

PhillyTalks 13

Rachel Blau DuPlessis / Barrett Watten

Mon. Nov. 15th (1999), 6 pm, free
Kelly Writers House, 3805 Locust Walk
PA wh@english.upenn.edu (215) 573 9748

"PhillyTalks" invites two poets to begin a dialogue on each other's work, then have the resulting exchange published in newsletter form & made available to readers prior to the event. The poets, following their poetry reading, informally extend their dialogue. The audience then joins in. A future newsletter will feature a transcript of the event, as well as written responses to previous newsletters.

CALL FOR RESPONSES: Please email
lcabri@dept.english.upenn.edu, or write: Louis Cabri,
529B - 19 Ave SW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2S
0E3.

This issue: edited by Rachel DuPlessis & Barrett
Watten, correspondence formatted by Barrett
Watten. Special Thanks to Al Filreis, Aaron Levy,
Heather Starr, & especially to the Writers House
Volunteers.

Back issues:

- 1: David Bromige / Laura Moriarty
- 2: Andrew Levy / Jackson Mac Low
- 3: Jeff Derksen / Ron Silliman
- 4: Tina Darragh / Jena Osman
- 5: Alan Gilbert / Rodrigo Toscano
- 6: Transcript & response issue: Derksen/Silliman
- 7: Brian Kim Stefans / Fred Wah
- 8: Bruce Andrews / Rod Smith
- 9: Steven Farmer / Peter Gizzi
- 10: Heather Fuller / Melanie Neilson
- 11: Ammiel Alcalay / Tom Mandel
- 12: Transcript & response issue: Levy/Mac Low

#s 1, 2, 3, 6 available at
<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~wh/phillytalks> thanks
to Aaron Levy; more to follow.

Produced with indispensable help of the poets,
Writers House staff & volunteers; funded by sub-
scribers (\$12/5 issues) & by the Kelly Writers House
(<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~wh>) at University of
Pennsylvania. Copyright © reverts to authors on pub-
lication.

DuPlessis to Watten #1

3 May 98

Dear Barry—

This is just to say that Bad History is a wonderful wonderful book. I read it, enthralled, breathless, which may or may not be the right [theoretical] posture, but I did. It is major work in every way. The pace is elegant, the sutures are provocative, the twists and turns of autobiography (yours) and autobiography (everybody's) are important. The glissades—but with control!—up and down the various discourse scaled—theoretical to historical, historical to business page, business page to art historical... and so on—are riveting. The work is a conceptual model—it is one of the first times I really felt that conceptual art, or conceptual sculpture actually came into writing, and with "poethics." It is a rare combination. I like that the sentences stay grounded, and I like the general shape of each chapter or episode of thought. The grief, the challenge, the indictment, the suspicion, the range, the resistant and dour humaneness of the documentary are all admirable. I guess I felt that the buttons were central—"each one a point of condensation for a process all of us had been chosen to go through." This is the impact of the sentences, the array, on me as reader.

Wow.

And it is not just "brilliant"—I am sure it is somewhat tiresome simply to be "brilliant." It is really a talismanic work.

(Also I assume you saw your demonic counterpart—the "bad history" cover of the Nation.)

Well, this is the report from this front.

Warmly, Rachel.



DuPlessis to Watten #2

29 Sept 99—There were several ways I

thought to begin—maybe three or four. See what you think, what you'd like to do. One would be to acknowledge belatedness—mine. This is not necessarily a fruitful topic, nor even a true one, for it depends on what grounds we choose to discuss; if we talk explicitly about Language Poetry and its formation, I was certainly not there, and have only an ex post facto sense of materials as they emerged, controversies, debates, ruptures and so on. To myself, I represent a difference within loosely oppositional poetics (now positioning LP as a formation that flowered in the past, but which has had incredibly long, still on-going, major reverberations). That is, in the poetics of critique. If one speaks of feminist analyses of culture and gender-inspired critiques of culture, I am hardly belated to those, having been “there”—let's say editorially involved with Feminist Studies—for fifteen plus years. I have already acknowledged my self-difference there: what I said was I was “too objectivist for the feminists; too feminist for the objectivists.” That was then; this is now; there is a history we could discuss. One difference is in work inside study groups (I see LP as a cross between a study group/ seminar and a movement); mine were always in theory or feminist issues, and I always felt alienated, that is without face-to-face community, as a poet. An accident of geography, perhaps; it nonetheless has had real consequences. I would be interested in your history of engagement, distance, disengagement and self-difference with the LP formation—how do you now look back on it retrospectively. It is clear, in terms of our conjuncture here, for Philly Talks, is that what we hold in common is not the particular formation in which we participated in the late 60s thru the late 80s, but the practice of negativity, of oppositionality, of suspicion. What we hold in common—as I said—is a poetics of critique.

This does not, however, lead to stylistic congruence (not a reason in the world why it should!), and so we might want to discuss our

rhetorical and stylistic differences, or even stages in our own coming to each other's work (if that topic would be useful or in any way exemplary in the public forum to which we are heading).

Another topic would be my conviction that Mass-Observation as a (British) practice, at a point of fusion of poetry and sociology in the 30s, has a lot of analogues with our separate/yet linked projects in poetry, and I wanted to tell you some of what I meant by this, and ask your opinion. I do not mean the Mass-Observation that turned into a sort of propaganda listening-post and machine during WWII, nor the early creepy development of market research tactics for politics that it pioneered. I mean the praxis of writing language about the social feelings generated, the material spaces in which we live, the political ideologies by which we are tempered and those of which we are suspicious.

A third way would be to ask each other the questions we'd like to understand about each other's poetry, the poetic career, and so on. What would be your own “cultural biography of and in poetry.” I don't mean this Q. to be annoying; far from it. The annoyance might be that you think you've already gone on record saying what you want to have heard, and don't want to say it all again.

A fourth way—this topic may be part of belatedness (!), but it also might be interesting to spell all this out explicitly. It would be useful to tell each other as many ways as we can think of that poetry has social functions, and ways that particular poetics have had, or have sought social functions, and what in the world that “social” responsibility (for social functions) could mean. or how we trust and distrust what people say, or imply, or mean, or conceal when they talk of the social function(s) of poetr(ies).

That's it for now; but see what you think.

Love, Rachel



Watten to DuPlessis #1

October 24

Dear Rachel:

Your letter of September 29 in hand, or rather jammed under the laptop as we go through turbulence somewhere over Utah—made me want to write. Turbulence! That and Jena Osman's line, from a Philly Talks: "For days afterward my vision was clouded with floaters." The space presently is incredibly cramped. Hence, once gives everything for a word like "floaters."

Your letter has that sense of opening, and openness, that we should pursue. Not directly responding to it, my opening to you was expressed when we met at the modernist conference, that we should consider constructing an event based on the "pointillist" logic—or the argument at points, from point to point—in your work. Wanting to get out of the formal requirements of an overarching, overdetermined, excessive nonnarration—which is still a major vehicle in my work (turbulence, turbulence—can hardly type. Warning sounds. TV screens flicker), I'm interested in interacting with the ethics of your stylistic choices in Drafts.

(The present condition of the battery should allow me to continue typing until I get to San Diego. The crew at present are behaving in a very rowdy manner—throwing cups around the work area and talking about carousing in town once their shift is over.)

I can say that your critical work, especially The Pink Guitar, means quite a bit to me, and part of what that is is what you point to—the parallel track you've been on, somewhat outside the collective self-reference of the Language School in its bicoastal constitution. But you've been doing it all along, and it's your ethical moment (and difference) that I'd like to address. In other words, while collective defini-

tion—as in the recent section of The Grand Piano I read (a work that is only now beginning to come into mutually present awareness)—has everywhere provided a kind of reflexiveness in my work, there is another consideration in which such an historically specific form of multipositioned reflexivity might be encompassed in a single ethical stance. That, finally, I think is its guarantee.

Now having said that I have been impressed with the consistency and focus of your work outside the exchanges, challenges, and articulations of a group of writers (without the slightest sense of exclusion, or being excluded, I think, but one of contemporaneous activity), the distinction between that singular focus and what I am referring to is qualified, immediately, by your decades-long involvement with feminist poetics. There really are two social matrixes, here, that may be compared—one the self-focused, autotelic bicoastal group, and the other the "social command" and historical networks of constituted collective identity.

(Hm, we're starting to descend. Seems a little early for that. I suppose it always does.)

Modernism in conventional accounts was supposed to be utterly hostile to the ethical moment of collective address. Earlier today, I was remembering an encounter I had with an American Poet and a Fiction Writer, in Bolinas around 1974. That would put me at about 25 years of age. Somehow I was visiting Poet and the Fiction Writer showed up with a shopping bag full of steaks he had just bought. I was in a period of life where a shopping bag full of steaks was utterly bizarre—one simply did not eat those things. But it seemed like a good idea at the time, so we cooked them.

Then, at dinner, I mentioned to Fiction Writer that I had noticed his enthusiasm for the work of Kenneth Fearing. At the time, Fearing was not available and I had seen few works of his. The available writers of the 30s were the Objectivists, though I had begun reading around

in Left anthologies (when I did encounter Fearing in the New Masses anthology published at about that time). In any case, at the mention of Fearing, there was some hemming and hawing between Poet and Fiction Writer. It seemed as if I had mentioned an unmentionable topic. I inferred that Poet had been critical of, or had somehow expressed impatience with, the Fiction Writer's reference—it wasn't in the script. And Fiction Writer didn't want to answer any such questions about the 30s. So the topic was canceled, quickly.

I've often remembered that moment as a kind of elision, a sliding under the table of a suppressed history of some kind. It may have been an accident that I had that impression. Fearing did not seem to be a "correct" reference, in the way that references must be correct in salons and literary scenes. Fearing was not relevant, and not to be mentioned. Just recently, I noticed a negative reference by a French Poet to Fearing's work in the recent 99 Poets/1999 anthology. For the French Poet, writing can be political if it is like the Objectivists or the Language School, but not if it's like "Pound or the Beatniks"—or Fearing.

The problem, as I see it, is the prohibition of certain kinds of politics, and specifically of collective subjectivity. If there is a subject, it has to be singular.

(I'm going to have to quit now; we are landing in San Diego and my typing might interfere with the accuracy of our approach. I hope not. Even as I think that thought, I can hardly stop typing. The stewardess has just asked me to stop.)



(I resume on California Poet's porch in northern San Diego County, between the propertied twitter of various birds and the oceanic grind of the freeway. As a natural force, the freeway itself may one day erode these hills, which are also under attack from a nearby ocean. These are

pleasant thoughts.)

In the 60s, one was forced into an immediate double bind: the experience one was going through was unquestionably that of a mass movement, and of a very real collective subjectivity that was experienced directly, in many areas. I mean extremely directly: the surging crowds of demonstrators outside the Oakland Induction Center in 1968; the masses of flower people confronting Gatling Guns at Peoples' Park in 1969. The breakdown of boundaries in ecstatic, not only political, moments was also direct: the Human Be-In. At the same time, one was forced into an experience that was entirely particularized, even a degree lonely. I don't mean to simplify, or sentimentalize, but to register the opposing pull of the moment: on the one hand, one was convinced of deep involvement in the surges of what was going on, and on the other isolated within it. Both aspects were compelling.

The story of a group of writers coming together, for a variety of reasons—radical praxis or study group, is one that I've been addressing now for some time. The analogy I've made to a radical student group in Oshima's film Night and Fog in Japan: a dynamic of centrifugal/centripetal tension, not a commonality of explicit purpose, is what keeps the radical group together. This is very like the Language School. At certain moments of historical redefinition, the group may collapse, explode, and reconfigure. And it does.

But I'm also interested in the ways that feminist politics provides an experiential matrix for an ethics that is compelled, on the one hand, to see itself in a radical singularity, and on the other is an articulation of a collection subjectivity: women. Shorthand notations like "discursive subject position" are great for the seminar room, but do not come close to what is really going in the negotiation of singular/collective identity as it's experienced in historical time. The 70s were such a period, in the devel-

opment of radical “groups” such as the Language School and for the emergence of first-wave feminism (not locatable in “group” dynamics).

Another question to raise: along with Mass-Observation as a pre-postmodern language praxis, the work of Kenneth Fearing as predicting the forms of social dialogue and counterhegemony that 60s culture would collectively suffer, and out of which the radical singularities of avant-garde practice would emerge.

Answers to the question of what one would mean by social agency would mean, given the difficulty and impedance of the work we respectively do, may develop from our consideration of these topics. Then we may consider the question of the form of presentation: how to make them interpretable to others.

Best, Barrett



DuPlessis to Watten #3

To Barry, 27 October 99

Turbulence indeed! The drama of turbulence and the sense of travelling and writing at the same time is dramatic; I love writing in trains—can revise poems there and do all the time, but there’s something about being in the air that rarely lets me put effective words down. In contrast, I’ll read every junk magazine on board, including hunting and fishing. The last time I was in turbulence, I really thought we were going to have a more serious problem; I had never seen coffee cups do that before, nor people—it was flying from Nice to London this summer. A big storm center over northern France. And then a bright London—toy-ish and green and Wordsworthian clouds—actual view of London landmarks as we circled, including of the great houses in acres of park. It looked like some game of culture I didn’t want to play. Especially having survived another flight, and

about to undertake yet another.

(Is there some significance to the fact that I am playing with, sounds suspicious, turbulent recollections gathered up in relative tranquillity, while you wrote where you actually are?) “Didn’t Want to Play” gets to some primal form of resistance and stubbornness in what I suppose are our mutual answers to questions about our formation. OK. Where am I and where have I been.

You say “singular/collective identity as it’s experienced in historical time.” That last phrase is exquisitely telling, because what the seminar room does is lose the sense of specificities, of actual options and agency, of decisions made within time-dated parameters. “Identity” is never a thing—it is a super-saturated viscous flow and resistant multi-vectored pull of braided forces. Yup—that was a metaphor. But as soon as any feminism lost that, I would move away suspiciously. Influences? the “situationist” George Oppen and the Marxist Raymond Williams.

So here’s some “historical time.” 1967. The fervent and silent anti-war commitment slowly articulated itself in actual action; I identified with Freedom Summer of Civil Rights, but did not participate. 1968: I was teaching as a preceptor at Columbia (27 years old), just a slight edge away from the actual strike (as a “TA” excuse me! though plenty of TA’s were there, inside the buildings, taking them over). The issues built; you could feel them. The contradictions built; you could feel them. Day by day a sense of incipience, a waiting as if for a transformation; an urgency palpable and visceral (inside one’s own private body) and the drumming (also inside oneself) of the emotion Enough—we’ve had enough, we won’t take “it” any more. What was “it”? university based research for the military; secrecy and CIA complicity. The erosion of civil liberties and truth in relation to Vietnam. Every day there were more lies and hypocrisies exposed—the air was pal-

pable with crisis. Did we seem simple? Had we really believed the government? That virtuous earnestness (they were lying! to us!—N.B. the sense of liberal and middle class entitlement) may well have been productive; the assassination of Kennedy and the taint of forever unanswered questions, the trauma of loss (no matter how qualified that figure) all contributed. One flash point at our university was a land grab into a city park, taking territory away from “Harlem,” in the name of “we can use it better than you do; we’re going to build a gym for the university.” Oh boy. The people (student strikers) who took over the buildings were in those buildings for different reasons and they each had a different center of gravity—African-American students; SDS students; long-march through the professions grad students—was it ever destined to “work”? It’s a revolt, surely; it never was a revolution. Who knows how political action precipitates finally—it is a sense you are acting in the name of an all—a collective subjectivity of rectitude, passion, and justice. One felt as if one’s chosen actions (and choosing how and with whom to act was a major ontological and ethical decision!) were simply and transformatively just. It remains true that something of the anti-war movement stopped the war. And something of the Civil Rights movement made changes. It’s also true that both of those movements in the 60s had long laborious and underacknowledged pre-histories, into the 50s, the 40s and—the 30s.

And then—all that repeated again, incredibly quickly, with women: 1968-69-70-71. The same drumming, the same sense of Enough; a parallel set of lies exposed, and oppressions of sexism revealed. Even middle class women—no apologies. When Ann Snitow and I worked on editing The Feminist Memoir Project (work we undertook from about 1992 or 93 to 1998, when it was published), we discussed again and again how to communicate the terrific upsurge of political arousal and its meanings. It

was as if one day you were complicit and simmering, maybe fulminating a little, and the next day you were in full dress resistance and revolt with a bunch of people, apparently emerging from that same “nowhere,” whom you self-consciously and proudly called “sisters.” The day after, you became an organic intellectual, writing pamphlets, making ideological critique, engaging in actions, collecting and analyzing statistics . . . and apparently changing certain words and their implications (like “sisters”). The long unrolling “moment” of claiming historical participation and agency was astonishing to experience and along with it, the educative assumption shifts—seeing new analyses and ideological patterns at every turn often in the deep materials of everyday life. “Women passionately connected with the prevailing apocalyptic atmosphere, the sense of a real ending of an oppressive time. they hoped thrillingly, wildly, even absurdly, and worked for social change with the rare urgency that comes from believing in the immediate possibility of a fundamentally different world” (DuPlessis and Snitow, 7; I also wrote a little about me personally in the anthology edited by Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn called Changing Subjects). This is the collective upsurge that you, in other ways, on other coasts, also spoke of. I don’t know whether I would speak of a “collective subjectivity”—tho I am not trying to mince words with you. A collective project, perhaps. To undo power. To achieve gender justice in the context of social and economic justice.

OK—so what does this have to do with poetry and culture. It was an approach to power with the tools I had. For me, starting with teaching during the Vietnam War, and doing ideological analyses of ad copy and official documents, it was as clear (as it had been opaque before) that culture (cultural products, artifacts, and culture as a mechanism and entity) taught, enforced, and communicated ideology. This seems so assumed now that it is hard

to understand that many of us came to that sense—of being interpellated, called in to, say, the most basic constitutive idioms like gender or class—with a shock of recognition. Of course—my funny biography involves the fact that I went (with Bob) to France in 1970, and thus had to “in isolation” (catch the biographical motif here) work out the implications of feminism by reading the 4-5 books that everyone did read: an amazing list. 1) Sexual Politics by Kate Millett, who had been a colleague in Columbia Women’s Liberation; the book was her dissertation and it had just been published; 2) A Room of One’s Own by Virginia Woolf (do you know—that book wasn’t half as bad as “they” said it was!); 3) your choice of a 19th-century novel—perhaps Jane Eyre, perhaps Middlemarch; 4) Sisterhood Is Powerful, ed. Robin Morgan; and 5) though seriously it wasn’t a big help, The Second Sex. The implications that I worked out were very simple: all culture would have to change, from the ground up. Nothing could stand the way it had stood. My reading of text #6, one of the most generative and productive essays for my generation, “When We Dead Awaken” by Adrienne Rich, only reinforced that conclusion. Although I was a poet, I understood this first for narrative: narrative was an ideological mechanism often of enforced options (marriage or death), and new values meant new forms, in an ongoing process of transformation and striving. Thus the analysis in Writing Beyond the Ending. Then it was clear that one would have to “rediscover” and repropose women writers as coequal cultural producers who might articulate different strategies or meanings in their poetic careers (different from men, that is). Thus H.D.: The Career of That Struggle. I began writing essays (like “For the Etruscans” in 1979) to leverage a genre to assimilate and propose febrile questioning and the multiple vectors of cultural arousal and critique; The Pink Guitar collection came out in 1990. Finally, I understood

that poetry, especially the lyric, would have to be “destroyed.” (Or as I also said “destoryed”). Thereupon Drafts. I don’t mean to ironize all this work by my brisk tone. I just mean to indicate that I saw all this work—critical, scholarly, poetic, polemical, playful, essaying—as intervention into culture as usual, and an attempt to reorganize the terms for our understanding of it; and an attempt to offer different forms and modes of textual engagement that could satisfy (i.e., give some new kinds of pleasure), yet imply resistance and critique.

Damn—maybe I should have written this on an airplane—at least then I would have had a “descent.”

But of course the difference took shape right away; in my resistance to the overly pat simplicities of a good deal (though hardly all) of more identity-based feminist poetry as that formation took shape. I could not myself write (though I could teach respectfully and enthusiastically) a good deal of women’s work in poetry from that period—I will overgeneralize for a minute here: it seemed to skate on the surface, be overly declarative, not really leverage critique into the deep fibers of language, genre, trajectory, and poetic tradition. So I was the site of a double resistance—to main culture as a feminist, and to feminist culture in the name of something else; I couldn’t particularly say everything of what that was—but it had a good deal to do with Oppen and what I understood of Objectivist poetics. (“I was too feminist for the objectivists, too objectivist for the feminists.”) I had no community then—no where to go but into myself. For a number of years, that’s where I was poetically. No book. No audience. No poetic career. No community. No listeners or interlocutors. There were certainly some people out there, but I wasn’t living in any of the centers where those people were (I lived in Trenton, then in Swarthmore, then in Philadelphia, then in Swarthmore). Speak of lonely! When was that? pretty much through the late 60s to the

later 70s. Basically Montemora changed that. (A journal not in the Language mode though in an investigative mode—a site from which Susan Howe also, though only partially, emerged, as she had other filiations.) And there were some cracks, but nothing really changed til that magazine—a very “Objectivist” journal. And then until HOW(ever).

So if I were going to return to the terms of your “over Utah and beyond” fliegende Brief, I would have to say that for me there was a dynamic transformative experience of collective engagement (in feminism), and in the struggle for legitimacy of feminist intellectual work (with Feminist Studies, on which I served for fifteen years in a variety of capacities), at the same time as there was a site of inchoate, unnamed, almost unnameable poetic resistance that played itself out precisely in “radical singularity” (to borrow your term from your flying letter). The thesis/antithesis dialectic between these was incomplete and frayed—there was leakage and spillage; the terms of each were not entirely commensurate. Anyway, that is probably something like my “ethical moment” within cultural work.

Could I take your “ethical moment” as a desire to intervene in “syntax”? That is, in systematic arrangement. To intervene exactly so deeply as to ask that things be put together in a different order—at least to examine the virtually unexamined sutures and multiple play of things. It is the layeredness and cross hatching of Bad History that I admire: the articulation of all the crossings of situatedness. Certainly never consoling: a way of saying THAT WE ARE HERE.

Though I don’t want to add to an already full agenda, perhaps a useful and amusing topic would be the Watten-Zukofsky/DuPlessis-Oppen interplay. I don’t mean versus—playing out the LZ/GO troubles, however one understands those. What I mean is that the Zukofsky connection is as profound for you as the Oppen

one is for me. We could do some interesting work commenting on that.

Talk to you soon I hope, Rachel



DuPlessis to Watten #3A

Dear Barry—Trepworter. 1) Assassinations of RK, MLK, Malcolm sealed in the suspicion and trauma; 2) a very juiced up 60s post to you, as if I’d slept thru post-structuralism; 3) “woman” is not one thing. Never was, for me. Where my “split subjectivity” came from in the POETRY is in a duplicitous, duplessitous relationship to tradition. 4) I would be interested in your LZ and my GO—indeed, I think that is one thing this encounter is MADE FOR. I don’t know why I was so “where I have been” in the post—since no structuring of one’s past is adequate, even to the mini-blips of feeling about it one might have in the present. Anyway, I look forward to the new “official” response.

With warmth, Rachel



Watten to DuPlessis #2

October 31

Dear Rachel:

This morning, after turning the clocks back and resetting the computers, I have an added hour. I will therefore make use of it. Sitting out on a porch in Michigan fall, about 65°, red maple leaves not yet fallen. Asa practicing piano. Thinking of the lines from Zukofsky’s “A”-1:

The next day the reverses
As if the music were only a taunt:
As if it had not kept, flower-cell, liveforever,
er,

before the eyes, perfecting.
—I thought that was finished:
Existence not even subsistence,

Worm eating the bark of the street tree,
Smoke sooting skyscraper chimneys,
That which looked for substitutes, tired,
Ready to give up the ghost in a cellar—
Remembering love in a taxi: [. . .]

Isn't he talking about base/superstructure there? The music taunting, but so that the underlying deprivation must be noticed? The music is not the "substitutes," they have been rejected, along with the moment of "giving it up"—as also that moment in the taxi? Does Bach sublimate eroticism as he wipes out the frail alternatives of the "substitutes," which must be, at the very least, failed poetry? And what you get, as a result, is a practical demonstration of art's potential for ideology critique, in a political bargain—Bach others us, but gives us the terms to identify and reject mere substitutes. Then we can see the worm-eaten bark of the street tree and the smoky chimneys for what they are, our redemption. And, possibly, in return we give up "love in a taxi" as correlative to "giving up the ghost in a cellar." (Better: it is this remembering too that wakes us up.)

These lines from Zukokfsky are etched in my memory, along with particular inflexions that went along with their phrasing from the performance of "A"-24, where they are a part of the "poetry" line of verbal music. That was my part, 1978. I've written on that recently.

What are the ethics of the schwa? I'm thinking about this after having an encounter with Judith Butler this past week. Now there is a practicing ethicist, but one without much sense of the necessity of the aesthetic! Let's say that the aesthetic has been coming back to haunt her, and she is trying to respond to it. Her students are unwilling to simply suspend their aesthetic cultural concerns for the kinds of rights-based gender critique, or gender-based critique of rights, she has so carefully constructed. And she is listening.

The schwa is the necessity of the aesthet-

ic without the possibility of positive claims. And yet it becomes a touchstone of value, a recurrent spring of the word and its transformative potential. Clearly because it has been constructed as such, identified as same.

The same. The schwa is always the same. If it is an aesthetics, it might be an ethics. Zukofsky's difference between "music" and "reverses" condensed—because the schwa unites all vowel tones in the suspension of their differences, is a placeholder (on which all difference is then constructed, becomes perceptible). For differences to be imaginable, there must be a schwa? Did the schwa precede differences, or come later? Did you just make it up?

Gender differences (make that verb: let's do that). For males, let's say "difference" founds gender. I am not like my father. My father insists: I am like him. I appeal to a difference, construct an alternative empire of differences, none of which are like my father. Feminists come along and say, he's created an empire of differences because he is the privileged son. It is his inheritance, his claim to all that is left over from the father's estate. In fact, his claim to all that remains—totality minus the father—is worse, a new monstrosity. A threat to us.

We inherit differently (we do? differently if we are M or F?). It has been a specific shock to encounter, as I have on several occasions, women writers, scholars, and critics with politics that I would recognize who feel that my difference from patriarchy is the site of an even greater political suspiciousness. A scholar of the French Revolution, for instance, who believes that "liberty, equality, fraternity"—the collectivity founded by the revolt of the sons—is an even greater site for domination and subordination of women. Women did better under the ancien regime? Certainly some women did, wielding their significant verbal power in carefully constructed coteries. Certainly, to follow

Gertrude Stein, I would like to see such coterie logics the basis of a democratic politics if I could, but not be mystified by their exclusions.

Red maple leaves falling on my laptop—the aesthetic? Toshiba settles lawsuit for \$1 billion—the political? Inside my laptop is an uncorrected sequencing error that interferes with data transfer during multi-tasking. Critique—consciousness? Change in material circumstances: Toshiba will send me a floppy disk with a program patch. Who gets the rest of the dollars?

Red maple leaves have fallen all over the table. Butler gave a talk on the recent controversy in New York over the “Sensation” show, particularly the painting HolyVirginMary by Chris Ofili. In a public presentation at Wayne State University, in front of administrators who had not once in their lives considered the advantages of fostering a climate of open discourse within a Research I university, she showed effectively how Ofili’s painting leads to questions of cultural difference that must be asked: the mediation of the aesthetic, then, would be the way that universals have to be understood in terms of particular cultural concerns. That seems to be a kind of breakthrough in Butler’s thinking, for which I’m grateful.

Later, at one of those staged reenactments of the Great Conversation, a breakfast with faculty and grad students, I asked: what about a gendered reading as well as a multi-cultural one? Everyone seems to think that the elephant dung (cross-reference to schwa) in Ofili’s painting is a marker of cultural difference. That’s awfully convenient. It turns out that Ofili, rather than being disrespectful of any particular religion, is bringing together two religious traditions: Catholic (Roman Catholic or Anglo-Catholic? technically, the Anglican Church and Rome were reunited about ten years ago: have the journalists been stretching this just to make Italian-American supporters of Giuliani more sympathetic?) and West African, where elephant dung, we are told, has important sacred

functions. And hence, it is no disrespect to associate the Virgin Mary with elephant dung—rather, for Ofili, it is a compliment, and quite a lovely one, if you know how to interpret the cultural codes.

Come on! So I said, why not a gendered critique of Ofili? Butler: and what would that be? Me: the Virgin is an icon of a patriarchal institution, the Church. She represents a plenitude that is the promise of religious faith. She is massive, flowing, and providentially black. But around her are many cut-out vaginas from Western porno magazines. The images of little cunts have been “cut out” from their contexts (women’s bodies). They are lack. The place where the little boy looks, with horror, to see she hasn’t got one. And hence he might not either. You know the routine. The Virgin Mary is surrounded with icons of castration and lack, a cloud of them.

What about the elephant dung? It seems to be a third term in the system, a materiality that does not rest in the system that creates, out of plenitude and lack, the terms for the system that is the patriarchal church. (Is that a controversial assertion, that the church is patriarchal? It may turn out to be.) The elephant dung is neither plenitude reinforced by lack, nor a lack that leads back to the desire for plenitude: it does not support the entire edifice of Western selfhood as predicated on a privileged lack, notably the one the male child experiences and which is returned to patriarchy in the virgin/whore dyad that Ofili seems directly to refer to.

So the dung is, at the very least, not genitally organized in its allure, in a traditional Freudian account. Its position, in that account, would be as a regression to an “earlier” stage of erotic organization, but of course everything that Butler has written on the topic of the construction of gender would go against that. We now would see as possible a construction of gender that is not circumscribed by the pleni-

tude/lack dynamic, and that sees the relation to an object in some other way. Materiality becomes the site of such a different construction.

Not knowing anything about Ofili's sexual orientation (and not needing to), I wondered if he was "queering" the Virgin Mary. That would be a culturally specific act that would, at the same time, not be one of a merely positive appeal to cultural differences. And hence more punishable, dangerous, and patently offensive to believers of all sorts (but certainly protected by the First Amendment).

Butler's response: the Virgin Mary is not simply an icon of plenitude within patriarchal inscription. There has been a lot of scholarship on that. The little vaginas are not negative, but a kind of aesthetic aura surrounding the virgin. They are, thus, her "aura"—and quite beautiful if you know how to see them that way. And the elephant dung remains sacred. A reading predicated on "lack" then would reinscribe patriarchy. Inferred conclusion: the positivity of the feminine, in both plenitude and lack versions, meets cultural difference in an aesthetic politics. And that qualifies my investment in lack, doesn't it, as suspiciously normative.

Well, take for instance the question of gays in the military. The question is not simply how difference and community may be co-constituted, but more, what gays in the military are then going to do with all that hardware and training?

We have a break in continuity, evidently. Refusal in the Vietnam Era merely (and I am convinced this is the ethical debacle that I stumbled into, unfortunately, here) reinforces a system of differences that prohibits other claims. My claim. Is an empire of negativity in itself.

I think of the university at times as the medieval church. Academics are "the brethren." Butler is an excellent interpreter of the rhetorical tradition; here, she has claimed an inheritance.

Not mine. To return to the schwa: is it inheritable, or does it always already exist? And hence that within which we stake our claims, argue our negativity, is a property of the phonic system, a "neutral" and hence not preinscribed cipher of materiality that is the basis of sense. All meaning depends on the schwa, not on Jakobsonian differences of features.

Jakobsonian differences of feathers. Birds are raucously carrying on in yonder trees. They seem, at the moment, all to be saying "fuck off." As do the trees, the houses, the very sky above if you are certain kind of poet. No, that's a delusion. Or maybe it's a phonic survival of your line in Drafts 3: "Well, fuck off." I very much like the way you say that as a woman, Rachel. (Do you think you are saying "fuck off" as a woman?)

Inheritance: we might consider that in relation to Zukofsky and Oppen. How does a feminist inherit without adhering to the propertied system? Is authorship = property?

If we agree that we are, as poets, critics of ideology, what is the place of the aesthetic in that critique? Is it merely necessary labor of presentation to gain interest and assent? I doubt it. What are the "ends" of ideology critique? Is there an "end" to ideology? Is what comes after ideology something like the substitution of one system of differences from another, as with Butler? Or is the necessity of creating, out of whole cloth, a system of differences that has a better result how we should approach the problem? What would be a "good result"?

Best, Barrett



DuPlessis to Watten #4

Hallowe'en night (and then Nov 1st, too, the turn of time). I just got yours of this morning, nice-glowy and golden 31 Oct, the same evening; e-mail is so fast. Well. The poem I think I want to present in this group of materials

is about “materialist strobing” with the phrase at the end “impeded/clarity.” And “constricted seeing.” It is exactly that clarity—impeded by all sorts of materialist strobing—that I want to acknowledge in our work. Impeded is a key word; it is clearly not negative but the matter of what one trips on. To entangle, to fetter, to hinder, to block—“tripped the limen/and got caught” (from “Draft 28: Facing Pages”)—to be in the material world. (I tripped and typed “inpeded.” Well again.)

Which is how I account for the trouble at the heart of poems.

Hard to mark arousal to a justice deferred, easy to show a joy sometimes too patent, that very joy deferring justice

with its own desirable pleasures. (“Draft 28”)

I haven’t seen the Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection show. If I remain true to form, I’ll see it in twenty years! (This joke because we just saw The Seduction of Mimi, by Lina Wertmuller last night; it is a major film, perhaps twenty years old? about gender, Italy, politics, etc., and I want to tell you about it in a minute. Or as it turns out, in a day.) So I don’t want to be like all those sanctimonious folks who create opinions without seeing the work (I did see a tiny depiction on the Bowie website). My woolly mammoth informant (was that man-mouth?), probably the Nation, reminds me that all of Ofili’s works use elephant dung, including works with depictions of enslaved Africans, so that part of his medium does not strike me as insulting along the one-dimensional lines on which most commentary has occurred. (Furthermore, apparently the dung is “dressed” with little pins or beads for a nice design effect.) However, unless Ofili is truly simple (unlikely), he is at least visually bilingual, and to just say about his visual vocabulary “ah well, African” is to play primitivizing games. Since he lives in the art world of

the twentieth century, the possible “ah well, European” take on elephant dung (it’s yucky) can’t have escaped him. So he is surely being somewhat duplicitous—a good thing. Along the same lines, the part of the work that really interests me is the cut-outs of cunts (the cunt-outs, so to speak, or buttocks perhaps) wafting around. How many? to what effect? visibly Playboy? or are they just “shapes” in the background? and how does the viewer see them? just “aesthetically” as shapes, maybe resembling clouds, or as shapes with a pornographic commercial origin (and thereby—what? tainted? insulting? amusing? transcoded?). He might be playing between the juiced up exposures of cunt/plus shots and the technicolor plumpness of putti or clouds. Do the little cunt-outs look like putti? That would be witty: a sort of mommy-baby combo. Do they sacralize the secular? Do they titillate the titular? And what’s the difference between what is so patent and obvious in many works especially of baroque Catholic art—the incredibly sexualized religiosity—and this work of contemporary Catholic art? Whether it’s a sort of orgasmic heave heavenward of a saint or the virgin (Assumption of Mary motif) or the amazing St. Teresa of Bernini on a roll, sexual ecstasy and religious ecstasy are bedfellows in a good deal of Catholic religious art. This is a fact of art history; the visual conventions linking the two are everywhere in such art, art often housed in churches. Which is why the outspoken anti’s are so sanctimonious it’s hard to remember their opinion has “power” if no credibility. If I had to make a “worry” about this show, I’d worry more about the material conditions surrounding rich people that lets them manipulate public museums to validate private collections and improve their market value—a fact, of course, not unique to this show.

So my favorite moment in all this so far was something I didn’t have to see the Sensation show to see. It was a news photo of

a demonstration near the Brooklyn Museum, published in the Philadelphia Inquirer on Sunday, Oct. 3, 1999. Two women's signs were photographed. One said, "Is this the way to treat our Queen?—a bruised petulant question indeed. The second, by far the more interesting, held by Laura Smithward of Cliffside Park, N.J., said, "Paint Mary the way Jesus Sees her." There was a freehand heart drawn on the sign. The issues this raised for me about blasphemy and representation were lively. The holder of this protest sign was claiming to know the way Jesus sees Mary, something even more blasphemous if you believe in these heavenly creatures than if you don't. The apparent internalizing of art-historical conventions of representation as an unquestioned and unquestionable reality stunned me in its confusions of art for "life," of history for mythology, real time for ideology, of invention for eternal verity. The assumption of Jesus's "eye" or gaze into the brain of the artist, as if by pod-substitution or beaming, the transfer of that image unmediated directly onto the page (the Veronica's napkin theory of artist's relation to their medium?), and the knowledge of the correctness of any drawing or painting of Mary by the holder of the picket-sign, gave beliefs in unmediated transparency and ignorance of any convention of representation a new dynamism. Assume, for a minute, that these mythological rubrics exist in the same general format as ourselves: so How does Jesus see Mary? If one can muster any humility at all, the only possible answer is—I don't know.

So here we are, you and I, and our various "companions of the flame," wondering whether we can ever make people see that art objects and poems are not just bizarre delivery systems for ideas and content, though artworks most emphatically make statements—but use media, conventions, genres, histories of their discipline, allusions, and, for poems textures (within language), sounds of words, rhythm, dips into ety-

mology, moves of equivalent words from the axes of selection to the ever-scintillating ever-processual, made on the spot axes of combination with all its syntaxes and a myriad of textual engagements—and we have to procede back to "GO" in this game of Monopoly Capitalism and begin explaining this all over again. Because texts are also statements, and people don't understand representation, but want affirmatively in art to literalize and confirm their most cherished beliefs, not only for themselves (I only have Pretty Queens hanging on My Wall), but for everyone else, too, in an imperial move that I resent beyond being able to express it. —So critical negativity is not a small matter but sort of actionable. (And Ofili's work is not even "negativity"; it is just a little off a norm!). How the hell did we get here—with "capitalism" "fundamentalism" "statism" and general smugness having "won" again?

It's like when the Southern Baptists declared for the conversion of the Jews at Yom Kippur: "Keep Your Hands Off My Apostasy!" I wanted to say. And speak, as we were, of a patriarchal religion (in its origins), or at least a religion that did an expert textual job of hiding and concealing any matriarchal or polytheistic origins—try Judaism. Oi.

My position as "apo—" away from. Standing away from.

When I woke up this morning (Nov. 1st) thinking of this exchange, I had some way of linking this to ethics, that I forgot. Maybe I'll remember.

I feel we are in the middle of a conversation without having had the ten years of beginning.

How did we get here? I mean as 68ers. Well, if The Seduction of Mimi (a man with a female nickname—I think out of La Traviata—but that whole opera allegorizing escaped me) is right, gender played a large role. The sub rosa seduction of "manhood" to abjection and power (the "mafia men" who always have three

beauty marks on their repeated faces), the homosocial network of whom you know and loyalties including loyalty tests and the unfreedom of being bound to those Fathers . . . And Mimi's thinking that sexual "choice" was in the realm of freedom: leaves wife to go with a Botticelli beauty, a free spirit, an "artiste" who bears his "son"; meantime wife does some auto-gestion (learns to drive, goes to work, etc.), but expresses her freedom in sleeping with a sympathetic police officer and getting pregnant. Squaring the circle, for revenge of manhood, Mimi sleeps with the officer's momma-large wife, mother already of five. Three types of woman arrayed, all pregnant; when Mimi is tricked by the Mafia as apparently guilty of shooting the officer (and no one will speak out—as he had not spoken out in his every repeated encounter with the mafia thru the whole film), he comes out of jail needing a job in the organization. And ends up exactly as he said he wouldn't. He has a passel of hungry kids, a nasty mafia job rounding up "votes," and his "true love" leaves him, driving off in a Fellini art-circus-carousel with his "son" and a former friend, a better leftist. Art is a cute little red place on wheels in this film, but it has no leverage. It just seems to wait for its time to help arouse others. But in the film, art is "passive beauty"—a real dish of a woman. All the main characters have gorgeous blue eyes.

Therefore, and I long have concluded this in a zillion ways, just evocations of "beauty" and the realm of the aesthetic as an autonomous space—is of very serious negative implication. It makes certain gendered demands on the folks considered more beautiful and more prone to decorativeness (you know which gender I probably mean); it makes for moments of resolution in art having to do with unexamined norms of mellifluousness, with undisturbed devices, with consumable matter. Since we are going into a period of literary criticism and philosophy where it is clear

this realm "of the aesthetic" is at issue, defended, spoken of with relief as if we can finally throw ourselves back on it, as on a sugar-tit—well—I think here is where the debate will have to be constituted.

This is why I think of Mass-Observation every once in a while as an analogy for what "we" are trying to do. There are a lot of caveats here, including that M-O got detracked from its radical writing for the people aspects and at one point became a tool of market research, and, during the war, a research tool used by agencies of propaganda. Mass-Observation was a cultural movement begun by a poet (Charles Madge) and a sociologist (Humphrey Jennings) in Britain and operated between 1937 and the early 50s. It has been reconstituted now (in the 1980s and 1990s); the archives are held at University of Sussex, and new projects go on with about 500 current volunteers. An early (1937) essay appearing in *New Verse* 24 explicitly connected "Poetic Description and Mass-Observation" and detoxed the elite word poet.

Mass-Observation was (and is) a project of recording everyday life; it invited volunteers to observe their regular life and write on it, sometimes with diaries, sometimes with letters. As the handout on Mass-Observation I received from the current director, Dorothy Sheridan, puts it: "The chosen themes may be very personal (close relationships, clothes, the home, domestic activities, family life, eating and drinking, shopping, employment, household finances) or more public and relating to opinions rather than direct experience: attitudes to war, political events, national and international news. Sometimes they [the directives inviting writing on a certain topic] call for a historical approach (first job, memories of childhood, educational life). Occasionally they [the volunteers] are asked to keep a record of just one day (either an ordinary day or maybe a special one, like a day of celebration)."

You and I are doing something analogous

in this [Philly Talks](#); we have not quite constituted it to talk about “life” but we have chosen to touch on vectors far beyond our specific works. If this were a webpage now it would have links to 1) chris cheek, who tried to do a poetic M-O project about 2 years ago; I would love to hear about the results, as lamentably I didn’t then have time (ugh) to participate. 2) Bernadette Mayer’s intentional projects like [Midwinter Day](#); 3) Ron Silliman’s Balzacian work [The Alphabet](#); 4) your [Bad History](#); 5) my [Drafts](#); 6) Anne Waldman’s [Iovis](#); 7) Robin Blaser’s [Image Nation](#); 8) a lot of other poetry, unnamed. Indeed, one way one can understand the plethora of poetry being written (and the less intense relationship many people who write have to reading poetry) is to view contemporary poetry as a peculiar branch of Mass-Observation that doesn’t know that it is. The directives for that project are that people try to identify how they feel and narrate events important to them (“experiences and opinions” as M-O says). If one could rupture a lot of the romantic and static conventions of a good deal of poetry, and just write what is seen and taken in and found—that archive would really be worth a lot. Now, mind you, I hardly think that we (you, I, etc.) are unselfconsciously achieving “people’s writing.” But we are doing writing that attempts to introject and exemplify a position beyond personal subjectivity. It is as if we are already positioning some kind of collective inside our work, as if we wrote works having been supported by bands of observers, collecting observations from a range of sites. Is this an ethical subjectivity? The subjectivity of “les autres”?

I suppose that the only way to make sure aesthetics in its current resurgence does not lose politics or a connection with “the real, real world” (a phrase Rakosi used in a speech once) is to inflect aesthetics with ethics. I want to figure out what I mean by this. Some helpers along the way:

One could try this (most of a poem) by Oppen:

from distance
in the close
crowd all

that is strange the sources

the wells the poem begins

neither in word
nor meaning but the small
selves haunting

us in the stones and is less

always than that help me I am
of that people the grass

blades touch

and touch in their small

distances the poem
begins

([Primitive](#), “If It All Went Up In Smoke”)

So the tertium quid—neither in word nor meaning—but in the crypt formations (as Maria Torok and Nicholas Abraham say in [The Shell and the Kernel](#)). These crypts and hauntings have a material presence. Points at which political event meets personal trauma, perhaps: the sense of “les autres” inside your “person.” This has a lot of resonance for [Drafts](#). Are the people the grass blades touch the Whitmanic United Statesers? Are they the ones living really bare to the land wherever they are? Are they those buried endlessly in unmarked graves from the multiple genocides recorded in the recently long-gone 20th century? Whoever they are, They are not very far away.

The ethical, as presented in Levinas is about a relationship with others . . . I would say not the Other, as rigidified in some contemporary thought, but two of whom both are in process, and in a reciprocal making, and two leading to others: so the ethical subjectivity is

one engaged with “les autres.” “The self comes into being only by first recognizing its responsibility to others” is the way Peter Nicholls puts it in The Objectivist Nexus article “On Being Ethical”:

Once we think of the ethical in Levinas’s sense at least two consequences follow, both at odds with Poundian modernism. First, a poetics of “encounter” will assume that the domain of the ethical is also the domain of the ordinary and the everyday, of relationships expressing proximity rather than contemplative or legislative distance. . . . Second, the ethical subject is not only open, but vulnerable and in question. Levinas thus speaks of “the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter.”

Nicholls goes on to remark that “sincerity”—one of the main objectivist terms with aura, is “not so much a true account of one’s inner feelings (manifest, then, Pound would say, in precise verbal formulation) as an acceptance of what exceeds the self.” (251-52; incidentally, that latter comment about sincerity, about which I agree, is a criticism of an early article of mine on Oppen and Pound).

When Wittgenstein says famously “Ethics and aesthetics are one,” he says so in the following form, as the third term of a grouped proposition, and he puts the comment in parentheses. As follows:

6.421 It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed.

Ethics are transcendental.

(Ethics and aesthetics are one.)

(Tractatus)

I think, thus, he means the opposite of what we are trying to mean, but he is using the same words that we might want to use. Or might find suggestive; for to say ethics and aesthetics

ARE ONE might really paper over too many fissures and fault lines. Anyway, Wittgenstein is apparently saying the opposite of what I gather Levinas is saying. This has to do with the bracketing of ethics into the realms of the transcendental and the inexpressible. I want (in poetry, in poems) to bring these issues into the realm of the “real, real world” and into the at least provisionally expressible.

The way you riffed out on “Draft 11: Schwa” caused me pleasure and glee, Barry; you almost make me unhappy that I want to pick something else, something more recent, to publish here. (People can find it in the “blue” Drafts or in Peter Baker’s anthology Onward; if Louis Cabri has page limits, maybe it will end up here, anyway.) You don’t really need me to tell you solemnly what I meant by the choice of that “duh” vocalic as the title—it is the half-spoken, half-swallowed syllable, the one that doesn’t count, the trace, the little, the thing without entitlement (the “le” of entitlement is the schwa sound), the pinhole opening. Through which much can be seen.

Ah gender gender gender gender gender. We inherit differently. Sometimes we do. We inherit the same. Sometimes we do. Some feminists are foolish (like your *liberté, égalité, fraternité* person). Of course. Some men who don’t see layers of implicated privilege are foolish. Of course. I am sure some men feel sometimes caught in this “you say tomAYto” when “I say toMAHto” game; nonetheless positionality of a statement’s speaker can indeed matter. I have been raked over the coals by a dear friend for choosing a selective list of women to mention, and neglecting someone she thought needed mentioning; I was pissed (doesn’t this person understand what an example is!) and chastened at once. I skimmed an article by Steve McCafferey on Levinas—he has a long half-abashed footnote about how the writers he has chosen to speak of under the Levinasian rubric are all men (Burroughs, Antin, Cage,

Phillips). How abashed is half-abashed? Which half? I'd rather struggle over gender saturations than treat gender as a hot potato, so we would need to agree that there's plenty of damn foolishness everywhere, but none of it is so definitive that we would end the "feminism of reception"—by which I mean not trying to impose gender ideas on an artist in production but maintaining all gender alertness in reception. Let's also agree that gender is only one social power factor in a field of other factors. Try to keep them all in play. I dare you! (I dare me!) Thus Denise Riley is infinitely quotable at moments such as these: on the last page of "Am I That Name?": Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History (1988):

To be, or not to be, "a woman"; to write or not "as a woman"; to espouse and egalitarianism which sees sexed manifestations as blocks on the road to full democracy; to love theories of difference which don't anticipate their own dissolution: these uncertainties are rehearsed endlessly in the history of feminism, and fought through within feminist-influenced politics. That "women" is indeterminate and impossible is no cause for lament. It is what makes feminism; which has hardly been an indiscriminate embrace anyway of the fragilities and peculiarities of the category. What these do demand is a willingness, at times, to shred this "women" to bits—to develop a speed, foxiness, versatility. The temporalities of "women" are like the missing middle term of Aristotelian logic; while it's impossible to thoroughly be a woman, it's also impossible never to be one. (113-14)

There's your foxiness; there's your rhetorical "bisexuality" (as an aesthetic-ethical engagement): there are your little "Foxes" . . .

So—it is a grand theory of elephant dung you get to at the end—a materiality neither lack

nor plenitude, but the material embodiment of that general economy of flux, necessity, and babble (flux, calme, et volupté?) that the aforementioned McCaffery proposed, that the soon-to-be mentioned Roland Barthes proposed (text of bliss—that is, of loss, discomfort, unsettling, shock, and loss). But materiality (the term of anality) is always mixed up, messed up with oedipality and gender—there's no backward move, I would think. I don't anyway think there's a materiality that exists apart from gender. Maybe that's because I have recently reread Jonathan Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room"—a masterpiece of writing about shit. I think that the traces of anality would be marvelously interesting to discuss in writing—and not only in Swift.

And as you exit, with the question "how does a feminist inherit . . ." one says, as if a new punchline to the joke about the 600-pound gorilla—"carefully, very carefully." A resistant, apocodic carefulness is one of my main relations to everything I have inherited; the other side of that is recklessness. Per — verse —an intensified turn from the turn of verse. So in "Draft 3: Of" (one of the donor drafts to "Draft 41: Of This") I probably was saying "fuck off" as a woman; or I might have said it as a poet. Or as a voice.

That's it. Rachel



Watten to DuPlessis #3

November 5

Dear Rachel:

This.

Time window. I have exactly the amount of time that it will take to write this (directly onto page masters in typeset columns) before I need to send it off. But as you say, we have accomplished what we set out to do: open the terms of a discussion.

Woman Poet has been here for a reading,

to-morrow night, a benefit, I hope, for the students of Wayne State University. Teaching the literature of the 30s and introducing her to the class. Today's topic: poetry and the politics of the Popular Front. Examples from the New Masses anthology, hardly the ethical equivalent of Mass-Observation. Kenneth Fearing's "Dirge": "And wow he died as wow he lived, going whop to the office and blooie home to sleep. . . ." Reading Maxwell Bodenheim's hysterical period piece, "To a Revolutionary Girl," in front of the visiting Woman Poet, whom I thereafter see as an inheritor of the Popular Front, bridging the gap between mass culture and the postmodern. I wonder if (or why or when) she would agree.

You are a girl,
A revolutionist, a worker
Sworn to give the last, undaunted jerk
Of your body and every atom
Of your mind and heart
To every other worker
In the slow, hard fight
That leads to the barricade, to victory
Over the ruling swine.
Yet, in the softer regions of your heart,
The shut-off, personal, illogical
Disturbance of your mind,
You long for crumpled 'kerchiefs, notes
Of nonsense understood
Only by a lover [. . .]

There is a serious point to this pathetic anachronism, which I'm not sure came out in class: the relation of revolutionary fantasy to deep personal need (or why do we write a poem?). Yesterday, sitting around the table looking at the poetry in her substantial MS, tentatively titled "The Sleep That Changes Everything." The question: is this the right title? Later I fall asleep and dream a new title: "A Socialist Birthday Card," or perhaps "Socialist Birthday Greetings." On waking, I tell Woman Poet and request, at least, that she write me a

poem with that title. She agrees, with enthusiasm: "Yes!"

"A Socialist Birthday Card" could be the solution to our dilemma, it could be "what we want." And not merely what we want in the form of recognition, as in the title of John F. Peto's trompe l'oeil painting, The Cup We All Race 4. I have often wondered about that "4," why its attenuation is so a propos. So reduced as an ethical maxim—you got what you wanted, so aren't you happy? Wasn't that enough? Surely, you aren't going to ask for more?

Last year, visiting the grave of Karl Marx at Highgate Cemetary in London—I have tried to tell a number of friends and others about this. It was as if a giant fist had broken through the Siberian permafrost under an ice-blue sky. That fist was Marx. The energetics of such a release from oppression, for all humanity, would be tremendous. I weep for all who had wanted to direct the course of their lives toward that release: their failure. It is a deep identification. We missed our flight as a result.

In your discussion of the feminist politics of the late 60s and 70s, I see the same kind of release. How to factor that in to the sources of the impulse to make art? It cannot be denied as a part of the energetics that creates whatever sublated or hallucinatory overtones we may associate with the experience of the aesthetic. The release from oppression. It is a new world, and we are (as if) the makers of it. I want to make a strong claim here: that that aspect of poetry or art that takes its motive and form from the recognition and imagined amelioration of oppression has not been granted its proper place in the manuals of postmodern aesthetics. Form is a sublation of a transformative wish, even if always in part. The famous moment of contingency in the modern—is this not an alternative to containment by the already existing, the classical model, the pregiven?

Progress.

Under erasure.

Here is where the obduracy of particulars enters in, at the limits where the wish is turned back. The self-construction of those limits as an ethics, or even the paranoid displacement of the self at the limits of the wish. How much of form in the writing of the 70s, that post-transformative period in which we both engaged our proper tasks, was a sustained meditation and enactment of an ethics of a deferred wish—which might have been, you know, untenable and destructive. A total wish possibly equivalent to the nonexistence that would totally contain it.

Mass-Observation in the present discussion becomes, retrospectively, a kind of systematic articulation of the aesthetic in relation to the possibility of a wished-for release. But it is turned back, needs to verify its desires in terms of that grand English concept, the empirical world. We had better ask nature, first, if it is all right to construct a new world out of the ashes of the old, to enact our wish. But nature never answers back: where do we find ourselves? Recognition, at the moment it cannot be obtained or is denied, is spread out all over—it is no longer the strained demand of the isolated soul, but demands the strenuous application of a method. (Thinking of Marcia Nardi and her drama of recognition: an act of authorship that was just as powerful as the success of Dr. P.,—who gave her recognition perhaps, exactly to the extent that poetry was unobtainable for her, thus making her, as negative, object of his poem.) As with magic crystals spread out all over, the entire world is recognized as identical to the one where we struggle with no recognition. It was a mere oversight that we could not see this, but now that we do: a distributed apperception. All the eyes see the other eyes seeing. And they write it down: it is the record of our witnessing.

It is no accident that the turn to the conceptual in art occurred at a particular historical moment.

There are a number of texts, agreed, that

take on such a task of distribution and witnessing. They are as if an index of the task of our time, the nearly impossible, heroic labor of remaining conscious in the face of that which will render us into nothing. That which interpellates us into predicted responses to our circumstances, our limited options, our increasing need, our redundancy, our incapacity not only to see around the corner but to see what is front of our faces. And so we write a monument. Marx breaks through the permafrost, and we create a record of the kind of knowledge our present condition denies. This is a necessary act. And yet . . .

What possibly could I say against this? I have been impressed above with a monumentality that many would regard as sentimental. A return. I want that return. I should be patient with my friends.

And offer them a socialist birthday card: “Prove to me now that you have finally undermined/ your heroes. In fits of distraction, the walls cover/ themselves with portraits. Types are not men.”

I am interested, as well, in the moment of address in Kenneth Fearing. Not the ethical precision of either Oppen or Zukofsky, but something readable in terms of a response to the dynamics I am tracing. Fearing is in a bad dialogue, all right, with history, which for an American never answers back. His oppression aligns with his own ethical stakes in the fate of a wish that (necessarily?) will be turned back. Perhaps it was his fault all along. He should have anticipated that. Anticipation, it turns out, preceded him, and it was everywhere, lurking in the alleys with the idiotic grin of strike-breaking thugs, the inevitable, the material. So in “1933”:

You heard the gentleman, with automatic precision, speak the truth.

Cheers. Triumph.

And then mechanically it followed the gen-

tleman lied.

Deafening applause. Flashlights, cameras,
microphones. Floral tribute. Cheers.

Down Mrs. Hogan's alley, your hand with
others reaching among the ashes, cin-
ders, scrapiron, garbage, you find the
rib of sirloin wrapped in papal docu-
ments. Snatched it. Yours by right, the
title clear.

Looked up. Saw lips move in the head
thrust in the museum:
"Unconstitutional." [...]

Interesting that we get the fantasy of the
return to the material at the moment of being
turned back, by a "gentleman" who hogs the
microphone over which we would deliver our
redemptive address, to ameliorate all suffering
(fantasy of? return to? the comforts of?). The
gentleman, of course, has no personality, is not
open to us but repeats endlessly, automatically.
Is aligned with nature as denial, ateleological,
unhomelike. And so we are left in "Mrs.
Hogan's alley" with only scraps of sirloin steak
and no method. Not only that: perhaps our work
will appear in a major museum some day, with
the obscenity of citing the "papal document"
completely alienated from us and our transfor-
mative wish, which has been ruled "unconstitu-
tional," even given the protections of the First
Amendment.

Does Fearing provide the first record of a
fantasy of a punishable obscenity in American
poetry? The dynamics I am outlining here are
at the limit of the question of recognition. If all
transformative labor is reintroduced into the
category of the aesthetic, our beautiful rage will
become a museum piece and we are alienated
from it to eternity. We should, if we are wise,
accept that moment as the necessary condition
of our work—in a way that Fearing, as a bad
(and fearful) exemplar, refused to do. Isn't that
what makes Zukofsky and Oppen preeminent

aesthetic exemplars for the both of us? That
their transformative ends are sublated into an
ethics of the text, with its radical acceptance of
particularity? An acceptance that becomes the
politics that are denied in other terms. And to
the list of works you name could be added
numerous others: an ethics of particularly in a
deferred unfolding: literariness.

So our beautiful rage becomes a moment
of cultural articulation, and "Disappointments
raised whose opera glasses?"—just as Ofili's
elephant dung turns into a mere moment of cul-
tural difference. (I am not, parenthetically, doing
the work of gender to propose any final, non-
genitally organized term. Heaven forbid! We're
talking about that which is not normally thought
of as aesthetic, elephant dung. The foxes are
neutral because they protest gender, don't
want to prefigured in its containments, not for
any positive goal of a bisexual alternative poli-
ty.)

Two models: the individual articulated in
the collective unfolding of the transformative
wish; the release from oppression and its turn-
ing back into materiality (or method). The per-
sonal as the site for the political; the obdurate
as the index of our need for release. I want a
figure for that frustration, as an index to? I want
an unfolding, not a mere totalizing. Alongside
Zukofsky's grand design, the necessarily self-
authored self-destructiveness of Fearing.

(Funny that I was thinking of Francis Jaffer
off and on while writing this.)

Total syntax. Socialist birthday greetings to
you, Rachel.

Best, Barrett