

[L]et's first explode any notion of collective self-designation. Beyond a labelling tag, what could it possibly (and precisely) consist of? No single origin or destination or dominant style or ideology marks this diverse body of radical, or radial, eccentricities. And its very heterogeneity, its swirl of concerns, is what gives it some insurance against a reductionist reception. (Andrews/Bernstein 1989, 44)

Andrews and Bernstein convey their reluctance to accept the impasse of misidentification through the trope of exploding the proper name 'Language' poetry as a shared means of collective self-designation and self-identification. What is implied in the metaphor of explosion is not so much a sense of social particularization as an atomization of individual poets. Andrews and Bernstein's notion of a "swirl of concerns" rather conveys the dynamic negotiation of both centripetal and centrifugal forces that are understood to shape an individual poet's Language identity, as it were, in their view. Andrews and Bernstein refer, on the one hand, to those forces that bind together the nameable social body of Language poets and, on the other hand, to those forces that open this very body up so as to contain and accommodate instances of nonconformity. To conclude, as far as strategies of self-designation and self-identification are concerned, the status of Language poetry's groupness might best be described in terms of a social sense of belonging that not only tolerates but even endorses individual acts of *un*belonging.

6.2 The Duncan/Watten Debat/cl/e

The debate surrounding the 1978 memorial event for, the then only recently deceased, Louis Zukofsky, which took place in San Francisco on December 8 of the same year, represents a catalytic moment in the early history of Language poetry. The event was hosted at the San Francisco Art Institute and was sponsored by the Poetry Center at San Francisco State University. It was organized by Tom Mandel, the new director of the Poetry Center at the time. The proceedings of the evening sparked controversy in the poetry scene of the Bay Area in the subsequent weeks and months and well thereafter. The Duncan/Watten debat/cl/e has ever since become intimately associated with Language poetry's initiation into the broader public eye during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The narrative skeleton, as it were, of the various recounts of the Zukofsky tribute is tied to the program for the evening as scheduled by

Mandel.²⁹⁶ Upon some opening remarks by the organizer, Robert Duncan introduced the audience to Zukofsky via Richard Moore's 1966 National Educational Television documentary on the late poet.²⁹⁷ A screening of selected film material from the documentary and behind-the-scenes footage followed. After the screening, Barrett Watten and Duncan were, in this order, set to conclude the tribute with their respective talks. However, Watten's talk on Zukofsky's *Catullus* (1969) was interrupted several times in a rather rude manner by some of the audience members, first and foremost by Duncan. Mounting the podium while it was still Watten's turn to speak, Duncan contemptuously dismissed Watten's reading of Zukofsky. In an impromptu performance/reading of the last poem "Zinnia" from Zukofsky's *80 Flowers* (1978), Duncan was adamant to refute in front of the audience what he perceived as an illegitimate reading of Zukofsky's poetry on Watten's part.²⁹⁸ Watten tried to resume his talk after Duncan's interruption but soon let the audience know that he would not be able to stick with what he had originally planned to discuss in his manuscript. He eventually closed rather abruptly. Duncan finally retook the stage to conclude the evening with his talk.

In a 2003 interview, Carla Harryman recalls the events of the evening from her perspective. She describes the specifics of Duncan's interruption of Watten as follows:

Barrett started talking and Duncan became hysterical, jumped up and went over to the speaker's area, and started jumping up and down in this histrionic manner, which some people loved and other people were irritated by. Then he read from [Zukofsky's last book, *80 Flowers*]. Barrett tried to retake the floor, I think rather adamantly, but I'm not sure about this part: my account of this could be unreliable. At the time, it just seemed unbelievably cruel and

²⁹⁶ The most detailed account of the schedule as planned by Mandel is provided in Watten's blog post "Three Tests of Zukofsky" (2004). Watten recalls the schedule as follows: "Tom Mandel, then director of the Poetry Center, had asked Duncan, as the major promulgator of Zukofsky and guiding light of the Poetry Center from the 1950s on, and myself as a reader of Zukofsky from a new and differently politicized generation, to participate in a memorial event. At a meeting the day before [...], we agreed that the event would begin with a screening of the NET film outtakes of Zukofsky, to be introduced by Duncan, I would make my presentation, and Duncan would follow" (2004).

²⁹⁷ The event was announced as "An Evening with Louis Zukofsky for a Sharing of the Out-takes [sic]" (see Jarnot 2012, 362). The title of the Zukofsky documentary, filmed March 16, 1966, in Moore's twelve-part *U.S.A. Poetry* series is *U.S.A. Poetry: Louis Zukofsky* (see Quartermain 1992, 210n27; Scroggins 2007, 463).

²⁹⁸ In her Duncan biography, Lisa Jarnot states that Watten's talk was "[a]t various points [...] interrupted by audience members' comments and questions, with Duncan and poet Larry Eigner being the primary interjectors. Watten also competed with the noise from a neighboring venue, and at one point someone in the audience shouted 'Speak into the mic; the punk rockers are drowning you out'" (2012, 362). Watten remembers that his politicized reading of Zukofsky "clearly resonated negatively with Duncan and George Oppen, seated in the first row" (2004).

small-minded and my feelings get in the way of some of my recollections. Also, Duncan's performance values were silly. The fact that he could be cruel, small-minded and un compelling as a performer and still get a chunk of the audience to cheer him lowered my esteem for the world I live in ... Duncan was focused on trying to humiliate Barrett through his hieratic public voice. Of course, he wanted to keep his power in a manner consistent with the vicious m.o. of his scene. It was ugly. At the same time, Barrett was no mere victim: he was approaching Zukofsky on his own terms. And, I suppose, it's these terms, either way, that are finally of interest. (Harryman qtd. in Salvato 2010, 119)

The interruption of Watten's talk by audience members, most forcefully by Duncan himself, is presented here as an abominable act of symbolic violence. Duncan's behavior is cast in such pejorative terms as "histrionic," "hysterical," "unbelievably cruel and small-minded." This kind of behavior constituted an efficacious means of silencing Watten on multiple levels, Harryman implies. Following Harryman, the stakes of the heated debate resided, in a very concrete and in a figurative sense, in the control over the speaking floor. Without elaborating on the arguments of the debate, her eyewitness account makes palpable the extent to which the struggle over the speaking floor must also be seen in more abstract terms as a power struggle over legitimacy in the field of American poetry of the 1970s and 1980s. In other words, what was at stake, as Harryman's account suggests, was not only Watten's right to take his turn at a public poetry-related event; it was also and above all the legitimacy of Watten's reading of Zukofsky. This question of legitimacy goes hand in hand with the question of the authority of, again, both literally and figuratively speaking, Duncan's voice. As Harryman casts the silencing of Watten into an act of public humiliation, she reveals that the terms of the debate revolved around a conflict between two different (read: competing, conflicting) types of habitus. The difference in habitus was essentially one in *modus operandi*, according to Harryman: Therefore, Duncan's "hysterical," "cruel," "small-minded," "un compelling," and "vicious" behavior is contrasted with Watten's composure and his "adaman[t]" insistence to retake the floor from Duncan. Watten's act of defiance hit the nerve of Harryman's narrated I at the time, she recalls. She admits to having secretly condemned Duncan's scare tactics and unmasks what she then perceived as the complicity of the audience in Watten's public humiliation.

It is certainly noteworthy that Harryman brackets her own account of Watten's attempt to regain control of the situation and to reclaim his right to speak that evening with a caveat. She asserts that her memories about Watten's reaction to Duncan's spectacle might be tainted by unreliability. Considering her admittedly biased enunciative perspective, Harryman's remark that Watten "was no mere victim" reveals her own claim to authority over the meaning of the event. Her narrative of that evening counters

narratives of Watten's victimization in two ways: firstly, by insisting on Watten's allegedly unirritated attempts at self-authorization and, secondly, as well as more importantly, by defending Watten's reading of Zukofsky as an approach in its own right.

In the following, I want to take a closer look at different accounts of the evening in order to chronicle the debate that surrounded the now infamous Zukofsky tribute. I consciously refrain here from providing a full transcript in order to present it as the one true account of events.²⁹⁹ The reason is that I am precisely and primarily interested in the potential for misrepresentation and misunderstanding that testimony and hearsay bear. This difference between, in ontological terms, reality and appearance is crucial for my own discussion of the event. Put differently, I am as much and perhaps even more interested in the myth(s) created around the 1978 Zukofsky memorial event than in the event itself. As myths, the different (read: competing, conflicting, contradictory) narratives can be traced back, as I would argue, to the structure of positions in the field of poetry of the time; they remain tied to the positions from which they emerge. Firstly, I will look at why and how the publication of David Levi Strauss's article "On Duncan & Zukofsky on Film, Traces Now and Then" (1984) provoked a series of furious responses in the pages of *Poetry Flash* and beyond and thus stirred up the controversy anew some six years after the event. This is all the more astounding since Levi Strauss's article treats the infamous fallout between Duncan and Watten after the fact. A testament to the controversy that has been called a "San Francisco Bay Area Poetry War" (see Sloan 1985) is Ron Silliman's response to the Levi Strauss article, published in the July 1984 issue of *Poetry Flash*. Furthermore, I will turn to Watten's own account of the evening as presented in "Three Tests of Zukofsky" (2004), a website post on his homepage at Wayne State University.³⁰⁰ Finally, Tom

²⁹⁹ There are two audio recordings available in public archives in the U.S.: one at the Poetry Center at San Francisco State University and the other at the Poetry Collection of the University at Buffalo Libraries (see Jarnot 2012, 493n5). As of 2013, there has been made available an electronic MP3 version in the David Levi Strauss Collection hosted at the PennSound website (see "Louis Zukofsky"). In his recent Zukofsky biography, Mark Scroggins provides a detailed account of the events of the evening with verbatim quotations from Duncan's talk (see Scroggins 2007, 464-5). Scroggins's account combines reports from a variety of sources: among others, an article by David Levi Strauss, a student of Duncan's, published six years after the event in *Poetry Flash*; an article by De Villo Sloan published in *Sagetrieb* in 1985; and Watten's "Three Tests of Zukofsky"; as well as telephone interviews and personal emails to the author (see Scroggins 2007, 554n15). De Villo Sloan's article is perhaps the most comprehensive written account of the debate because he includes full-length quotes from various sources into his article (see Sloan 1985).

³⁰⁰ "Three Tests of Zukofsky" is the third post in a series of posts starting in 2004 titled "1-Year Plan" which were published on Watten's homepage at Wayne State University. Watten conceives of the posts as "a writing project that [...] take[s] place in time, on a

Mandel's retrospective comments on the events of the evening provided in the fourth volume of *The Grand Piano* deserve closer attention.

My claim is, in short, that the debate surrounding the 1978 Zukofsky memorial at the San Francisco Art Institute represents a formative, if not *the* formative, event in the early history of Language poetry both in terms of strategies of self-identification and in terms of strategies of hetero-identification. The head-to-head situation between Duncan and Watten can be read as a small-scale reenactment of the clash between the consecrated avant-garde, namely the aged New American poets, and the emerging new avant-garde, that is, the Language poets, in the local arena of a memorial event for Zukofsky at a San Francisco venue. Correspondingly, Watten's struggles to retake the floor from the veteran New American poet Robert Duncan can be seen as mirroring Language poetry's initiation (both in the sense of claiming a position and in the sense of being assigned a position by others) into the role of the new avant-garde in the field of American poetry of the 1970s and 1980s.

As has already been mentioned above, *Poetry Flash* put the Duncan/Watten fallout back on the agenda of the San Francisco poetry community some six years after the infamous face-off between the two poets on the occasion of the Zukofsky memorial. In its June 1984 issue, the magazine ran a commentary by David Levi Strauss, a student of Duncan's in the Poetics Program at New College of California in San Francisco from 1980 to 1983.³⁰¹ In keeping with *Poetry Flash*'s purpose as a poetry calendar for the Bay Area, Levi Strauss's article is pitched as an advertisement for an upcoming event organized by the San Francisco Art Institute and scheduled for June 3, 1984 at the San Francisco Cinematheque: namely, the screening of two NET documentaries from Richard Moore's *U.S.A. Poetry* series together with the outtakes, one on Duncan and the other one, already well known to the Bay community from the 1978 memorial event, on Zukofsky.³⁰² The screening was part of the "Poets on Film" series during the spring and summer of 1984 hosted at the Cinematheque featuring, among others, such poetic heavyweights as Ezra Pound and Frank O'Hara.

regular basis, and that [...] publish[es] its findings on the internet" (2004). The last post on the website is from September 2007. Watten's personal homepage, barrettwatten.net, which also hosts material from his WSU homepage, was launched in January 2010 and has been updated regularly ever since (see Watten 2010).

³⁰¹ The editors of *Poetry Flash* introduce Levi Strauss as "the editor of *ACTS* [i.e. *ACTS: A Journal of New Writing*]" and "the writer of a preliminary approach to *80 Flowers*" (qtd. in Levi Strauss 1984, 10).

³⁰² The Duncan documentary is the first installment of the *U.S.A. Poetry* series made for National Educational Television. The documentary on Duncan was – like the subsequent installment of the twelve-part series, namely the documentary on Zukofsky – produced by KQED, San Francisco's public television station, and interviewed by Richard Moore. The Duncan documentary was filmed on November 2, 1965 (see Johnston 2002, 95).

Levi Strauss's article can be subdivided roughly into two parts of equal length. The first part opens with a positive review of the two documentaries in technical terms. Levi Strauss discusses the modes of filmic representation of the two poets as far as production and journalistic approach are concerned. He praises Moore stating that "[t]he filming is competent and relatively passive" so that "[i]n both cases the poet is centrally framed and allowed to speak for himself, though prompted now and then by the interviewer, Richard Moore" (1984, 5). He also points towards the significance of Moore's choice of the poets' homes as a more intimate setting for the interviews. Besides, Levi Strauss engages with the poets' demeanor in front of the camera as well as in the outtakes. His commentary on Duncan and Zukofsky reads like a homage to the two poets and their auratic presence on screen. He muses, for instance, about Duncan's flow of speech and calls him "an incurably *projective* talker" (5; original emphasis) invoking, of course, Olson's speech-based poetics as a model. The peculiar impression that Zukofsky's reading of his own poetry leaves on the viewer of the documentary is also described by Levi Strauss in rather striking terms: "He fills the frame, all eyes and eyebrows, leaning into song – a prickly intelligence with a certain insect-like charm" (5).

Midway through his article, Levi Strauss abruptly shifts attention from the two documentaries and the occasion of their upcoming screening. He takes a look back at the Zukofsky memorial event six years prior. This event, Levi Strauss states in retrospect, "proved to be an occasion for the airing of two very different approaches to Zukofsky's work" (10). The fallout between Duncan and Watten is thus read as a clash of interpretive methodologies. Levi Strauss's eyewitness account of Watten's reading of Zukofsky is biased to the extent that he clearly attacks the legitimacy of Watten's approach. He describes Watten's presentation as follows:

He [i.e. Barrett Watten] then went on to perform an operation on parts of 'A,' separating the poem into so many discrete parts that any hope of integration was lost. He spoke of the conic section as a fixed formal model for one part of the poem. He said Zukofsky was 'trying to invent a language using a mathematically derived model.' Commenting on technical difficulties with the opaque projector he was using to project the text, Watten at one point said, 'This is very crude mechanical access.' Many of us thought he was describing his approach to Zukofsky. [...]

In retrospect, Watten's talk was perhaps well-meaning, but so tediously tendentious and *closed* that it did do real violence to the work at hand. (Levi Strauss 1984, 10; original emphasis)

Levi Strauss presents Watten's reading of Zukofsky's poem in terms of an exegetic procedure of medical precision that is imposed, if not to say forced, onto the text. The central element of Watten's approach is, according to Levi Strauss, the dissection of the poem into small segments. The

stigma of Watten's reading hinges precisely on these two aspects in Levi Strauss's account: Firstly, it is presented as an extrinsic approach whose method of fragmentation is exercised on the poetic text and, secondly, it is for this very reason disqualified as an illegitimate approach that undermines the notion of the poem as an aesthetic whole.

The pun on the notion of "crude mechanical access" is a key element in Levi Strauss's trenchant critique of Watten's approach. Watten's intended meaning of the phrase as a reference to the circumstantial technical difficulties in visualizing his reading with the help of the equipment available at the San Francisco Art Institute is stated by Levi Strauss only for the purpose of exploiting it for his own critique. In this sense, "crude mechanical access" becomes an indication of Watten's misguided approach towards reading Zukofsky in more general terms. What is more, Levi Strauss marks his judgment on Watten's approach as the unspoken verdict of a collective that was present at the event: "Many of us thought," he writes thereby marginalizing Watten as the odd man out among a united audience of like-minded peers. The epithets 'mechanical' and 'mathematical' hence become marks of negative distinction employed by Levi Strauss with a specific agenda: namely, of exerting symbolic violence on Watten. These stigmas are meant to convey the "real violence" that Watten's "closed" reading is supposed to have inflicted upon Zukofsky's poetry.

It is small wonder that Duncan's fiery speech after the interruption of Watten's talk and the seizure of the podium is presented by Levi Strauss as a rescue of Zukofsky's work from the injustice done to Zukofsky on the part of Watten: "Duncan launched," Levi Strauss writes, "into a furiously impassioned defense of Zukofsky's last book" (10). Duncan's impromptu interpretation of "Zinnia," the last poem from Zukofsky's *80 Flowers*, is accordingly stylized as a welcome and necessary corrective to Watten's reading of *A*. Levi Strauss praises it as "truly exploratory," "the most extraordinary display of an active poetics dis-covering [sic], opening up a specific text I'd ever seen" (10). The adverb 'truly' is of special significance in this context because it signals the extent to which Levi Strauss draws an evaluative distinction between Watten's fashionable and pretentious pseudoanalysis of Zukofsky's poetry and Duncan's approach. While Watten's reading only pretends to offer new insights into the Zukofsky poem by computing mechanically its formal and structural madeness, Levi Strauss insinuates, Duncan's integrative approach represents the genuinely illuminating and thus the only permissible one. True exploration and discovery in Levi Strauss's sense are achieved by opening the text up from within *à la* Duncan rather than cutting it up from without *à la* Watten.

The editors of *Poetry Flash* were obviously very much aware of the potential for controversy that Levi Strauss's article yielded with its retrospect on the 1978 Zukofsky memorial event. This is probably why they decided to add an "Editor's Note" in bold print below Levi Strauss's text. "POETRY

FLASH realizes,” it reads, “that this is just one side of the story, and it seems odd to bring it up after almost six years. But the debate sparked by the showing of these films was a crucial turning point for many present at that time” (“Editor’s Note,” 10). The editors therefore encourage their readership to respond to the Levi Strauss article vowing that the responses will be printed in the follow-up issue of *Poetry Flash* in July 1984 “in the interests of fairness and dialogue” (10), as they assure.

As far as length and intricacy of argumentation are concerned, Ron Silliman’s letter to the editors stands out from the set of, in total three, responses printed in the July follow-up issue.³⁰³ Silliman’s response to the Levi Strauss article opens with a public reprimand of the editors of *Poetry Flash* which makes clear that his own view of the goings-on at the Zukofsky memorial event in 1978 is adamantly opposed to Levi Strauss’s account. “How can *Poetry Flash*,” Silliman asks, “print an article which actually valorizes censorship?! [sic]” (1984, 7). What Silliman’s reproach to the editors of the San Francisco magazine suggests is that he feels obliged to publicly expose Duncan’s interruption of Watten at the event in question for what it really was – and this all the more so after Levi Strauss has purportedly failed to acknowledge it as such in his account. It was, in Silliman’s view, a condemnable act of symbolic violence. Silliman writes:

I have been going to two or more readings a week now for some 21 years, a total of more than 2,000 poetry events. I have *never* felt more embarrassed for a performer’s sheer loss of judgment as I did for Robert Duncan on that evening. [...]

Watten was never permitted to give this talk. Duncan’s seizure of the stage prevented that. This was literally an act of censorship conducted in front of an audience of 100 or more people, most of whom were appalled at this blatant display of egoism. (Silliman 1984, 7; original emphasis)

Levi Strauss’s emplotment of Duncan’s behavior as an honorable intervention aimed at rescuing Zukofsky from Watten’s approach can be juxtaposed with Silliman’s counternarrative of Duncan’s “sheer loss of judgment.” Silliman unmaskes Duncan’s retake of the stage as an authoritative move by the veteran New American poet calculated to flaunt his “egoism” by way of suppressing the perceived heresy of the newcomer Watten. Silliman calls out Duncan’s breach of (academic) etiquette as a gesture of enforced silencing and justifies the authority of his own judgment in a counternarrative to Levi Strauss’s version of events.

For this very purpose, Silliman inserts the Zukofsky memorial into a long series of eyewitnessed poetry events on his part that spans more than

³⁰³ The other two responses were written, in the order of their printing in the section, by Jacqueline Cantwell and Stephen Rodefer. Both Cantwell and Rodefer authenticate their accounts by foregrounding their status as eyewitnesses to the Zukofsky memorial event and expose the rudeness of Duncan’s behavior towards Watten.

two decades of his career as a poet. Similar to Levi Strauss, Silliman also claims to speak on behalf of the majority of those present on the occasion. The embarrassment he articulates is thus emplotted not only as a personal feeling of outrage but also as a practice of collective indignation directed at Duncan and his circle of supporters. As a consequence, Silliman calls Levi Strauss's narrated version of events a "seriously distorted report of Robert Duncan's reprehensible conduct at Barrett Watten's talk" (7). Silliman's criticism of the Levi Strauss article is based, on the one hand, on circumstantial factors related to the publication of the article as well as, on the other hand, on the author's approval of Duncan's behavior.

In the opening of his response, Silliman addresses the context and the timing of Levi Strauss's engagement with the events of the 1978 Zukofsky memorial. He questions Levi Strauss's motivation for making it an issue "again after all these years" (7) given the immediate subject of his article, namely the 1984 film series and not the memorial. He also mentions Duncan's severe illness at the time of the publication of the article. Silliman insinuates that Levi Strauss makes use of a random occasion to launch a veiled personal attack against Barrett Watten. Hence, he calls out Levi Strauss on his exploitation of a welcome opportunity to bash Watten publicly. Levi Strauss's rehashing of Duncan's attack in the pages of *Poetry Flash* is taken by Silliman to signify the general climate of debate in the poetry community of the Bay Area during the 1980s. What is actually at stake in the controversy around the Levi Strauss article, Silliman writes in his response, are the following questions: "[W]hat are the grounds for an act of censorship, why would a poet go out of his way in a piece that is ostensibly about 2 films to bring this up and valorize it, and what are the politics implicit in its being published in the one journal read by virtually every poet in the Bay Area?" (7). Silliman's use of the term 'politics' in this context reveals the extent to which he conceives of the Duncan/Watten fallout and Levi Strauss's decision to take sides with Duncan as a matter of struggles over power in the field of poetry. In Silliman's account, the victimization of Watten becomes evidence for the hierarchies of power in the field. Based on the Duncan/Watten incident, the right to speak in the San Francisco poetry scene of the 1980s represents, as Silliman suggests here, not so much an inalienable right of every member of the poetry community but rather a privilege to be granted or denied to unconsecrated newcomers by those in (symbolic) power.

For Silliman, the silencing of Watten represents the latest installment in a series of scenarios of abuse in which the Language poets as unconsecrated newcomers (here: Watten) are denied the right to speak by veteran authority (here: Duncan and, by proxy, Levi Strauss).

Barrett Watten was not suggesting to that audience that they should eat babies, kill their parents, rape women or start a race war. Duncan's intolerance

at a more rigorous approach to the poetry might have been on aesthetic grounds (although I doubt it) – but his actions were and are in no way defensible. His behavior implicitly threatens any poet or speaker who wishes to make any sort of statement. He did not interrupt to ask a question or insert a dissenting view – he used his privileged position as co-discussant to take over the evening. As a political act, his behavior was modeled on the coup d'état. By praising it, Levi Strauss takes an equally reactionary position. To do so in a digression which is nearly half the length of the whole article is simply incompetent writing. [...]

I have been disturbed for the past year or so at a game which is rapidly becoming the pastime of the poetry scene. It's called Bash the Language Poets, and Levi Strauss' swipe at Watten is only the most recent example. (Silliman 1984, 7)

Again, the issue of politics figures prominently in Silliman's response and is juxtaposed with the issue of aesthetics. According to Silliman, Duncan's intervention obfuscated what was the real issue of the clash between Duncan and Watten: namely, a dissent on aesthetic grounds. Silliman criticizes Duncan for his behavior in 1978 and accuses him of having illegitimately shifted the stakes of the debate from the realm of aesthetics to the domain of politics. The silencing of Watten on the Zukofsky memorial event, Silliman alleges, turned an aesthetic conflict into a political skirmish – and wrongfully so. To Silliman, politics signifies an arena for power struggles with authority and legitimacy being at stake. Duncan's arrogance in taking the speaking floor *from* Watten instead of talking *to* him, entering into a dialogue *with* him meant, according to Silliman, that the struggle between the veteran and the newcomer had to be fought out on the level of politics rather than on the level of aesthetics. For Silliman, Duncan's act of censorship thus ultimately equals a calculated stroke of consecrated power to (re)gain authority or, as he calls it, a political "coup d'état."

What is especially noteworthy in the excerpt quoted above is that Silliman himself adopts the discourse of politics and stigmatizes the position of those in power as a "reactionary position." In this sense, then, aesthetic difference becomes a matter of difference in political outlook: The reactionariness of the veterans (here: Duncan and his supporter Levi Strauss) is juxtaposed with the progressiveness of the newcomers (here: Watten and the Language poetry collective). On a more general level, the Language-bashing game that Silliman describes as a ritual of the San Francisco poetry scene at the time provides a reactionary measure to secure veteran authority for him. Acts of censorship are directed, Silliman alleges, at the socially young in the field of poetry. In Silliman's politicized terms, this socially young faction is the aesthetically progressive group of the Language poets who find themselves still at the hands of the promulgators of orthodox rule. What Silliman sketches here is the structure of positions in the field of poetry at the time with a consecrated front in power and an

unconsecrated front that challenges the legitimacy of orthodox rule and is stigmatized, censored, and silenced on this very account. To illustrate the full scope of symbolic power, Silliman projects this opposition onto the field of politics with the consecrated pole aligned with the political right and the unconsecrated pole tied to the political left.

In order to shift attention from the question of politics back to the question of aesthetics, Silliman closes his response with a discussion of Levi Strauss's appropriation of the infamous phrase "crude mechanical access" as a stigma for Watten's reading of Zukofsky. Silliman's own report of the events leading up to Duncan's interruption of Watten complements Levi Strauss's account in this respect. Silliman deals in more detail with the two different approaches to reading Zukofsky that Duncan and Watten employed respectively at the memorial. Silliman states:

As I recall the event, Duncan's discussion prior to the showing of the film demonstrated both a long familiarity with Zukofsky and his work and a lack of special preparation for this occasion. What he offered was personal and anecdotal, gossip in the place of analysis. This is of course something with which we can all feel deeply familiar, precisely because we come to know poets as people through their writings and take an interest in their personal lives.

Watten, in sharp contrast, had done some homework and was attempting to describe how Zukofsky actually wrote the works for which we take this interest in the person. [...]

Virtually all of the instances of Language Bashing resort to the same device, the charge of inhumanism: there is no person at the end of the tunnel of the text. Levi Strauss appropriates a phrase of Watten's and turns it on him: crude mechanical access. From my side of the fence, what that charge means is that a simple ego psychology (ego-centric) is not being relied upon to legitimate the presence of the text. Speaking here only for myself, I would argue that the self is ultimately a social construct, the product of many (largely ideological) inputs and forces. Any other 'I' is a lie. This does not mean that I don't exist, but it does mean that I will, at all costs, avoid the kind of crude personism that inheres in much contemporary American literature. (Silliman 1984, 7)

As far as the style of presentation is concerned, Silliman brands Duncan's talk as half-improvised and calls the speaker unprepared for the occasion without, however, questioning his expertise as a Zukofsky specialist. Watten's talk, on the other hand, is described as both well prepared and carefully structured. The difference in presentation styles is directly tied to a fundamental break between the approaches of the two speakers, Silliman maintains. Silliman recalls Duncan's talk as a homage to the personality of the poet Zukofsky. Duncan's presentation is hence stylized as a mixture of "anecdot[e]" and "gossip." The personality of the poet was precisely not Watten's business, Silliman remembers, because he rather focused on the

work itself. In Watten's talk, Silliman argues, analysis took the place of testimony. Silliman embraces the gossip/analysis dichotomy because it is shown to mark the stakes not only of the Duncan/Watten debate but also of the struggles over power in the field of American poetry in the 1970s and 1980s. Analysis in Watten's vein still counts, Silliman alleges, as a stigmatized practice. This horizon of stigmatization is the reason, Silliman suggests, why the charge of "crude mechanical access" directed at Watten translates into and extends to the charge of "inhumanism" raised against Language poetry in general.

As he turns the allegation of crudity against itself to expose the cruelty of stigmatization, Silliman finds his preferred measure against Watten's public humiliation as well as against Language bashing in an act of subversive resignification. Silliman coins the phrase "crude personism" in analogy to the stigma "crude mechanical access" in order to denounce the position of the Language bashers. The formula "crude personism," which, paradoxically enough, pays overt reverence to the original scene of cruelty from which it emerges, hence becomes itself an instrument of symbolic violence – a powerful device in the hands of those stigmatized with the labels "crude mechanical access" and "inhumanism," now employed to denounce the stigmatizers' own obsession with the personality of the poet. This obsession is identified by Silliman as a more sweeping contemporaneous tendency in the field of American literature in general and in the field of American poetry in particular whose legitimacy is called into question by the Language poets.

Watten's single own record of the goings-on at the 1978 Zukofsky memorial event is contained, as has already been suggested above, in his website post "Three Tests of Zukofsky," which was published on Watten's WSU website on September 25, 2004. The post is dedicated to Watten's engagement with Zukofsky on a broader level than the 1978 memorial event. In fact, Watten names the "Louis Zukofsky Centennial Conference" (2004) at Columbia University as the immediate occasion for his post.³⁰⁴ Watten's retrospect on the 1978 memorial still figures prominently at the heart of the post. The significance of the event can hardly be underestimated, as Watten himself claims, given the quasi-iconic status it has come to hold. Watten therefore refers to the notorious memorial evening for Zukofsky in November 1978 as "a poetic watershed and political disaster that has been often commented on, but only spuriously until now" (2004). The blog post stages itself as a necessary intervention in the debate. Watten's caution with commentary by others on the event in question becomes most evident here since he considers what has been said about it so far

³⁰⁴ The "Louis Zukofsky Centennial Conference," organized by Columbia University and Barnard College, New York, took place from September 17 until September 19, 2004.

dubious and thereby promotes his own firsthand testimony as an authentic version of events coming from himself as an authoritative source.³⁰⁵

Watten's own account of events midway through "Three Tests of Zukofsky" starts *ab ovo*, as it were, with an explanation for Tom Mandel's decision to invite Duncan to speak at the memorial and a glimpse into the preparatory meeting between Mandel, Duncan, and himself. Watten recalls discussions over the schedule for the evening with Mandel and Duncan one day before the event at a restaurant near San Francisco State University. In his narrative, Watten emphasizes the authority of the veteran Duncan referring to him as an institution on Zukofsky and the patron of the Poetry Center since the 1950s. At the same time, it is this very emphasis on Duncan's consecrated status that functions to foreground the generational gap (in the sense of both biological and social age) between Duncan and Watten. Watten describes his own position vis-à-vis Duncan's as that of a reader of Zukofsky who belongs to a newly socialized generation, especially in terms of politics.³⁰⁶ Reminiscing the evening, Watten suggests that generational difference manifested itself, first and foremost, in terms of different approaches towards reading Zukofsky. In Watten's account of the events, Duncan's introduction to the film is mocked as "some fuzzy anecdote" about Zukofsky's alleged claims to an extravagant honorarium. In introducing the NET documentary, Duncan put forth, as Watten recalls it, a literary nationalist reading of Zukofsky. Duncan's recital "ended with a grand claim that Zukofsky's work was written, in its brilliance and obduracy, 'that we can be American,'" Watten remembers.

Watten took (and still takes) issue with Duncan's claims, as he states retrospectively, on the grounds of his own socialization as a poet younger than Duncan and as a member of the Vietnam generation.³⁰⁷ The question of possible junctures between poetry and politics thus inevitably became a touchstone, to Watten's mind, for the conflicting positions of the veteran Duncan and the newcomer Watten on Zukofsky. For Watten, the need to debunk claims as to Zukofsky's vision of Americanness along Duncan's lines became all the more pressing given traumatic sociopolitical events in the Bay Area just prior to the Zukofsky memorial. With the Jonestown

³⁰⁵ The fact that authoritativeness of interpretation is Watten's prime concern in this context can, in my eyes, also be seen in his refusal to have additional excerpts of his talk reprinted in Lisa Jarnot's recent Duncan biography. "Watten refused permission," Jarnot states, "for other excerpts of his talk to be included" (2012, 493n5).

³⁰⁶ Lisa Jarnot quotes Watten as having opened his presentation after the screening of the film with a reference to his young biological age. "The thirty-year-old Watten," Jarnot writes, "admitted with some deference that he had been reading Zukofsky for ten years as opposed to Duncan's forty" (2012, 362).

³⁰⁷ What I mean here by Vietnam generation as a sociological (rather than a literary sociological) concept is the generation of biological youngsters who were in their late teens and in their twenties during the war (see MacPherson 1984).

massacre and the Moscone-Milk assassinations rattling the San Francisco community in November of 1978,³⁰⁸ he asserts, Duncan's praise of Zukofsky as a champion of American national identity seemed utterly out of place:

I had not seen the Emersonian core of Duncan's poetics until then, but the idea in the late 1970s that 'being American' was the goal of a poetics of countercanonical resistance was anything but tenable. Much can be said on the question of the American horizons of Zukofsky, but we were close to the Vietnam period then. (Watten 2004)

Duncan's reading of Zukofsky lacked legitimacy for Watten, as he recalls it, because it mismatched what Watten perceived to be Zukofsky's heretic position in the field of twentieth-century American poetry ("a poetics of countercanonical resistance") and a politically conservative position that appeared incompatible with this heretic habitus. Therefore, Duncan's nationalistic reading seemed inappropriate and "anything but tenable" to Watten. Put differently, Duncan's anecdotal framing of the outtakes from the Zukofsky documentary as a tribute to "being American" is unmasked by Watten as an illegitimate appropriation of Zukofsky put forth by the veteran Duncan.

The agenda of his own approach at the 1978 memorial event as a new way of reading Zukofsky in the face of the Vietnam period is recounted by Watten as follows in "Three Tests of Zukofsky":

My strategy – both proposal and defense – was to employ the material text as means of speaking for Zukofsky and to avoid the traditional encomium and any authority of transmission it would imply. [...]

In my own presentation, I tried, by means of an opaque projector and a series of carefully typed selections from 'A,' to show how the material text in Zukofsky derived from both poetic and political motives. [...] Next, I read my note on the [sic] Zukofskys' [sic] *Catullus*. At some point – memory blurs the recollection of trauma – [...], Duncan had heard enough. He literally attempted to retake the podium, I asked him to sit down until I had finished, he complied, and I quickly summed up my remarks. Duncan's presentation involved a strong rebuke of my argument on *Catullus* [...]. An expressionist reading, as opposed to my constructivist one, here found a defining moment. [...] In what followed, Duncan took up one of the Zukofsky fragments I brought (of *80 Flowers*) and tried to give it an impassioned, sponta-

³⁰⁸ The so-called Jonestown massacre of November 18, 1978 refers to the mass suicide of the residents of Jonestown, a radical religious commune or cult maintained by a church called the Peoples Temple, founded by Jim Jones (see Greenberg/Watts 2009, 185). San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk were shot to death by Dan White, a former member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, in San Francisco City Hall on November 27, 1978. For a detailed account of the public reaction to the deaths of Moscone and Milk in the context of the gay rights movement, see Hall 2011.

neous reading that would recover its vital core in an act of embodied transmission – a performance that, due to already overloaded synapses, started to fritz and spark without focus. (Watten 2004)

The fallout between Duncan and himself is cast by Watten in terms of a clash between two radically different approaches towards reading Zukofsky. Watten's distinction between Duncan's "expressivist" reading and his own "constructivist" reading is thus akin to Silliman's gossip/analysis dichotomy as articulated in Silliman's timely response to the Levi Strauss article. The expressivist approach is disqualified on the grounds that it remained stuck, according to Watten, in a stance of mere adulation. Adulation, Watten alleges, put the ritualistic praise and worship of Zukofsky as a classic in the place of analysis. As a result, Duncan granted interpretive authority primarily to the author. Duncan's response after his interruption of Watten's talk is therefore cast as a performance rather than a talk: Duncan's talk is cited as an attempt at an improvised declamation of the Zukofsky poem. The spontaneity of Duncan's performance is brought into sharp contrast with Watten's own constructivist reading of Zukofsky and his well-prepared talk. In his own talk, the material text, Watten writes, took the place of the figure of the author. His intention was, as Watten explains, to extrapolate the textual and political dimensions from the text rather than to reconstruct authorial meaning *à la* Duncan. Watten's use of props and aids served the self-professed purpose of visualizing his constructivist mode of working with the text. This is, then, why Watten's reading depended on such technical expedients as "an opaque projector and a series of carefully typed selections" from Zukofsky's text. The infamous projector that provoked Levi Strauss to coin his stigmatizing phrase 'crude mechanical access' can thus actually be seen as an emblem of Watten's technical, that is, constructivist, approach. The stigma is (re)claimed by Watten as a mark of positive distinction to legitimize his own approach to Zukofsky.

Watten closes his retrospect on the 1978 screening of the NET documentary with an account of its status and function in the collective memory of the San Francisco poetry community. He writes:

As overdetermined by the events that had preceded, this literary debacle – and those who listened to it later on tape could scarcely understand why – conveyed an aura of utter symbolic violence. I remember the audience streaming from hall [sic], looking like an evacuation from a train wreck. The event, in any case, became an urban legend in San Francisco; though furtively referred to since, it was used to mark the unbridgeable chasm between textualist and authorial readings of Zukofsky, and between the emerging community of the Language School and the more established San Francisco literary scene around Duncan. (Watten 2004)

The passage quoted above underlines once more the two dimensions of Watten's take on the memorial event in "Three Tests of Zukofsky." The enunciative position of the author oscillates between the role of a participant in the proceedings of the evening who gives an eyewitness account of personal trauma and the role of a literary critic who sketches the horizons of a watershed moment in the history of American poetry after World War II. The contextual frame that Watten provides for the evening, that is, the Jonestown massacre and the Moscone-Milk assassinations, serves to link two instances of victimization that play out on two different but interrelated levels: on the personal level as well as on the public and even historical level. Duncan's interruption remains a scenario of personal humiliation for Watten which carried and still carries "an aura of utter symbolic violence." As a personal "debacle," as Watten calls it, the scandal of the 1978 Zukofsky memorial only revealed itself to those who were present that evening and witnessed the scene at first hand, which is why witnesses after the fact are said to fall short of grasping its full thrust. Abstracting from the personal affront, Watten also corroborates the constructivist/expressivist paradigm introduced earlier to capture the two different ways of approaching Zukofsky. He proposes another pair of epithets to name this divergence in interpretive approach. In this sense, the incident emblemized the irreconcilable antagonism between "textualist and authorial readings" of Zukofsky. Watten's personal humiliation can be seen as a reenactment of the stigmatization of the constructivist-textualist approach. As an urban myth of the Bay Area, the event has even assumed iconic status of historical proportions, according to Watten. The iconicity of the event unfolds, Watten suggests, as soon as one begins to understand the conflict between Duncan and himself not so much as a head-to-head confrontation between two individuals and their standpoints on Zukofsky but rather as a clash of two positions in the field of American poetry of the late 1970s and 1980s. The fallout between Duncan and Watten can be read along Watten's lines as an epoch-making moment of incision in the history of the field of post-World War II American poetry. This historical moment opened up an "unbridgeable chasm" between the new avant-garde ("the emerging community of the Language School") and the consecrated avant-garde ("the more established literary scene around Duncan," meaning the New American poetry). The spatial metaphor of the chasm can thus also be interpreted in a temporal sense as the making old of the consecrated avant-garde. Following Watten, the Zukofsky memorial became iconic as it made history for showing how history was made – or created, in Bourdieu's sense – in the field of poetry.

In order to conclude my discussion of the 1978 Zukofsky memorial event in this section, I want to finally have a look at Tom Mandel's account of the evening. As has already been mentioned above, Mandel was the organizer of the event after having become the head of the San Fran-

cisco Poetry Center in the fall of 1978. Mandel's testimony is contained in the fourth volume of *The Grand Piano* and is lifted from, as Mandel himself states, email correspondence from 2003. The electronic exchange evolved, as Mandel recalls, before the project of *The Grand Piano* took shape as a collective enterprise between what would later become his fellow pianists. Mandel quotes from his 2003 email:

Naif that I was, I put on the infamous Zukofsky evening with the specific intention to facilitate conversation across the divide. [...]

Barry read a critical piece on Zukofsky and translation and then began to interpret passages from 'A' shown via an opaque projector. Pages kept appearing upside down or askew. This made for an awkward presentation, and Barry was slow to build momentum. Robert interrupted him, trying to take over. He didn't like Barry's attempt to 'materialize Zukofsky, both textually and politically.' But Barry persisted, rightly, and completed his presentation.

Robert then returned to the stage. By this time I was freaked out – paralyzed. I remember him striding back and forth as he improvised a commentary on 80 FLOWERS that glossed "ZINNIA" as Z (his name) and A (his life's work) captured in a mirror made of letters. He shone, but his brilliance was frightening. [...]

For a long time I regretted my failure to step in and take hold of the proceedings. I had put the event on after all. The different person I am now would know how to take the reins. (Harryman et al. 2007, 59-61)

Mandel rehashes here the basic elements that all narratives of the infamous event have in common. He even features the leitmotif, as it were, of the "opaque projector." Mandel's report structurally parallels Watten's account insofar as Mandel also invokes both the personal and the historical-ionic dimensions of the event.

Mandel's narrative can be read as an expression of personal shame. The author takes responsibility as the organizer of the event for not having intervened against Watten's public humiliation that evening. Mandel revisits the past with a profound sense of regret for his lack of immediate reaction and action at the time. Shock and paralysis, Mandel recalls, were his dominant feelings. The confession to his inertia that evening paves the way for a split between, in narratological terms, the narrated I and the narrating I of Mandel's account. This split serves to convey the impression of maturation after personal failure. Had he known what he knows now, Mandel admits, he would have intervened against Duncan's act of symbolic violence, all the more so given his institutionally assigned role as the director of the Poetry Center and the organizer as well as the host of the event.

Apart from providing the author with an occasion for personal regret, Mandel's account sheds light on the historical significance of the event. In the follow-up section to the quote from his 2003 email, Mandel admits that the evening also meant the end of his time as a director of the Poetry Center. "Duncan used his powers to win a battle that night," Mandel states,

“and he helped roust me out of the Poetry Center some months later” (61). Mandel’s dismissal from his post as director at the hands of Duncan unfolds, as Mandel insinuates here, the institutional dimension of the symbolic violence that Watten refers to in “Three Tests of Zukofsky.” The post of the director of the Poetry Center is thus cast into another stake in the struggle between the consecrated and the new avant-garde in the field of American poetry of the late 1970s and 1980s. His professional prestige was just as much at issue, Mandel implies, as Duncan’s insistence on his authority as a consecrated veteran and Watten’s claim to legitimacy for his position as an unconsecrated newcomer.

As has been shown, the boundaries of the Duncan/Watten debat/cl/e constantly shift between the private and the personal, on the one, and the public and the social, on the other hand. Mark Scroggins nicely captures this double nature of the controversy by calling it “a clash of personal egos, of poetic ideologies, and of poetic groups, and a clash that demonstrated that there was already under way a struggle over Zukofsky’s poetic inheritance” (2007, 462-3). This private and personal head-to-head in Scroggins’s sense between Duncan’s and Watten’s egos on the occasion of the memorial event can and perhaps even must be read metonymically as a public and social clash of two generations of poetic avant-gardes in the late 1970s and early 1980s with Duncan standing for the old consecrated New American poetry avant-garde and Watten representing the emergent new Language poetry avant-garde. In an article from 1985, published in the midst of renewed uproar over the Duncan/Watten debat/cl/e, De Villo Sloan identifies the combatants in this Bay Area “poetry war” (1985, 241), as he calls it, – or, at least, one might second, in this not so minor skirmish – as the following two camps:

The struggle took place between the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets and a group of less clearly defined poets centered around Robert Duncan with Black Mountain and Beat Connections: two disgruntled and strangely related factions of the American poetic avant-garde. (Sloan 1985, 241)

The fallout between Duncan and Watten marked a rift between two camps with the Black Mountain/Beat nexus in Sloan’s sense or, more broadly, the New American poetry connection from the days of the war of anthologies battling the Language camp in the field of poetry during the 1970s and 1980s. Thanks to the memorial event from 1978 and its discursive rehashes, the figure of Louis Zukofsky was soon caught up between the battle lines, so to speak. Zukofsky became a symbolic stake in the battle of the two avant-gardes as he was placed at the interface between colliding and colluding strategies of self-identification through (dis)affiliation and genealogization. The debate over reading Zukofsky the right way, brought into the public eye on the memorial and reignited through Levi Strauss’s article, was thus also and ultimately an issue of leaving one’s mark in the

field by claiming one's poetic heritage and thereby forging one's genealogy – both on the part of the Duncan camp and on the part of the Watten camp. Duncan's Zukofsky was incompatible with Watten's Zukofsky precisely because the poet and his work became a site of (relatively) open signification into which Duncan's authorial and Watten's textual readings could be inscribed.

6.3 Stalin as Linguist

The air of controversy sparked by the Duncan/Watten debat/cl/e was heightened by negative press on Language poetry issued in local, San Francisco-based newspapers and magazines (such as, for example, *Poetry Flash*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Berkeley Monthly*) as well as in academic journals of national renown (most importantly, *The Criterion* and *Partisan Review*) in the mid-to-late 1980s.³⁰⁹ The list includes three pieces from 1985 and one piece from 1987: 1) Tom Clark's "Keeping Up with the Avant-Garde" (1985a), published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*; 2) Clark's "Stalin as Linguist" (1985), published in *Poetry Flash*; 3) Stephen Schwartz's "Escapees in Paradise: Literary Life in San Francisco" (1985), published in *The Criterion*; and 4) the revised version of Clark's "Stalin as Linguist" (1987), issued in *Partisan Review* under the same title two years after its original publication. The two articles written by the poet and former editor of *The Paris Review* Tom Clark deserve closer scrutiny here. Clark's two opinion pieces elicited both supportive and harsh responses, which were also published in subsequent letters to the editors of the respective newspapers and journals. A few years after the fact, Clark even went so far as to refer to smear campaigns against himself which had allegedly been waged by the Language poets and their allies in the aftermath of his 1985 publications (see Clark 1990b, 80).

The first installment in this series of negative press on Language poetry was Clark's scathing review of Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax* (1985), titled "Keeping Up with the Avant-Garde" and published on January 13, 1985 in the local newspaper *San Francisco Chronicle*. Upon its publication, the paper received, as Clark himself later recalls, "a storm of angry letters from Watten's allies" (1990b, 80). *Poetry Flash* then also ran an article by

³⁰⁹ Michael Davidson's "Writing at the Boundaries" (1985), published on February 24, 1985 in *The New York Times Book Review* can be read as an attempt to rehabilitate Language poetry in this context. Davidson's piece is, first and foremost, a formalist discussion of the poetic modes subsumed under the 'Language' rubric (see Davidson 1985).