

***The Barricades Project, the Life-Long Poem, and the Politics of Form***  
**Notes towards a Prospectus**

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“I will endeavour to eradicate my own voice and allow instead the voices of the oppressed through all time to ring out through me, leap from my throat, and pirouette off my tongue—demanding that they be heard, that they be free, that they be the base of whatever we build.... I do not know where the boundaries of such a structure would be—it would have to go everywhere, include everything.”

—Ramon Fernandez

**DEAR COMMON**

*after Gerald Raunig's Art & Revolution*

I had thought this was  
Outside the barricades  
No street in time but  
A space left  
Uneven and cluttered  
With dailies and torn  
Voter registration cards  
Like a poem with  
Everything in it so  
Nothing you write  
Isn't it and  
Nothing you write is  
But everywhere your  
Hand over the page  
Is shadowed by  
Another hand taking  
Up what you've written  
And finding the  
Scale at which it  
Makes the most sense

It's not a matter of  
Imposing no  
Guidelines  
So long as they—  
Tinkering with the  
Art machine / the  
Revolutionary machine—  
Rise up from below  
Evading the narratives  
Of major ruptures  
And—constantly moving  
Permeable fluctuating  
A swarm of points of  
Resistance not crushed  
By apparatus—they  
Find their own way  
To the supper of  
All history's comers

I'm talking about a poem  
Dear Derridean discourse

The lacuna of every  
Word we pitch  
Brick by brick  
Up against what  
Contents and discontents  
We are wanting  
To wall out or  
Wanting to wall in  
One foot firm  
In the reals  
We have been  
While the other  
Steps off into  
The unimaginables we  
Haven't

Or brushing the dust off  
An old familiar form—  
Say sweet fringe  
Of what I think  
I'm saying—I can  
Feel your pulse  
Wherever I touch  
The hand you hold out  
To my place within  
Or without this poem

## The Question of the Book

It grew out of a dawning, creeping sense of where we were. Twisted waste of scrap metal piled high in Burtynskian half-light, multiple worlds (“first” to “third”) overlapping in increasingly compressed urban spaces, scorched earth where sand was made oil, a car-choked “freeway,” a loved one wasted by cancer, voting restricted to some televised “talent” contest, incessant texts and tweets, an endless stream of truck-born containers in and out of the city, many of them with the word “CAPITAL” blatantly printed on their sides, some dead turtles on a tropical beach, albatross with their stomachs crammed full of plastic bottle tops and disposable lighters. The conditions themselves crying out. Where can I find a “cognitive map” for all of this? At the gas station up ahead, peaking out of oil? Everywhere walls went up, everywhere the struggle to pull walls down. Try temporary autonomies, fleeting affinities, coming insurrections which are—always—*coming*. Try a “Barricades Project.” It can be made of words—it (power/revolution) always is. Tear them out of text and put them up against the sky, across the street.

Mayakovsky: “The presence of a problem in society, the solution of which is conceivable only in poetic terms” (49).

**Capitalism** is paratactic, mobile, and poses everywhere the problem of boundaries.

**Poetry** is paratactic, mobile, and poses everywhere the problem of boundaries.

“No one has ever met or seen the thing itself” (Jameson 354). The map. Which is not the territory. But which could be of great help to us, if we can “produce the concept of something we cannot imagine” (347). A demand for the impossible I’m willing to spend this life struggling to answer.

It becomes a question of the book. Or books—which become markers on the map. First to go back over where we’ve been—the struggle that has been the rise, and endless expansion of capitalism, and the resistance and critique that has been its constant companion. Then to go forward, into that which “we cannot imagine,” but must—a space beyond capital, a map with no territory we can yet perceive.

We require scale. But particulars and procedures too.

## The Principle

The first principle of *The Barricades Project* is taken from Robert Duncan: “We begin to see that the intention of the boundless is manifest in the agony and restoration of pages or boundaries or walls” (Duncan 221).

To write a poetry to—towards—or for “the boundless”—if it is to be anything at all—must address itself to—and through—boundaries (whether social, material, linguistic, formal—what have you). The goal is utopian, but the page, and its material conditions, must be faced first. This is its dialectic. You have to start somewhere. You have to start with some words.

Edmond Jabés (whom Duncan is glossing above): “The book breaks off from the book only to rejoin it farther on. So the empty space between two pages or two works is the place and non-place where our limits of ink and screams are set up and broken down” (381).

A barricade between works—set up, broken down—amidst ink and screams. A non-place (utopia), dependent upon the agony and restoration of real places (present conditions) (crying out). We find them in our texts. We write (read) them and name them poems. We push against limit—ideology, hegemony—hello, here is a poem. It’s all I had. It contains everything outside of exploitation. You didn’t know there was an outside to exploitation? This is the task then: imagine it. Here and now. In every moment. As long as you live and write.

## On Scale

Scale as *the* contemporary problem: the globalization of capital—its push to planetary limits and beyond—in Roger Farr’s words, its “escape from its human host.” Thus if poetry is going to address the breadth of the contemporary a *poetry of scale* may be what needs writing.

Rem Koolhaas: “In a landscape of disarray, disassembly, disassociation, disclamation, the attraction of Bigness is its potential to reconstruct the Whole, resurrect the Real, reinvent the collective, reclaim maximum possibility” (510).

I am consistently struck by the singular *unambitiousness* of much contemporary poetry. It would seem that, as poetry slipped from cultural significance (or at least was *perceived* to have slipped from *perceived* significance), poets have simultaneously retired to the safety of lyric introspection, becoming specialists of the quotidian, the small, the insular, the private—shrinking from the historical, social, and public. So poets bemoan the loss of “the centrality of the single poem,” and seek a return to the safe sealed domain of the singular page.

As has often been noted, it seems now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The complexities of change—of forces and systems we may have some involvement in—is an imaginary we (perhaps understandably) shrink from. But one of poetry’s “permissions,” the very nature of its “license,” has been to imagine the unthinkable. To paraphrase Bob Perelman, poetry may stand in a place we recognize, but it aims to enact a space that does not yet exist. To aim at or enact such spaces requires a capacious and elastic imaginary. It requires compression and a spatially mobile language. It requires cognitive mapping—the long poem.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis: “I take long poems...to concern things that are too large...the universe, the earth, our history and politics, the sense of the past, and the more febrile sense of the future: in short, plethora, hyperstimulation, an overwhelmedness to which one responds” (Considering the Long Poem).

## The Life-Long Poem

We call everything from T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (maybe 16 pages) to Louis Zukofsky's 'A' (some 800 pages) "long" poems; what distinguishes the life-long poem (to use Robert Kroetsch's term) is not necessarily—at least not only—its length, but the *length of time* over which it is composed, and the extended period over which it makes its appearance in print. Life-long poems typically take decades to write, and are typically published serially, as multi-volume projects. Thus they implicate a certain degree of *commitment*—from their authors, but also from their publishers, and even readers—as well as engaging the work and its participants in a process of *deferral*: the poem one reads, piece-meal, is understood as *provisional*, incomplete in its particular manifestation, with more of it to come—even possibly its hypothetical completion—in future manifestations.

With the life-long poem, however, such wholeness never arrives. The poem "ends," generally, when the poet's life ends—thus nowhere else are life and art so literally interdependent than in the life-long poem. At its core there is a missing completeness that similarly resides at the core of life: we never get to see the whole thing. As Ron Silliman notes, "entropy" is often "a formal element" of the life-long poem (Silliman 16). The genre proposes models of incompleteness. It is buried to its waist in the archive, its edges receding into scatter.

### A list of possible Life-Long Poems:

<i>The Recluse</i> , William Wordsworth	1797-1839
<i>Leaves of Grass</i> , Walt Whitman	1855-1891
<i>The Cantos</i> , Ezra Pound	1917-1969
<i>Paterson</i> , William Carlos Williams	1927-1963
'A', Louis Zukofsky	1928-1974
<i>The Maximus Poems</i> , Charles Olson	1950-1970
<i>The Holy Forest</i> , Robin Blaser	1959-2009
<i>Passages</i> , Robert Duncan	1964-1984
<i>The Martyrology</i> , bp Nichol	1967-1988
<i>Ketjak</i> , Ron Silliman	1974-
<i>Music at the Heart of Thinking</i> , Fred Wah	1984-
<i>Drafts</i> , Rachel Blau DuPlessis	1986-

William Wordsworth never wrote the bulk of what he projected his *Recluse* to include: it is a wreck on the shores of the archive. Walt Whitman produced seven published editions of *Leaves of Grass* during his lifetime (the first in 1855, the last in 1891)—each one

different from and longer than the last; there is every indication that, had he lived longer, the process of constant revision, emendation, and addition would have continued. Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (written and published over a 50 year period) and William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* both exceeded their author's projected scopes, ending in fragments and ruins beyond their supposed limits. Charles Olson and bp Nichol both died before they could complete *The Maximus Poems* and *The Martyrology*. Fred Wah's *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, Ron Silliman's *Ketjak*, and Rachel DuPlessis's *Drafts* are, like their authors, ongoing. Only Zukofsky's 'A'—after 45 years, 24 books, and 800 pages—is “complete” in any normal sense.

There are other possible candidates: Ronald Johnson's *Ark* fits the bill, but was very much a complete (fulfilling a pre-set, more or less symmetrical structural intention) work after 20 or so years. But I'm probably splitting hairs. Robert Kroetsch's *Field Notes* (1973-89) announces its conclusion, but that conclusion seems to be inconclusive. The question is, how important is incompleteness to the definition of the life-long poem? These latter texts are certainly part of my sense of the broader project of a poetry of scale. But, if it has a utopian goal—and I would argue that all life-long poems are utopian—then in a world where the realization of utopia is (at best!) still a distant, incomplete project, formal, aesthetic incompleteness is also necessary (or else the poem leaves actual lived conditions too far behind, and ceases to be a true poem-of-a-life).

Is Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* a life-long poem? We have to wait and see if more of it appears, but already its accretive structure suggests something of Whitman's *Leaves*. What about Nathaniel MacKey's *Song of the Andoumboulou*? In the tradition of Duncan's *Passages*, it repeats, intermittently, throughout MacKey's work; a special category for this poem—and Duncan's *Passages*, as well as Blaser's *Image-Nations*—could be created. (Interestingly, Blaser has as it were two entwined life-long poems: the intermittent *Image-Nations* which thread through the accumulative *Holy Forest*.) But for now I'll rest on my critical fence. Allen Fisher's work suggests the life-long poem, but the question might come down to being able to define the relationship between the series *Place* (1971-80) and *Gravity as a consequence of shape* (1982-ongoing); Fisher's work tends to “cluster” (his word)—a term that may in the end be the best way to think of the life-long poem (thus non-linear, thus broken, thus spatial, thus intermittent).

#### **A tentative typology of the life-long poem:**

- a) *Accumulation by poem* (pure seriality)  
[Zukofsky, Wah]
  
- b) *Accumulation by book*  
[Wordsworth, Williams, Blaser, Nichol, Silliman]

Note: a combination of modes a) and b) is common, perhaps even most characteristic: Pound and DuPlessis (though the series dominates over the book); Olson (where the series of letters gives way to the book)



There are also two sub-categories:

- c) *Accretion* (where poems expand in relation to the book)  
[Whitman, Hejinian]
- d) *Contextually embedded* (where the series is seen as inseparable from the context of the book, and poems not of the series, in which it appears)  
[Duncan, MacKey]

I am of course keeping myself here to the modern version of the poem of scale. With Wordsworth the formal *container* of the poem becomes more elastic, less “generic,” more diffuse, various, fragmentary—more a poem-of-a-life than an epic narrative of heroic and national proportions—as Roy Miki writes of Nichol’s *Martyrology*, “an open ended poem determined by the exigencies of life-process” (12). The long poem becomes a record of thought and reading, a sort of poetic day-book, a variously arrayed archive of literary explorations, researches, propositions, and theories—a writing that is as much an extended reading, a poetry not of voice but of *voices*. Rather than following some sort of narrative arc, the life-long poem accretes. It is modular. Branching. Overtly digressive. It is as much “lived” as it is “written.”

If I am to give a provisional definition of the life-long poem then, it would be that it is characterized by the paradoxical *durationality* of its *provisionality*: it is comprised of “drafts” (Pound/DuPlessis) that go on being drafted, without achieving a “final” form, for the length of the poet’s life; it is the *temporary* given temporal *extensivity*. The poem remains in the realm of *possibility* and *futurity*—a lure the poet is ever writing *towards*.

DuPlessis: “I start from the metaphoric presumption of provisionality—these poems are... ‘unfinished.’ By using this title, I signal that these poems are open to transformation, part of an ongoing process of construction.... In some ways, the metaphoric idea of *Drafts* was to write a poem in which every section was as if an incomplete attempt at the same poem. This mysterious, non-existent and ‘ideal’ poem is nonetheless always impossible, always implausible, and therefore necessarily always deferred” (A Visionary Practice).

## On Boundary I

*The Barricades Project* proposes again and again the problem of where its boundaries lie. Its limits are sketched with one hand, as they are erased with the other.

First conceived as a 3 or 4 book project in late 1997 and early 1998, the initial comments in my journal juxtapose the project with Wordsworth's *Prelude* as not "holding the world within the power of one mind," but rather, a process of "being invaded by other minds."

Blaser: "the *Image-Nations* are not devoted to my logic of desire, but to a nation invaded by what is other than itself" (30).

Other key sources for *The Barricades Project*: Robert Duncan's *Passages* poems, Robert Motherwell's series of paintings, *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, Stéphane Mallarmé's *Le Livre* and Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. To write a work "like" these. To write under the heading "contributions to—" these never complete, never bound works, as though what "I" made were a mere continuation thereof.

Jacques Derrida, in discussing Kant's notion of the book of "pure philosophy," refers to such a work as "a sort of architecture" which "one can in principle enter...from any point" (50). Derrida also notes that such a book is everywhere concerned with the problem of boundary and framing, pouring itself relentlessly outside itself, into its "parergon," its "side-work."

Jabés's *The Book of Questions* is key too—though I have come to it late. "That my books should make and unmake themselves indefinitely" is what I am after.

What DuPlessis says about *Drafts* seems to come closest to where I imagine *The Barricades Project* "aims," but what Wordsworth attempted (a response to the failure of the revolution), and what he produced (a series of failed and incomplete books), comes closer to what the *Project* "is."

DuPlessis: "There are as many generic traces in a long poem as there are genres one might consider" (Considering). *The Barricades Project* has always been proposed as a long poem which would contain—within it—a novel. That part of it requires this different discourse. I think it will also contain a book of non-fiction prose (*A History of Change*) and possibly several mixed genre works. But I cannot be sure. *The Barricades Project* is written under the imperative to exceed any boundary proposed within it. It is "parergonal," always beside/outside itself. As soon as the *Project* assumes a structure—a sequence of books, for instance—such structure is called into question. I had thought there would be a book in it called *The Red Album*, and another entitled *Fuller*. Now I'm not sure. Or they have changed into something else before I could pin them in poetry or prose. A barricade is a mobile structure, a provisional space. It may disappear tonight, only to reappear—in another street—tomorrow night. I can only say what *I think* it

contains, or will contain (even though what “I think” it will contain changes, relentlessly).

**I think** it’s first two movements are my books *Anarchive* (2005) and *The Commons* (2008)—though I feel both books will in time be entirely re-written, accreting more material from inside and out, and publication solves and solidifies nothing. **I think** *On the Material* (2010) contains poems related to the Project, but is not itself part of the Project. **I think** a book of prose, and a book on Parisian street barricades (prompted by a reading of David Harvey’s *Paris, Capital of Modernity*) come “next” and “complete” the Project’s first stage, which I have been calling “Platform” in my notebooks. A movement back into history. The second stage, “The Architecture,” has shape and titles (possibly 3), but is still too distant to be spoken of with certainty here. It is a movement ahead, into futurity, towards the map that yet has no territory.

In a somewhat spurious “introduction” to the Project included in *The Commons*, Alfred Noyes (Ramon Fernandez actually had no hand in its writing) notes that the Project “is a borderless structure. It begins and ends nowhere.” This is true and all attempts to describe the Project are tentative and partial at best—essays, in the true sense of the word. What seems right to me now is the use as an epigraph of the passage from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*. The Project is documentary to the extent that it reviews the revolutionary past, in search of a way forward.

Returning momentarily to the notion of “scale,” one doesn’t want to be *too much* like capital, but how else to prop up against it? I think with *The Barricades Project* the “project” will always exceed what we can point at and say *is* the “project,” an indeterminate shape gestured towards. It will always stand outside itself. It will always “fail” to appear as such, in its fullness. Its “scale” will remain imaginary. This is what it means to be “open,” I think. Rich Owens, writing on Rob Halpern’s *Music for Porn*, notes that that work

only exists in fragments—pieces from it dispersed across the face of print magazines and online publications. And the scattered state of the stalled project seems to provide a public record of the contingencies that shut down an ability to hold or read the present moment through the limits of project-based work as such. The present state of *Music for Porn* as a project bodies forth its failure to be reined in by the terms of its own making. The connection I’m groping toward here might be a little tenuous, but I’m thinking about the epic / lyric dialectic, or the extent to which “project” has come to stand in for epic—serious work built on a grand scale and seen for miles—work that subsumes the occasional and ephemeral, the work of distraction, within the frame of a totalizing or immanent scheme. Scale. Where size matters.

I take this to heart. (I suppose one difference here is that *The Barricades Project* includes whole books in its scatter, and imagines a life-time of such scattering.) But failure is key and keeps the project a pure potentiality (via its impotentiality). It is a project built in part out of an anxiety over project-based work as such, an anxiety over the barricade (as a

figure of any tradition tool or tactic of resistance) as an obsolete technology. All our tactics have failed—body forth their insufficiency, their complicity, their uncertainty—but we have to go on imagining—**resistance**.

I had at one time drawn a triangle (in red of course) over a map of Europe, with the points being St George's Hill (outside of London), Barcelona, and Rome (where Margaret Fuller, in 1848, wrote a good imitation of Marx's *Manifesto*). The middle of the triangle was occupied by France. This seemed to map its imaginary geography, and describe the positions of its first four books. But the map is not the territory. And such a specific geography returns the boundless to the bound.

One thing that links the books of this hypothetical life-long poem is the recurrence of poems entitled "Dear Common." They are addresses simultaneously to and from the collective—disembodied lyrics lacking specific subjectivities. But—as boundaries imply "beyonderies," and the bound and unbound co-implicate—"Dear Common" poems also appear to be occurring *outside* the sequence of books that make up the Project, attaching themselves wherever they will. This seems a necessity, if the poetry is to truly engage, thematically and theoretically, a history of revolutionary movements. As Robert Duncan (again) said best, the truly, radically open poetic must be open enough to also include the closed. That's another formal axiom at work here. Thus, the expressive lyric amidst constructivist collages and appropriated word-barricades. Thus "singing," but no clear sense of who sings.

## On Boundary II

Obviously, a boundary at play everywhere in the *Project* is that between poetry and politics, art and revolution.

Adorno: “What makes art works socially significant is content that articulates itself in formal structures” (*Aesthetic Theory* 327).

I think this is what I want to happen. Only I’ve been told the poetry in the *Project* doesn’t seem overly “radical” at a formal level. Doing without punctuation and normative grammar and syntax and resisting lyric closure isn’t what it used to be. But I think the “social significance” of the “formal structures” of the life-long poem works (largely but not exclusively) at the “global” scale, its architecture one of *the relations between an indeterminate and open-ended series of elements, and between an open sequence of books*. What does “form” mean at this scale? What does a cognitive map look like?

*The Barricades Project* seeks to take down the wall that is often seen to separate *formally* radical work from work that more directly addresses radical *content*. But then it builds its barricades where that wall once stood, looking at once into both realms. Or shifting between them—now raising radical content in a “tiger’s leap” into some historical nexus, now stepping into a formally radical assemblage of some sort—now for a moment blurring and blending the two.

Jacques Rancière sums up a key aspect of the *Project*’s work along the boundaries of poetry and politics:

Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.  
(63)

At once “readable” and resisting signification, flooding with political content and damned against the easy transfer of its “content” via its orientation towards sound (the “sensible”), the poetry in *The Barricades Project* is, quite happily, of two minds.

In *Art and Revolution*, Gerald Raunig warns against “the topos of the *totalizing confusion of art and life*” (16). The writer of any life-long poem would do well to heed this warning. Such “diffusing and confusing,” as in the “aestheticization of the political,” leads down a slippery slope towards fascism, as Benjamin noted when he wrote that “All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (*Work of Art*). Raunig proposes instead “temporary overlaps, micropolitical attempts as the *transversal*

*concatenation* of art machines and revolutionary machines, in which both overlap, not to incorporate one another, but rather to enter into a concrete exchange relationship for a limited time” (18).

Adorno: “Committed art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures...but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes” (“Commitment” 78).

I do not set out to merely write something political, but rather, to write in a world where *there isn't anything but the political* to write about—a world where *everything is political* (as it is in ours).

Adorno: “It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads” (“Commitment” 78).

Maybe it’s true poetry is no place for addressing political (practical) alternatives—I’m not sure and certainly the *Project* wanders along the borders of alternatives and didacticism—but I have found it at least a place for the expression of political *affect*—the desire for collectivity and liberty, the hope for a future, the grief over what we have lost and suffered. At the same time it can be a place to resist negative political affects—fear, suspicion, alienation, self-interest, powerlessness, disenfranchisement. *The Barricades Project feels* like freedom, and it **feels** like the open air of the commons, and that’s what keeps it interesting, as poetry, for me.

## Spaces of Hope

In going over the history and wild variety of utopian schemes—reading back into the historical “search for alternatives” in the context of our present, supposedly post-historical moment where there are “no alternatives” to capital’s domination—David Harvey (one of *The Barricades Project*’s patron saints) draws the line, and marks the ligature, between what Marx called “fantastic pictures of future society” and actual, material built space.

Imaginative free play is inextricably bound to the existence of authority and restrictive forms of governance.... Confronting this relationship between spatial play and authoritarianism must, therefore, lie at the heart of any regenerative politics that attempts to resurrect utopian ideals. (Harvey 163)

Harvey continues:

Closure (the making of something) of any sort contains its own authority because to materialize any one design, no matter how playfully construed, is to foreclose, in some cases temporarily but in other instances permanently, on the possibility of materializing others.... The task is then to define an alternative, not in terms of some static spatial form or even some perfected emancipatory process. The task is to pull together a spatio-temporal utopianism—a dialectical utopianism—that is rooted in our present possibilities at the same time as it points towards different trajectories for human uneven geographical development. (196)

One way of thinking through the life-long poem’s architecture is to see it as oscillating between the poles of provisionality (the barricade: imaginative free play and emancipatory process) and duration (the archive: restriction and static spatial form). It is both simultaneously—a spatio-temporal utopian poetic that attempts to give enduring form to provisional acts.

This is also to note that provisional utopian projects in some senses depend upon—or co-implicate—fixed and therefore authoritarian institutional structures and spaces. We can imagine the perfect poem/society until we are blue in the face, but ultimately there must be (there always is in a world as heavily “built” and overdetermined as ours) some “constructed place” to actually build our utopian projects upon, within, and from. We have to start *somewhere*. This is another version of the problematic of the bound and unbound which *The Barricades Project* seeks to historicize.

## The Methodology

Terry Eagleton: “We live within societies whose aim is not simply to combat radical ideas...but to wipe them from living memory: to bring about an amnesiac condition in which it would be as though such notions had never existed” (7).

I am, as a poet, a historian.

In *The Barricades Project* I try to imagine a subject position that is both historically located and at once transhistorical, a position that is located geographically and yet mobile, singular and plural, that speaks both to and from the history of social struggle and its mediation via culture (image/text). It takes particular sites and then moves over and through and across and away from them in a wayward, non-logical, and intuitive fashion. It reaches back, in order to find a way forward. At a moment of (so we are told) no social alternatives and a stifling imaginative vacuum around the concept of social change, *The Barricades Project* seeks to recover a history of alternatives and willfully imaginative alterations. As a re-reading of the life-long poem itself, *The Barricades Project* sees such a poetics as itself inevitably political—following Pound’s designation of the modern “epic” as a “poem including history”—charged with the sense that as cultural workers we must once again address the broadest problems and deepest structures that constrain and deplete us.

*The Barricades Project*’s poetics are historical materialist, via Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. When Benjamin writes

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes the costumes of the past. (261)

he must have in mind Marx’s dismissal of repetition in revolutions from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new sense of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. (15)



Benjamin is “correcting” Marx here—or at least salvaging revolutionary repetition from the dust-bin of history. There is much in the past, Marx recognized, that we must shake ourselves free from. But there is also much there—a history of resistance and failed revolutions (which Marx himself was playing a fairly early role in)—which we might do well to remember:

For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. ...In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it....*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. (Benjamin 255)

Recall Eagleton, quoted above. The *method* by which the past is “recognized” and tradition “wrested” from “conformism” is the *method* of *The Barricades Project*:

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized.... [An instant] in which time stands still and has come to a stop....blast[ing] open the continuum of history....blast [ing] a specific era out of the homogenous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. (255-63)

This is the “interpretive procedure” (Zizek 137) of the *Project*—that history is a text to be taken down brick by brick (word by word) and—strategically—thrown up into the street of a new text (a recovered/repeated history)—another revolution.

Slavoj Zizek, interpreting Benjamin’s *Theses*, offers the clearest *raison d’etre* for the *Project*: “official historiography,” which conceives of an “empty, homogeneous time of continuity,” “leaves out of consideration what *failed* in history” (138). Historical materialism (as the method of “the oppressed classes”) “appropriates the past in so far as the past already contains—in the form of what failed, of what was extirpated—the dimension of the future.”

And the only field in which we can speak of such an appropriation of the past that the present itself ‘redeems’ it retrospectively—where the past itself is thus included in the present—is that of the signifier ...[T]he revolution accomplishes a ‘tiger’s leap into the past’ not because it is in search of a kind of support in the past, in tradition, but in so far as this past which repeats itself in the revolution ‘comes from the future’—was already in itself pregnant with the open dimension of the future.” (140-42)

Failure, here, is the very inexhaustible potential of the past: that which has failed is *not yet used up*, its potential as yet not fully tapped. Failure is futurity.

That history is a *text*, and its “appropriation” occurs at the level of the *signifier*, directs the *Project*’s reading strategy: the building of barricades out of historical (and literary) material.

The road forward looks back. The angel of history. The “constellation” our era forms with definite earlier ones (Benjamin 263). To which and from which we make our “tiger’s leap”—Spain, July 1936—St. George’s Hill, 1649—Europe 1848—Paris 1830, 1848, 1871—Chiapas Mexico, 1994—monad after monad blasted out of forgetting.

**“POLITICS IS ITS OWN WORLD, WHOSE ACTORS HAVE PROBABLY  
NEVER HEARD OF ‘THE IDEA OF ORDER AT KEY WEST’”**

1.

But has the “Idea  
of Order at Key West”  
heard of the actors  
slipping in and out of character  
in the world of politics?  
One there sings  
beyond the genius  
of the sea  
a species of speech  
that no longer has  
the equipment to respond  
to a general audience—  
you see—even this  
dying discourse  
is not ours—inhuman  
but not a mask  
even in politics’ own world  
we are the makers  
of our songs  
speech of air amongst  
the meaningless plungings  
aesthetics demands  
will to change  
power to speak  
*through* and *between* the words  
that lurch in a sentence—  
that blind spot just beyond  
the last strand of punctuation  
wondering why it is  
I constantly write poems  
in which the actors vote  
on the necessity of their worlds.

2.

We could imagine  
better communicative equipment  
something that takes molecules  
instead of words  
from one being to another

implanting the material sense  
of the sender in the receiver  
re-launching new struggles  
whenever the earlier ones  
are betrayed—  
whose spirit is this?  
Someone would ask  
and not knowing  
the outer voice of sky and cloud  
think its art makes  
nothing happen  
(just quasi-synaesthetic effects)  
but that *is* something  
wandering minstrel of ghostly towns—  
see—you made *nothing* happen  
not even an abyss  
and that has made  
all the difference  
brooding glade  
coral-walled hum.

3.

It's the magic  
of perspective  
Frank Stella's protractor  
drawing the arcs  
of round Arabian cities  
no bombs or burkhas console  
no clichés elevate  
this debate between  
poetry and politics  
lifts into the worldly  
wisdom we call  
"the media" as though  
it were mere material  
to work our wisdoms through  
and not theatrical distances  
bronze shadows  
an archipelago of the embattled  
fiddling with their verses  
while empires happily burn  
and if all efforts  
to render politics aesthetic  
culminate in war

I'll be damned if I don't  
fire the first shot  
or at least see if the reverse  
is true and render  
my aesthetics political—  
temporary overlaps  
where the archipelagos  
bump into one another  
in a history of currents  
and bridges.

4.

Tell me  
Theodore Adorno  
if you know  
is art a logic  
that makes reason ridiculous?  
Or if it isn't  
tell me why the singing ended  
when the song wasn't even sung  
tilting in the air  
at wintering windmills  
unfixed emblazoned zones  
and firey poles—  
are these means really inappropriate  
to our appropriated ends?  
We should rather  
the language of the pamphlet  
when we took to  
our flaming internet sites  
thinking politics lacked poetry  
when it was poetry  
lost its politics  
and set off for a world  
of *its* own—those  
archipelagos again—  
dear everything  
I could ever imagine  
addressing—  
I think there's still a place  
call it a compression zone—  
the art of activism  
the activism of art—  
where words are

flagrant portals  
dimley starred with  
the voices of others  
*and* ourselves  
pulling worlds and islands  
across ghostly demarcations  
and listening to the keener sounds  
of our yet close breathing

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