

“In Eternity one thing never changes into another thing—it hasn’t the ‘time’ it is simultaneously ‘overcome’ (in Corbin’s cosmological dramaturgy) given back put back at the moment of maximum entropy or growth or ripeness . . . which is what Blake must have meant by a Human Harvest, and by the same ‘ax’ (to cleave *as* to kill, or Original Sin), which is where *memory* comes in as menace or monster we are when cloven fiction (sexual division)—so any attempt to make this ‘third’ or ‘tripled’ turn a 180 you get fusion or synthesis (Hegelian) what Dostoevsky called ‘the third and last anguish of men’ (the ‘craving for universal unity’ . . . ‘for worldwide union’)—this is the tropological apple, the eating of which (cannibalism) is the disobedience which crashes the Crystal Cabinet or Garden (where a threefold kiss is returned as reflection/delusion)—*whereas* kissing the joy as it flies (as three yielding to the form of the fourth—the unknown?) revives ‘the dead’ (actually only a sleep of inertia or slow moving particles, particulars, mole-cules) thus quickened by the ACT of returning reversing of field in mid-field flight at that moment of Clarity when you see daylight . . .”

—John Clarke

The interstices of poetry wars
for Jack Spicer

“Poetry lives in the interstices, not in the structures.”

—Robert Duncan

We inherit the somewhat contentious phrase, Poetry War, from intellectual conflicts that arose in the wake of the publication of *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. The new, post-war, post-modern energies that Donald Allen brought together ran into the wall of a conservative, formalist Establishment, and a poetry war broke out on multiple fronts, giving rise to among other things an alternative poetry culture of resistance, resourcefulness, and Emersonian self-reliance within living networks of mutual support. Elsewhere I have argued that the war itself actually began in the aborted duel between Ezra Pound and Lascelles Abercrombie (figuratively speaking), and continued through the travails of the Objectivists before erupting into the self-proclaimed poetry wars of the 60’s and early 70s. More recently, the term applies to now notorious event that occurred nearly 40

years ago in San Francisco during the screening of a film on Louis Zukofsky when Duncan got into a confrontation with Barrett Watten. Patrick Dunagan reminds me that other fronts in the poetry war were also active at that moment and points to Duncan's conflict with Denise Levertov, and the now near mythic events at Naropa immortalized in Tom Clark's *Poetry Wars*. Robert Duncan was very much a part of these conflicts, and was central to the San Francisco event. And while some people, I know, have expressed ennui and irritation at the continued attention to the confrontation between him and Watten, which they apparently consider too old or lacking substance to be of interest, I think it remains central to an understanding of our situation and the situation of poetry today.

It began in 1978 when, after the screening of a film on Louis Zukofsky, Robert Duncan walked on stage during a presentation by Barrett Watten and took the microphone from him, symbolically asserting the continued precedence of the New American Poetry over what he saw as the re-emergence of the New Criticism's formalism in the work of what came to be known as *Language Poetry*. This name (brand) came to stand for a diverse range of poetics responding to what is called the "linguistic turn" of the 70s and 80s, many of which did not share the same commitments to the formalism central to this discussion, and hence is meaningless in one sense. Nevertheless, the name became part of a marketing campaign by critics like Marjorie Perloff and linked to the identity of a number of poets, propelling them into the center of critical attention at that moment. Duncan had spent much of his artistic life battling one dominant, institutionalized formalism, and having won, he was in no mood to see it rise again from the ashes in the form of neo-Marxist materialism.

The war erupted into the open 6 years later when David Levi Strauss wrote an introduction to a showing of the Zukofsky film along with a film on Duncan. After detailing the history of the films, Levi Strauss related a story of the confrontation between Duncan and Watten in 1978 that outraged Watten's cohort who, led by Ron Silliman, responded in kind. The barrage of letters to *Poetry Flash*, a Bay Area poetry news tabloid, that followed became the top poetry news story of 1978. *Poetry Flash* upped the stakes by inviting a contribution from linguistics professor George Lakoff, whose writing provided a theoretical support for Language poetry. That provoked poet Tom Clark, who responded with a piece called "Stalin as Linguist," which, to say the least, further inflamed the debate.

At that moment the poetic energy unleashed by the New American Poetry split into a self-declared avant-garde who ran with the oppositional energy of the NAP but grounded it on sociology and philosophical materialism; and an unorganized rump circulating around the poetics of Duncan/Olson/Creely/Ginsberg grounded in *Kali* energy, the incommensurable *creativedevouring* plenitude of the world, and poetry's articulating entanglement with its morphogenesis and its potential for transformative gnosis. I am using gnosis here in a non-specialized sense of knowledge that exceeds the bounds of "reason," which Charles Olson going to the roots significantly located in the work of the ear (knowledge as *gna*) rather than the eye (knowledge as *vid*).

At the very beginning of his essay "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife," written 10 years before the incident at the Zukofsky film screening, Duncan stated: "I find myself a prejudiced member of a very small community of belief in strife with other poets about what the poem is." It was a moment in the poetry wars when the established, university based poets of the New Critical movement dismissed and shut out the poets of the NAP, and Duncan was a self-admitted combatant in the

poetry war that followed. The stake, as he articulated it, was a determination of what the poem is, and what the poem is, he goes on, is a *World Order*, as it is also *of* an order of *all* poetries. The poetry war, the strife as he calls it, develops because of “incompatible ideas of what *world* and *order* are.”

In a late clean-up operation, the forces levelling the world through the cultural economy of general equivalence and universal commodification—what I call The Doom Program—successfully reoccupied poetry’s upper social orders in the US and integrated them into its institutional structure. The difference between *worlds* and *orders* here circulates around this occupation of poetry which integrated it into economies of use. Let me be absolutely clear about one thing. The war is not about this kind of poetry or that kind of poetry, and certainly not about anyone who ever got a teaching gig, or won some prize money because someone recognized their terrific work. The war is about resistance to the displacement of *becoming-with(in)-poetry* by *being-over-poetry*, a change that quantifies it, turns it into a product that, if it meets certain understood standards and regulations, can be exchanged for a variety of rewards. Nor is it about some *us vs. them* scenario. This occupation of poetry touches us all, entangles us all. It is a struggle each of us must confront in our own lives as poets.

Duncan, who saw it coming early on, understood the challenge it presented to his sense of poetry’s work. You could even argue that he occupied the center of a moment of mythic origin, a moment of conflict between orders that gives rise to an origin, a new ordering or relation of orderings. Duncan sensed the significance of the moment that night in San Francisco, and came prepared. As David Bromige relates, “. . . Robert appeared in his full, Romantic poet regalia, the Spanish cape, the Spanish hat. . . . It was for effect. But it was also the effect on him too. He had his manna when he

was in that garb. He could fight off evil magic.” Duncan walks on stage to fight evil magic, takes the mic from the yielding hands of a stunned Barrett Watten, and sets in motion—or materializes—a conflict that continues to play itself out 40 years later.

But of course that wasn’t the first time, although every time is also always the first time. It’s a wave in a pattern that echoes in time. It marks a moment in recent literary history even as it reveals within its folds layer on layer of homologous events, a morphological nest, a palimpsest, a form of event that resonates out of Nothing to reveal itself in Ovid’s erotic, metamorphic challenge to Virgil’s structural empire of words, or the challenge implicit in the Pearl Poet’s rugged alliterations to the colonizing iambic pentameter from the south. Not to mention the poetry wars between the Provençal and the Dolce Stil Novo poets, and the entrenched Latin verse they wrote against. Or Whitman’s barbaric yawp aimed in part at the genteel poets of Cambridge Mass. Or Emily Dickinson’s rhythmically broken psalms directed at the chorus of sanctimonious voices pouring from the church down the street. You may be squeamish about the word *war*, but the conflict is undeniable and universal. It is the energy of renewal.

At the time of our mythic origin conflict in 1978, the issue was declared (by Duncan) to be *fun* versus *tedium*: “I just want to get some sense of fun in this,” he says of his interruption. But that fun rests on an entire world order that rejects formalism and the quantification of poetry, whatever name it goes by. Watten proposed to split Zukofsky “down the middle” separating considerations of the poem from his life and reading the work as a *thing*, arguing that Zukofsky’s “structuring devices” were mathematical and that he, Watten, was attempting to get the words to interact with themselves.

“Structuring devices” is Watten’s name for his materialist displacement of myth which arguably was the secret agenda of his presentation. Echoing New Criticism’s dismissal of biography in the pursuit of a quantified text, he asks Duncan, “How are words your life?” To which Duncan responds, what we are reading *is* life, not math—it has something to *say*. And he proceeds to call into attention the swarms of meaning that circulate in Zukofsky’s poems, dancing through them, drawing out the allusive, illusive worlds they weave from sound and mind. He offered this as alternative to Watten’s analysis of phonemic progression and graphed curves. In that sense, the issue was not about personalities, not about Duncan and Watten. Or it was only Duncan and Watten in so far as they were the bearers of worlds and orders that were and are incompatible.

As Stan Persky once told me, poetry is a unique linguistic mode of knowledge, a mode that dwells, as Duncan says, in the interstices. The knowledge that poetry bears, the thinking that it opens, its transformative gnosis, ruptures the given separations, activating *bodymind*, opening it into disOrders of meaning within and beyond the habitual orders that hold us in the clutches of the Doom Program’s isolating structured categories. Writing of Hölderlin, Jean-Luc Nancy locates the exactitude of the poem’s calculation in “touching” of the transmitting body, so that the voice of the poem “is not phonation alone: it is the transmitting body, the body open to the outside as the transmitter of its ‘inside,’ which is only given in the transmission. . . . The point of contact, the touching-of-the-opposite, is the opportune exactitude of the calculation that delivers sense or that delivers up to sense, by suspending the uninterrupted course of sense.” William Carlos Williams puts it somewhat differently to the same end: “for everything/and nothing/are synonymous/when//energy *in vacuo*/has the power/of confusion//which only to/have done

nothing/can make/perfect.” Confuse, suspend, to have done nothing, render inoperative— you could call it, as is popular in some circles who like scientific sounding words, *defamiliarization*, but only if defamiliarization is understood as *the shaking of the Sistrum*, that magical act Plutarch describes in *Isis and Osiris*: “The sistrum also makes it clear that all things in existence need to be shaken, or rattled about, and never to cease from motion but, as it were, to be waked up and agitated when they grow drowsy and torpid.” It’s what George Quasha calls poetry’s healing principle. One minute you are walking into a lecture hall with 300 other students. The next you are swept up into the *mysterium of the tremendum* by the glaze of rain water on a red wheelbarrow beside the white chickens.

The poetry wars exist and are important. They force us to pay attention, to think of the struggle to keep alive and active the knowledge of the interstitial space of poetry’s dwelling within the poet. The poetry war at this moment involves a fight for a space for an un-commodified relationship with its transformational gnosis. Duncan was absolutely clear and unequivocal—the poetry war begins within the poet and the stake is the world. It is projective, to use the word of his friend: “In the struggle to undo all the particular claims to order in Poetry, the critical battles, the movements that ruled for a period, setting up laws and definitions to establish what is in order and what is out of order, and then are replaced by other movements . . . —these battles carry into the public field the inner battles of the individual poet’s soul.”

For Duncan, the heart of the war involved keeping at work “contending forces and convictions” so as not to lose sight of the world’s divine mongrel excess, its prodigious antagonisms, contradictions, and differences, to avoid, as Emerson said, binding your “eyes with one or another handkerchief, and

attach[ing] [yourself] to some one of these communities of opinion,” as most men do. “This conformity,” he goes on, “makes them not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars.”

According to Duncan, keeping the war alive is the poet’s calling, the very essence of the poet’s vision. But if the poet projects the poetry war as the manifestation of her understanding of her responsibility to what Duncan calls What Is, a further fold lurks in the plies—the commitment to discord and disorder within the work itself as crucial to the poet’s responsibility to keep language true to the emergent world, to remain open to the myriad vibrations at the foundation of morphogenesis. Only that way can you meet the poem halfway, allow it its freedom to introduce you to what you hadn’t anticipated, hadn’t known about, permit it to lead you through the transformative gnosis which occurs in relation to the exact calculation’s suspension of the uninterrupted course of sense and the *in-voca-tion* of the *tremendum*.

According to Duncan, the poetry war is archetypal and projective. And it’s important because in a profound existential sense, poetry matters. Poetry war, discord, disorder, general pain-in-the-assness, preserve and activate potential resistance to the epochal tidal pull toward the reduction of all value into some specific weight of imaginary metal in its myriad forms, Moloch’s final victory. Poetry war agitates the knowledge of what a poem does beyond some mechanical measure having to do with curing social ills or doing away with injustice, as if those issues could only be addressed in one way, on one plane, from one direction. There can be no justice without beauty, any more than there can be beauty without justice. And that work takes place on many different planes. While occasionally under certain conditions, poetry can have a specific material effect, as it did in the U.S. in the 60s, or

the USSR and Eastern Europe in the 70s and 80s, mostly we have no idea what it does or where it does it. We can say definitively that it's presence alone makes the world different. And better. Try to imagine a world without the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Popol Vuh*, *The Book of Psalms*, *Enuma Elish*, or the *Kalavala*, without the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, *The Pearl*, the *Sundiata Epic*, *The Canterbury Tales*, without Dante's *Commedia*, without Rumi, without Shakespeare's or Wyatt's or Sidney's sonnets, without Donne . . .

At a recent meeting of a group of young writers, mostly former students, someone raised the age old complaint, why do we bother, no one reads poetry. To which, as everyone else nodded in jaded agreement, a new member of the group demurred—everybody has a favourite poem, he said. And he's right. Poetry occupies our worlds in ways we forget about or don't recognize, lingering in corners of the mind maintaining unperceived channels of sense. Poetry wars are crucial to keeping in mind that point of contact where the opportune exactitude of the calculation occurs in the suspension of the uninterrupted course of sense, shaking the sistrum, reminding us of our further responsibility.