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READING NOTES

for Dotti, 2003

[Some notes, at times manifesto-like, on the (often neglected) dynamics of reading radical texts, bouncing off the cushions of arguments in *Contemporary Poetics* (a 2001 special issue of the Prague journal, *Litteraria Pragensia*, edited by Louis Armand). All the material in “quotes” is from the Canadian poet Dorothy Trujillo Lusk’s exemplary *Ogress Oblige* (Krupskaya: San Francisco, 2001). The 10 part organization parallels the outline of an ongoing poetics project, ‘Tips for Totalizers’ mentioned in ‘Paradise & Method’ (in my essay collection, *Paradise & Method: Poetics & Praxis* from Northwestern University Press, and also in *Aerial 9: Contemporary Poetics as Critical Theory*, ed., Rod Smith).]

Let’s read — a political economy of sense & praxis.

There are givens of writing open to contest, but there are also givens of reading open to contest. Moment by moment, which is it gonna be?

“Inherent poetics will out.” Especially when it comes to *connecting* the possibilities for such drastic new writing with the opportunities we take up as readers. Here, we could focus on the ways that meaning & pleasure & challenges to ideology get fashioned out of the up-close experience of reading, not just from our taking in the ‘triumphs’ of experimental writing. We’re pulled outside of any model of straightforward communication & exchange, or of cultural capital to be appropriated as someone ‘leans back’ to be impressed & entertained. Certainly it goes beyond a reading dedicated to some revelation of prepackaged content or ‘response’ to an author’s prior intention: “include stakeouts beyond sense declension”.

To marvel at the degree of disjunctiveness or discontinuity in poetic work like this today takes on a fresh edge if we attend to the dynamics of reading. ‘Wild’ or ‘informalist’ possibilities may sit at the opposite end of a spectrum from any temptation toward continuity & spectacle — a temptation we might detect in literary writing more invested in the ‘powers’ of formalism (in either a conceptual or a programmatic version).

B-1.

Transparency — an old-fashioned model of reproducing sense: to read through words, individually or in recognizable clusters, toward (or in the shadow of) specific referents.

Protecting what? “Present as Genteel. BAD archaic element.” Safeguarded by a tradition of so-called close reading that *presumes* some gnomic (yet specific & recoverable) plans & coding & expectations set up intentionally by the author. How stuck in someone else’s continuous past do you want to be? — “maintaining / the absence of the full-stop”. As if, in more conventional literary work, there had been a prior emptying out of the words by the author — to enforce their contractual (referential) obligations, to reduce their (disassociative) speed, to enforce some continuities predesigned to deliver up some overall mood or sketch out some larger convincing picture. Reading through words (by ignoring the code of manners at stake in this delivery) renders the words flimsy or weightless, underjinxed. We’re stuck with an immaterialism of denial.

Get this: what shows, what’s showing, is only “nominally manifest” — a name show, “and relic contingency”. Can’t a word stand on its own? “Mannered semblance or void aspect,” yet semblance is a mannerism, a (usually visual) ventriloquism. A different kind of writing rebuffs some of this enforcement by the past, as well as the lures of familiar, even effortless reference that it depends upon. Instead of near-cinematic continuities, we get gathered up or twisted around in “tenuous rhythm”. “I matter in time fluttered cadence”. Pulled apart, words matter differently — as blockage of see-through, as noise, with an abolitionism of subsequently.

Action: “to repudiate a lineage”. We can experience such a ripping up of conventions as we get over being spooked by those ghosts of coherence & consensus that had been bottled up in them. “Time’s showroom *exegete*” wants our votes for continuity instead. Yet continuity is little more than the concession that death makes to life, or to dynamic change. ‘Close reading’ is taxidermy. The best continuity is death.

Consider the alternative: time scramble. Even to the point where time gets ‘spaced out’ or capsizes into space. “Meaning gets thrust / up every which way—”. Partly by readers of radical texts as they are practically compelled to track the differential systematicness of

language — even if that means skipping over some of the idiosyncratic concreteness of letters & syllables, to locate the individual units inside a system of signifiers (since that seems like the only part of the sign that could be systematized). Such a reading plays around within the displayed/displaced system of language on which radical composition goes to work. It plies “a polysemous series of profane relations”.

Still, the “overstimulated word” can stand out from any system leash, linguistic or otherwise. Reading it, and around it, we make compositions “lacking in methodologies tidying rigour”. We toy with the “NON-SPECIFIC SIGNIFIED”. “Composition // occurs later – deplete artifact congruence”.

B-2.

Stripping away the foundations — of the sign system, of stylistic continuity, of allegiance to genre — turns it into a highwire act. “Much of the firmament / has washed away”. Daring readerly acrobatics “awakened by the shifting foundation”.

Representation gives way to breakage. “I can’t see the figures for the desecration”. Individual words are deposed, pulled apart & put back together again, where we’re no longer visibly (or consciously) “bullied by american spell check”.

Our vocabulary hit a snag, words or even letters jettisoned from a reassuring lockstep, “my meaning adrift”. Language “gnomic in dispersal”. “Undergrounded in realities.” Or, “apropos goof”: are the mistakes instances of the author refusing to follow orders, or of readerly flamboyance in decoding or in Crime Scene Investigation? “Thinking of smashing something / up, actually writing it, no telling what.” Uncoding.

We read little bits “at the (throttling point) / hatchet edge.” They present “a crystalline irregularity”. “Inchoate: blasted”. As if in a “drunkardliness” on the part of the text, or on *our* part but with *its* encouragement (& without the breathalyzer test). We produce events, intersections, *transits*: “Composing transits / of ineffable / Fluff”. Then “why not thrill to the tingling jests of novel modernities—”. “The expected is so insupportable.”

B-3.

Language refuses to give way before “Divine, right of things”. Something intrudes, something in between. Don’t we notice a prior clotting in the language system, a clotting that makes time for the subject & her action. But with a subject, are we talking about the writer or the reader? After all, what does it take to make sense, to be ‘comprehensible’? Does it require some agency, some unfurling of an active authorial voice — “Passive voice (no suggestion) therefore incomprehensible”? Without personification, without the trappings of intimacy or personal revelation, do we end up with “That which excludes action,” — so that “nothing can be said”? A customary fix would be to personalize the language, to rig it up to carry the customary force of suggestion. But why can’t the impersonal or even the inanimate do some suggesting?

Before you mummify, abdicate. Confession — spurred on by continuities of subjecthood, tone, syntax, etc. — exasperates. Let’s get out. “Are no further filmic clutter / bits of feeling stalked and staked”. The author signs off as “Yours, an apparent whom”. As if *character* can only operate as an invocation of a network of references. The reverse is not true. “Disorder, refute / and begrudge ME”. “As if I matter, as if”. Identity Anti-Politics.

The subject becomes constructive, onsite, once read “in my wreckage”. To experience the text in this way carries with it marks of “self/battery” — by filling in, by substituting for herself/her selves in a more complicated timeline. “I am usually absent.” Dishevel the name. Toss off the name — in a “merry mutiny”. Which suggests either our tendency to identify with the mutiny of the author, or our bolder mutiny from any preimposed authoritarianism of production. Author be damned. Textual audacity “discards name” altogether — but not meaning.

“It is you who have initiated the process / & your travails retain an oblique lineage of documentation.” Or a lineage of semblance, instead of formalist self-enclosure. How much on account? “Indemnity, or who I seem.” Or is that double indemnity? With these extremities of writing, how much (& what kind of) readerly *will* or *swoon* do you expect to help encourage on the other end — & how does it get configured? “‘VECTOR’ / ‘DESIRE’ / ‘BODY’ / ‘YR’”

B-4.

We're quick to attribute a heroic stance or a showy bohemian insouciance to rebellion. But what's left for the reader? Much of the celebratory talk about bursting out of stylistic or discursive straitjackets has centered around the writer's consciousness or point of view. But doesn't reading need to move downstage? When it comes to a heroism of pure breakage, its force gets pretty eroded on the path leading toward a 'period style'. All those dadaist trappings, so quickly consigned to the history books.

What's the potential reader's moment-to-moment relationship to style or grammar or social discourse? Crutch? Prod? Regulator? Police state? Reading, we certainly can bask in insurgencies of words, taking them on viscerally. But this is specific. There is no single 'one size fits all' breakage, nor any reason to assume that fragmentation forces us into a cul-de-sac. "Fragment (no suggestion)". As if! In reality, a reverberating constellation of fragments can suggest, can even get a statement across. Once we highlight the moment of reading, the familiar one-way street opens up. Our adventures in reading play out within elaborate *varieties* of breakage: of verisimilitude, grammar, genre, consistency of argument or mood or tone or timbre or coloration or pitch. As one type of activism: "A series of small, crackling sounds intrudes upon the contestable given".

Yet *insurgency* is always so timely. Circumstances force it to retake its bearings, again & again, chronically. That's the nature of discourse as a "contestable given". Reading through it, we plunge into "homologous diversity". Scatter. Layers. Concentric circles of significance. Now, there's no reason a discursive rupture (or a rupture keyed to a particular discourse) can't propel its implications outward in a similar way: to make a *troping* width, or scale. To read discursively, careening out from syllables or word fragments toward their widest grip. "Position the limpid polyglot" to penetrate an outer *terra incognita* or confront "expanded prowl". We take on the role of Arranger ourselves: redecorating & scaling local detail (as well as footnotables — more remote cross-references), pingponging back & forth within & outside the limits of discourse, to shed light on those limits..

Radical texts solicit a non-sequential production or remaking of sense — (to parallel an early characterization of *hypertext* as non-sequential writing). But it doesn't have to be as rigidly

predefined as classic link/node hypertext or hypertext as cryptograph. More freely, readers “could string words, find goofy relations”. We maneuver within a discursive *informalism*. As a measuring of time, as spatialized timing, as an architecture of memory. A poly-engorgement — isn’t that the best way to trick certitude? The *Multiple* challenges the one-person all-by-myself Truth Squad.

B-5.

The call is out for a writing that frustrates, or doesn’t bother with, a *leaning back* style or comfy ‘read’. [Thinking of corporate decisions about the conflicting interfaces of television and personal computers — which are frustrating the desired moneymaker: integrating the role of a TV & a PC in a single box in the ‘home entertainment center’. The styles in conflict, with interesting parallels to the expectations we bring to literature, are ‘leaning back’ & ‘leaning forward’.]

We like to keep a little phobic about aura too.

To clarify, let’s consider a non-reader-centered alternative — either in mainstream literature or (perhaps especially) in new-fangled versions of ‘technic spectacle’ or machinic programming. Here we imagine that a text, all by itself, could sustain the illusion of a lobbing of meaning, an almost geological surging up of sense, from subterranean ‘below’ to dizzying ‘above’. Reading would then be a camaraderie — “yearning to this word”. As if the supernatural were supervening, in the front row seats. Or as if our fetishism of the past & its traditions, its turf battles & Heritage Village coziness had emptied all of the reader’s time out of the textual experience, to risk a collapse into (either classicist or automated) instantaneousness & presence. [A disability of either a worshipful, auratic reception or — perhaps pretty much the same thing — of too much ‘leaning back’ to enjoy the multimediated or algorithmic fireworks.] What we really need to know is: how much feigned proximity (to person, to bio-emphatics, to scape, to facts, to language ‘as a whole’) does the text incite?

“BLANDISHMENT” defines a counter-reading. We don’t want the words regimented in space & disappearing in time, leaving no trace. “—am I separate or sought in an adjectival squirm of over- / identificatory liaison?” The visualized variant: “or iris vignetting entity” — warming

over (or targeting) the prerecorded facts. “—should not I now chow / a whole faceful of phantoms?” No flipping, no blinking.

The alternative to texts that call for an activated, informalist reading would be prone to elicit a disembodiment — as if the body of the reader were being constructed (or parsed) by the closures which the text imposes. Even ‘astonishing’ closures. We get an inflicted facework (or ‘interfacework’), with all of its characteristic generality, its ‘overdetermination of the blank’. Text as grid, text as grammar. In some new cyber-versions of non-reader-centered textuality, we confront a purity or autonomy of proceduralism brought to our desktops by information technology. (This is where it may make sense to link the legacy of concretism to that of intermedia in cyberspace. Both risk a shared limitation: a similar investment in ‘making an impression’ in either visualized or ‘nominalized, virtual media’ at the expense of the reader’s productivity.) [Perhaps this would get us close to a nonphenomenal sublime of machinic automatism. And put us within hailing distance of the discussions in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001.]

As a new terrain for writing, programmatic codework runs this risk. Syntactic & semantic & formatting permutations can all be carried out independently of any possible readership. An automatized textuality may be the result, formulating — or becoming — its own response. No longer just a prosthesis of memory, the ‘interfacework’ would become a prosthesis of substitution, a solvent of time. The reflexivity of the cybernetic apparatus turns inward; its ‘signs’ & its recipients made arbitrary or irrelevant. As if they were programmed by a ‘hypermnesiac’ apparatus that ‘remembers by forgetting everything’. For readers to be penned in, pinned down: the crowd control consultant’s dream. Instead of a reading that increases our finiteness, focussing or concentrating our finite state, we could end up with texts that reduce our finiteness, blurring our particulars. The breathing fascinates us: “every shivery aside binding / co-determinate froth management.”

C-1.

There’s a big social world out there. Did we notice? Is the writing designed to help us apprehend the larger scaffolding of sense behind it, or to help this scaffolding stay in the dark, a “*system’o’neglect*”? Still, this isn’t a call for some National Public Radio (“legendary victim

improvement”) version of ‘meanings’ coming pleasantly or collegially together. “Fearing alliances of meaning / without / taking immolation / into account.” Exposures of conflict & negativity still get us juiced.

“*Pay Attention!*” In activist reading, alertness — & alertness to conflict — as pleasure. Not just the bare-knuckled agonistics of influence (registered in time — readers’ time, which codework may ignore or hollow out) but also the pleasures of spatial conflict or skewing, the stressed territorialities of semantic overlap & tension, the building & intersecting of temporary/partial hegemonies of sense & affect.

Shake up the reader “in polite contingency” — to counteract the automatisms of programming or confinement to classicist heritage, “to temper this intrusive expansion of mind.” Surface Kinetics. Velocities — deletion & ellipsis, speed *plus* halting. Or “transience fidget, heft”. Social weight or heft can be engined out of speed, fidget, transience; it needn’t be our one-way ticket to Lugubrium City. It’s “the ever frantic repertoire” ready to start to have “confounded lassitude”. Why not give us “the full brunt of aural thumpage, sirenage”? Why not bring on “the reading of constant motion”?

While “speeding up the music” we help displace the old ‘necessary’ aura, the overly well-grooved reaction. “Generalia extant upon reactive fodder”. Specificities of attention denaturalize, disalienate, rematerialize. “Crushing naturalized generalia,” we make a reversal of sophistry. Language “&/or estranged”. Attention particularizes; attention granularizes. Beguilement stripped off. “—The beautiful music has stopped.” A controversy baits. And baits our body. A less-generalized version of the body returns with the reader reading adventurous texts. The aesthetic returns — as a new performative, an interactive rhetoricity. We enjoy interfering with your pleasantries. Chemical bonding is made or meant to seem relativized, fragile, part of a “surfeit of contingency”. Sleek friction; sleek pressure. Nature as alienation. Incision makes hope.

Lean forward — as we would, maneuvering at the laptop or desktop, negotiating farflung databases, etc. Let’s reinstate the mobile powers of the signified, with all their opportunities for (aesthetic) synthesis, or for a *merger* of machinic with intentional logic, as we’re encouraged to read through entire sign systems as mobilizable social objects. If this

resembles a *sublime*, it comes in a different version: no longer unapproachably beyond us, this is more like an 'interpretive' or a 'cognitively or experientially processed' sublime with more broadly social bearing.

The forms & formats of writing can be designed to help structure any initial chaos of microscopic particulars — to encourage us to tease out their 'macroscale' implications. And we can imagine these larger scale effects to have greater width — wider, as both more social & more disjunctive: alterity of reference as nonlinearity & speed. Reading can make a topology out of the *vectoral* exchange between degrees of immediacy & mediation, degrees of referentiality, scalings of local significance. It can make a syncopation out of convergences & juxtaposition. *Transversality. Parallax* — a network of remote intensifiers "plus more inverted political homilies". So, kick the outside, the social outside; "collective glut / shove"

C-2.

Counteract the generalizing, the universalizing. "There may be shunting, there may be unity". There may be various & variable weights, tiltings, adhesives. *Entropics*. Or: "gravitational rhetorics instill seminal prescience".

"—Can I question?" We can too — we're nudged to; putting ourselves at the distances the text choreographs from multiple perspectives, without suturing them permanently together.

"What grew some composure under ideogloss": now it's set up for discomposure. Text as a specific, particularized solvent of the social status quo. Not to propose "the wry suss" — but a more oppositional attitude, with exuberance at misbegottening — "Let's white English!" Here our interaction with a micro-reportage needs to 'get with' an insistent broad range of the f/acts — & of their spaces. "Wish to report on the atomization of the social order under Later-Than-We-Think Capital" — "irksome / in its overtly defeatist model of the ration."

How much social 'matter' or 'territory, & what kind, can adequately 'account for' or 'make intelligible' the words. To contextualize: "& is that an harangue or justified outburst." As if "wordly circumstance" were choreographed to place us back in worldly conditions — "allow an anguished plea for every / sustainable circumstance." Stickem the glut, the social surplus, as an impractical immeasure. Sizing up property lines, resizing spacings. "How I could see the

propertied outlines". Connecting (& connecting with) the words as partial maps & partial lists — "of pertinents and a field of fodder." Pertinents: small sparklers, autopsies, risk takings & giganticisms. Rereadings.

When does a symptom become a perception?

C-3.

In certain kinds of textuality more than others, we read evidence (twists & turns) of a social system that ratifies itself through induction, "no more modest instruction". The culture apparatus trains us, socializes us; we are the "mercantile subset / of Training Capital". Part of a self-exalting project that saturates most of the language we come across — as if bedeviled by *Lack*, impulsively seeking the reassurance of unity within an objectified self, to meet the preconditions for "this imputation of fault" & agency & responsibility.

Phonex — Solicitation.

The words don't just implicate some universalizing schema (of an imaginary body, for instance). Identification is forced translation — [we're not making that mistake]. Capital sponsors the generic — "stranglehold, choke, chain, (bashed [probably/unusable] out of class consciousness)". But the interpellations appear filled with glittering particularizings, magnets for seduction & identification. The reality is different: "I am reduced to a generic being sniping at a hostile city-state." "Find only myself typing the personal 'I' as numeric one (1)".

Yet in experiencing more obstreperous texts, the identifications don't start out as generic (even if the social pressure is on to make them so). Consistency is barely skin deep. Even the generic person is only "an apparent whom". Territory stays contested — & we can sense it in the words. Any continuous occupancy by a generic persona or personhood — a "whom" — is caked with doubt.

Plagiarism is internal to the text. "He is onto their identity. This is a curse." "'I' is a trick-diving belwether". The reader's 'ME' gets refuted or begrudged by a social scaffolding of disorders of an actively productive or constitutive kind. "Escaping the main conspiracies, I am set adrift."

We'd often like to be too, but... how can we escape? Our disbelief needs to be primed: "fleeing the activity prod" & its occasional tantrums.

Dramatically centerstaging a particularized body. Here it's being offered up as "enclampment / dysfunction" — to mess up the social clampdown. An activated reader-body to resist the sort of strategic unawareness that allows for easy interpellation. "The field is catapulted from identification." Splittings to save us. Recall us. Rather than bolstering 'Lack' with compensatory illusions of wholeness, stoke the reader's urge to become *multiply incomplete*. De-bot us.

C-4.

To toss a reader-centered wrench into the apparatus, to replace the 'ghost in the machine' implicit in more programmatic works: "a serene disemboweling of finer poetics". How can the text help trouble or discourage the proverbial 'good judgement'? Certainly not by emphasizing *redundancy*. Instead, pick a new fight. "Into such argumentative states" — to equip the language with the force of *suggestion*, not just a consoling suggestiveness.

Forensics. Words as deposition, at odds with the redundancy of fixed structure — the posing from a variety of angles makes them so. Whereas "you are small print outside an older order". And reading: "for an ideolog, I'm deleted". "'We' is a time-biased brick shit-house" — prepositioned within that "serial solidity of the propertied": usually in thrall to narrative, membered to hegemony.

More drastically, when it seems as if part of our split personality has an accomplice: "dotty-mouthed social self / emergent, rampant". In a disjunctiveness (or disassociativeness or perversity) of insurgent device, we confront words of social sufferance, of inflicted social materiality, resonating through manifold protective layers of formality & fecundity. As if the reader's body as a surface of social inscription could become a matter of reversible tattoos. Readability... preoperative... postoperative... "—to-be-honed."

C-5.

“Complete sense?”

Surprise makes hope — for all of us in a ‘future anterior’ — “in havoc”. As twins: turbulence & information. Set off the social geiger counter. Catastrophe exigency. (Can you create *exigency* & then make it disappear?) *Strange Attractors* (or should that also be ‘staged attractors’) — as opposed to the mechanizing of readership by the sleights-of-hand of (conceptual or digital) programming.

Redundancy tends to risk self-enclosure, an anti-social tilt. Instead we ask: can’t the reading help produce a semantic “social proximity” — “a social, intersubjective mirror”... “—or perhaps flaunt of suprajativity”. We’re calling for a counter-hegemony of made-possible gentleness, a ‘forethrow’ of social possibility.

Out of the Past: “comeuppance scissions daft hope”.

Fun is fun.

Fight the future.