the claim “that saintly skulls sustained saintly proportions” or that “bumps betrayed burglars” seems to mimic linguistically the phrenologist’s correlation of a skull’s surface with mental attributes. The smooth sibilant of “saintly sustained” contrasts with the onomatopoeic “bump,” just as the even curve of the saint’s cranium might have differed from the relatively lumpy burglar’s skull. Hiding within the words, however, we discern a multiplicity that disrupts these symmetrical correspondences. “Bumps,” of course, might refer as easily to cranial protuberances as to the noise inept thieves make. Instead of corresponding to a single faculty of mind, the bump may signal multiple faculties, a deviation and efflorescence of mental abilities. Linguistic vari-

ations and discrepancies jostle one another in the same way that the restless “underneath” of the mind disturbs a simple correspondence with its protective mantle of bone. Words, even as they assemble under the same acoustic umbrella in alliteration, retain distinct identities and divergent tendencies, a kind of subversive linguistic unconscious.

Spirit and breath signal non-discursive sound in the poem: “Each sigh is the silhouette / of such tactility.” How do we measure what cannot be measured, what cannot be contained, the “scream unleashed on itself” or the confession “loosed” from the tortured prisoner that emerges as a “howl?” If poetic language disrupts the numerological and phrenological systems, how does the inarticulate, non-discursive sound, traces of inarticulate affect, trouble language as a system? Here, we might consider phenomenological, lived experience, the kind of knowledge we accumulate through the medium of the lived body in relation to knowledge that professes to categorize the mind through a dead or inert body.

Repetition (“saintly ... saintly”), like alliteration, sets up correspondences that accentuate difference as it is elicited by changed context. Repeating lines with variations—as in, “Know that not being afraid of exposing myself for you” and its reverberation in the second section, “Believe that exposing myself will be easy”—plays with difference within the echo. The lines cluster epistemological stances and emotions in different configurations—fear, belief, difficulty/ease, knowing, exposing—interrogating the intersections

among them, questioning the relationship between knowledge and belief. Puns are a kind of embedded repetition, meanings conjoined within a single word such as “reeling,” which alludes simultaneously to the cinema (“Each kiss lights a small cinema / on our skin, a home for the movie / with the lovers who remain reeling forever”) and to the sense of vertigo (“reeling”) that the poem produces. A pun may work in ways analogous to the disrupted phrenological project: multiple definitions fit inside a single word, just as the lovers “fit” inside each other (“The hidden, into the hider”), not collapsed into sameness, but retaining their singularity within the pod of their union, a variant meaning of “unfit skulls.”

Alliteration opens readerly experience into the sensory realm. Primarily an acoustic device, it is sometimes visible to the eye, and sometimes audible only, as in “phrenologists first put faith.” The poem privileges the visual in four images of the skull with numbered divisions; they lie on the page as authoritative diagrams, promising organization and explanation. In the poem’s final, unnumbered section, two small skulls without numbers appear, suspended between commas, within a line of poetry. The skulls are joined at the back, adhered, assembled, subsumed into the poetic line as a visual image, a metaphor literalized by sight, the picture doubling the sense of the words and complicating what it means to receive knowledge through different senses.

The imagery of touch and hands is pervasive in the poem. If hands are a central phrenological in-

strument used to palpate the skull's lumps and swellings, hands are also redeployed here as the lover's hands, a touching of curiosity, erotic exploration. Eyes are replaced with "palming," a kind of blind seeing or medical Braille. The "finger-traced bone" of the skull is a truth made "palpable," "[o]pen to the residue of fingerprints, the endless elasticity / of seeing." As the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us, touching is always reciprocal. To touch also means that we are touched. To palpate a skull leaves a trace, a fingerprint, a residue that both implicates and contaminates the possibility of objectivity: "Pull my hands to your skull and guide them, / teach them a way to get free from touching / themselves."

### **Imagination and Metaphysics**

"Assemble, Like So" repeatedly juxtaposes "imaging," as scientific technology, with poetic imagining: "Imagine there's a day when we are identical ... Imagine the day we are indivisible, studying / the snow as though bootprints were traces / of a universal synapse." "Imagination" and "image" are etymological kin, spliced together through their common root. The mind's capacity to form images is an inner ability mirrored in science's increasingly sophisticated capacity to present visual representations of the brain's operations. Neurological imaging turns the mind inside out, just as phrenology endeavoured to make the "hidden" visible, displaying and mapping not just the territories of the brain but also the more ephemeral qualities of the

individual human subject. “Both of our sciences”—poetry and phrenology—“are dead,” says the lover, and both the lover and the beloved must “fumble to make them new,” to revive their power. In a sense, the poem posits a confrontation between their respective poetic and phrenological capacities to revive the dead, whether in the imagined death of the lover/speaker or in the poet’s ability “to show / that what’s archaic or killed lingers in more than the gut.”

In its engagement with philosophical metaphysics, the fundamental ways that we know the world (and in this case, our own minds), we could argue that the poem is “metaphysical.” It invites comparison with seventeenth-century Metaphysical poetry, which famously coupled deep philosophical speculation and love. Metaphysical poetry was artful in its use of metaphor, not only in the extravagance of its tropes and conceits and in its willful importation of new knowledge derived from emergent science, but also in its self-conscious use of rhetoric and metaphor. Samuel Johnson (1795) criticized these poets “yok[ing]” of “heterogeneous ideas” by “violence together” in metaphysical conceits, a conjoining of extravagantly dissimilar things. “Assemble, Like So” displays the inherent violence both of metaphor and of scientific exploration. The opening stanza imaginatively anatomizes what the lover’s “exposing” would mean for the phrenologist. Literalizing her/his scientific gaze, s/he envisions “peeling away the flesh,” “muscles and tendons,” and “laying raw” the “bone’s sub-

tlest expression of tendency / and fate.” S/he summons the phrenologist’s disappointment as s/he gazes at the “ominous / dimple in the region of my ‘Memory of Things,’ the “unsightly bump above ‘My Sense of Metaphysics.’” Gall identified “metaphysical perspicuity” as one of the 27 cerebral organs, and the debates between metaphysicians and phrenologists filled the pages of phrenological journals. Phrenology claimed to improve on metaphysics, for instead of abstract descriptions of mental faculties, phrenology could identify specific physical locations through observation. The lover wonders in the poem, however, if phrenology’s insistence on physiological verification induces a new blindness. S/he images her/his “exposed, dead self” divested of the senses it needs to navigate: “[M]y eyes will slip loose from my skull and wait / for my body to emerge searching, this blind bulk palming at air as it lumbers away from / what it cannot see to find.” The echo of “exposing myself” in the poem’s first and second stanza foregrounds the relationship between knowledge and belief: where phrenology anchors knowledge firmly in bone, belief aligns itself with consciousness, spirit, and poetry, what escapes numbers, categories, and perhaps, finally, extinction.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful for the rich insights provided by the members of the Jackman Humanities Institute working group on “Exploring Neuroculture.” My thanks to Andrea Charise and Peter Whitehouse

for their organization and facilitation of illuminating transdisciplinary conversations.

### Reference

Johnson, Samuel. (1795). *The works of the poets of Great Britain and Ireland. With prefaces, biographical and critical.* Vol. 1. London, 1800, p. 11. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. University of Toronto Libraries. URL: [http://find.galegroup.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/ecco/start.do?prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=utoronto\\_main](http://find.galegroup.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/ecco/start.do?prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=utoronto_main)

**Daniel Scott Tysdal** is Senior Lecturer, Creative Writing, Department of English, University of Toronto (Scarborough). Email: [dtysdal@utsc.utoronto.ca](mailto:dtysdal@utsc.utoronto.ca) . **Elizabeth D. Harvey** is Professor of English, University of Toronto. Her books include *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and Renaissance Texts* and *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, Editor. Email: [elizabeth.harvey@utoronto.ca](mailto:elizabeth.harvey@utoronto.ca) .