

## **Becoming Unmoored: Rob Halpern's *Disaster Suites*** **Richard Owens and Andrew Rippeon**

[The following conversation addressing Rob Halpern's *Disaster Suites* (Palm Press 2009) took place by way of email during the last two weeks of February, 2010.]

**RO:** For all the books that come to us *as* books—most brought into the world with a sense of necessity that drives their being—there are a few that, for whatever reasons, announce their urgency in a way that cuts across the landscape and demands attention. Rob Halpern's *Disaster Suites* is one of them—or at least it came to *me* this way, as a sort of painful roar shipwrecked—where?—on the shores of a strange humility. But I don't think my response to the work or the conditions of my having received it are unique. There's a shudder and a simmering but restrained frustration in the poems that relays a desire to respond to the signal crises of an ongoing emergency. The book is a call and a number of others have likewise been deeply moved by this call: Brenda Iijima, Thom Donovan, Michael Cross, CJ Martin and Sianne Ngai have all commented publicly on the work. I mean, the *Suites* come to us—or at least to me—as undeniable and important, something I hesitate to say for fear of denying other important poetries. But there's something specific about Rob's *Suites* that at *this* particular historical conjuncture calls one to it and so I wonder if there's a way to account for the call these poems appear to make.

**AR:** Rich, I'm thinking about that call you identify in the poems, the accounting for themselves you note they demand. I'm also trying to think about the urgency of the poems, and that double genitive seems to me a useful ambiguity: the poems compel, and are themselves compelled. I like very much that sense of partial identity, then, between the poems and their reader. If not identity, then something like a shared motivation perhaps. I think this is why I never feel as though any of Rob's poems condemn me for this world of my making—instead *we*, the poems and I, are condemned, and this shared damnation is first solace. Or, not "solace," because solace is recuperative, and the condition at the scene of Rob's poems is not so much recuperative as first fact. I read this as a function of his very careful work with tense to create forms of momentary community, forms that never exist in the present and abjure the normal causal logic of experience and expectation as they correspond to past and present: As Rob writes, "*Who will have been here to hear this?*" I want to think more about Rob's persistent use of the term "patency" in the talks and readings I've seen him give. It makes me think of Nancy's "patency," the stunningly banal non-appearance through the work of art of everything that is the case, a revelation that all was always already revealed, a connection to obviousness. But right now, my instinct is to say that Rob means something almost the inverse of this; Nancy's model seems to have something of a power differential in it (artist at the center), and I'm not sure the same can be said for Rob...

**RO:** If I'm not completely misreading your comment, the question seems to be one of history or specificity—something in Rob's sense of the potential for art or the art object

to be not so much a vacuum or disarticulated space of negativity (i.e. an idea of the art object as the privileged site of a purity unsullied by history *precisely though* the bracketing-out gesture of history's full disclosure) but instead something capable of pointing toward the blind or non-sites of an historical situatedness that, on one hand, discloses without refusing this disclosure and, on another, radically decenters both artist and art object without dismissing agency. In the afterword to *Disaster Suites*—Rob titles the thing “Post-Disaster”—he says the poems “took shape around distraction.” Here the call to a center is abandoned in favor of the pant-leg-tugging news encountered in the space of distraction, the space *around* a visible center or a center that announces itself as such. The news—the signal frequencies that might allow for responding to a particular moment in its passing—reside in the corner of the eye or over the shoulder, anywhere but the place to which the eyes are commonly called. Man, I'm grateful you called my attention to Rob's theorization of “patency”—and would have missed the articulation of this with Nancy's “patency.” If agency is recourse to strategies capable of determining common sense—the sites to which we are commonly called—then in Rob's formulation the most useful strategy seems to lie in negotiating the space altogether outside agency, a dialectical inversion of agency that considers the productive possibilities in being a patient being patient, a giving up or into, a willful suspension *toward* others: “The patient paradoxically submits to the material conditions of mistreatment (conditioned material), in the interest of receiving unanticipated care”—a scene of “suspended action” or “interrupted agency” (<http://www.nonsitecollective.org/node/666>). A moment of *active* pause that leaves one open to signals of distraction and invites the intervention of others.

**AR:** This is such a lush direction in Rob's work, and I'm really taken with your comments on “the pant-leg-tugging news encountered in the space of distraction” and their residence “in the corner of the eye or over the shoulder, anywhere but the place to which the eyes are commonly called.” Rob writes about this in the Post-Disaster statement, too, and I think the term patency is particularly relevant here (though un-used, perhaps a kind of a ghost at the moment). Rob writes, “I had been working on *Music for Porn*, the continuation of a project that began with *Rumored Place*, but the writing was going nowhere. I couldn't sustain my attention, as if disaster had already made the world all repellent surface, allowing for no traction. So the work languished...*Disaster Suites* took shape around distraction”—and here's the part that's really relevant, I think—“Rather than lamenting the failure of my own absorption, I needed to know if it were still possible to hear anything beside myself.” And then Rob goes on to detail the “dailiness” of *Disaster Suites*, along with its radical social particularity: each poem (at least as Rob describes it) is addressed, and sent, to a specific person on a specific day. What I find fascinating here—and which dovetails, I think, with your remarks above about the “moment of *active* pause that leaves one open to the signals of distraction and invites the intervention of others”—is the incredible ambiguity in “the failure of [Rob's] own absorption.” I may just be a poor reader here, but it seems like that sentence cuts both ways: a failure *in being* self-absorbed, and a failure *to be* self-absorbed. I think, perhaps, it's both, and the subsequent sentence continues this: a personal “need” to get beyond “need”! I think Rob handles this crisis with a deftness that is both subtle and remarkably effective. It's easy to miss, but in his comments above, he notes that he's working on a “project”—something I think many of today's poets would be happy to say. But Rob, at

least at the time of his remarks, finds “the project” stifling, a dead-end, and I think this speaks to the *conceptual* conservatism (regardless of politics) that often informs such projects. I.e. the work as being built *around* or *upon* an idea—and I’m not thinking here of current “conceptualisms” (on which you’ve written in other venues), but simply the very normal practice of having an idea-driven *practice*. And Rob seems to note this conservatism, and step to its side. He remarks on that double-failure (related to the project) of absorption, and then immediately implicates himself in the need to escape need. That’s that active pause you’re noting above—an opening and a closing. What’s the word—cleaving? Both adhering to and cutting from, right? And while I’ve said too much here, this reminds me (like your notes do) of Rob’s remarks on “the fault.” He brings these up in the post-script to *Disaster Suites*, but only obliquely. But he’s got a more definite statement in the New Narrative anthology, *Biting the Error*, where he notes grammatical competency as part of a complicity... But let me go back, just a second before I stop, and say that the patency / patiency distinction seems to pertain here as well. Patency seems, at least from Nancy (35 – 39), to be something informing an instructive stance; the artwork (phallicly?) *shows*. And perhaps that’s *also* something “conservative” in the sense above. But patiency seems to make a space for *being-shown*. In the *Disaster Suites* statement, Rob’s stance is one of discovery—and not through content, but through practice. I’m sure there’s more to be said here, but for a later date.

**RO:** Yeah, thanks for calling my attention to the comment in “Post-Disaster” on absorption—the failure *in* absorption to absorb or be (productively) absorbed. It’s a hard word to parse out in the thick of Rob’s afterword, but the ambiguous character of its usage here seems essential and I do think, as you do, that it’s articulated with this notion of distraction *and also* some idea of active surrender (patiency) that turns away from the forms of (self) absorption—forms of focus and attention— that make large-scale project-based work possible. In *Disaster Suites* the space of attention is in fact the space that disrupts attention—in other words, there’s a being-absorbed in something which is not properly the object of absorption. And maybe the present state of *Music for Porn* as it’s available to us tells us something about the sort of failure Rob’s talking about. I’m thinking from the hip, but so far *Music for Porn* 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 reigned 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. In the *Disaster Suites* afterword—which I read as a skeleton key to the poems rather than an apologia that masks them—Rob mentions Thom Donovan’s suggestion that he imagine “disaster” etymologically, “in relation to the stars.” Taking up Thom’s suggestion Rob says, “So I began considering disaster as the state of being delinked from stellar guidance *as when one’s eyes like stars escape their spheres* unmoored from the visible constellations, dissociated from the horoscope and other forms of totalizing

organization...” The pull for Rob is toward a smaller scale, a sort of daily or guerilla practice that reduces itself, disperses itself, casts itself into shadows between mapped constellations and aspires to give itself wholly to contingency. In terms of a careful theorization this is more your territory, but this sounds to my ear like an argument for the strategic necessity of a rigorously reimagined lyric. You’ve been doing a lot of careful thinking along these lines specifically through *Disaster Suites*—particularly around mention of the lyric. Can you talk a little about this because I think, in your reading of the *Disaster Suites* afterword, the question of size falls against the space between the public and private, the space of an irreconcilable antagonism.

**AR:** Rich, I’m glad you’re calling these moments to attention. I’ve never been satisfied with my own reading of that remark on “disaster” in the end-note. I guess it’s a bit of malaise after three years of grad seminars where everyone (myself most of all!) wants to claim “ethical” this and “ethical” that.... And that remark always made me think of Blanchot (so seductive a thinker re: disaster...), and I would end up pulling up short of an avenue of thought that I myself was wary of going down. But what you’re pointing to gets me thinking about this from a fresh perspective. I think Blanchot’s argument is something to the effect that true disaster is *so* disastrous that it renders its own recognition impossible; i.e. the coordinates by which we measure trauma etc. are themselves subject to disaster.... But what you’re pointing me toward (just by quoting the rest of the relevant remarks!) says something different than this:

Taking up Thom’s suggestion Rob says, “So I began considering disaster as the state of being delinked from stellar guidance *as when one’s eyes like stars escape their spheres* unmoored from the visible constellations, dissociated from the horoscope and other forms of totalizing organization...” The pull for Rob is toward a smaller scale, a sort of daily or guerilla practice that reduces itself, disperses itself, casts itself into shadows between mapped constellations and aspires to give itself wholly to contingency.

I really like this! Disaster not as shattering of coordinates right along with whatever other trauma there may be, but a much quieter movement; Rob writes “delinked,” I’m even thinking now a form of “dis-orientation.” And that’s so useful for getting us away from our own seductions of witness, mourning etc. that have plagued lyric since Adorno. To think of lyric here as a form of “dis-orientation,” it allows for us to think a responsive lyric, a contingent lyric, but a lyric that doesn’t begin in loss, or (worse) guilt. That’s the crisis in representation familiar since Lyotard’s reading of Newman, the sublime of the avant-garde, a cut in time produced by trauma and remembered by art, and so forth (and which Ranciere has thoroughly exploded: Lyotard cobbles Burke’s empirical and Kant’s conceptual sublime, and Ranciere notes that the resulting “unrepresentable” of the avant-garde is an imposition of retrograde criteria upon practice that presumes to be forward-thinking...). But Rob’s practice looks in a different direction. What if dis-orientation (unlike my previous thinking of it) is a form of acknowledging, but not directly following, compromised coordinates? So here’s a stretch, but I’m thinking about the break between Levertov and Duncan. His point was that despite what she might have intended, there was no uncompromised place from which Levertov might levy a critique

via the poem upon a social situation she found unsatisfying. But if we are dis-oriented, out of coordinates, wandering, under this etymological disaster, we aren't claiming any such exemption, but through our errancy we produce alternate modes of knowing, seeing, traveling, singing, etc. The boat may have been launched from—and we may even hope to return to—the same shores, but *under disaster*, under dis-orientation, engaged in errancy, there's space to sing? You've made me re-think my approach to *Disaster Suites* now. I had taken aspects of Rob's end-note as a form of self-excoriation—"There must be some bad faith in this," Rob writes, "as if the lyrics were aiming to console my disbelief in the world *or to take revenge on it* while still doubting whether the poem can do or say anything other than what the world is already doing and saying."—but now I'm mulling over whether or not (bad) faith is itself part of a system of coordinates from which disaster has the potential to release us? And this isn't a release from, but perhaps *into* responsibility? The more so, because one is de-linked (in that great phrasing) from any standards or modes of recognition or analysis that would have let one know "when the experiment was over" or had accomplished its "goal." And this hasn't gotten to your remarks on lyric, which are undeniably pertinent, and also point us back in the direction of disaster and responsibility etc. Because I would assume that Rob's intuition of a "bad faith" in his lyric practice is an index of how sedimented poetics are today with the residue of recent language-oriented critiques of the voice, of a metaphysics of presence perpetuated through the poem, the fiction of authenticity, etc etc etc. That bad faith, I think, is Rob's acknowledgement of that strain of poetics, but also his recognition that what he wants to accomplish can't be performed via a poetic totally stripped of historical particularity, a register of embodiment, and the pathos/eros of the fact of *two*. It's bringing back, or acknowledging the *phatic* aspect of lyric that Robert Grenier shouts against in his "ON SPEECH"—like William Carlos Williams's remarks on the sonnet (all sonnets say the same thing), Grenier says all speeches say the same thing... and almost from then on starts drawing all his poems! But Rob wants to take us back to that moment of phatic contact, where speaking is an act of touch, singing an act of caress—yet informed by a constructivist regard for subjectivity, discourse, etc. Which takes us back (I've got to stop rambling with this) to lyric as a form of *listening*. And at this point—disaster as a form of wandering (not specifically "trauma"), errancy as a form of "positive" activity, a fluid position from which to sing while yet not exempting oneself from critique, and the historical particularity and contact of lyric—we're back to your point on *Disaster Suites* as a measure of distance and proximity. And I'm reminded that "suite" is of course "music" (music for dancing and ensemble, especially!) (music always insistently a part of Rob's practice), but also a set of temporarily inhabitable rooms (a hotel visit with friends, for example), a set of matching furniture pieces (a place of hospitality, intimacy)... Like Spicer's *Admonitions*, or Duncan's *Letters*... lyric as pulled *from not projected into* (contra Charles Olson) the social fabric....

I don't know. I might want to re-think all of this; your last remarks really led me in a new direction re: this text.... There's definitely a guilt that hangs over lyric today, but to claim that guilt or that bad faith is as much an act of rebellion and resistance as it is of acknowledgement of the co-opted state of lyric. And I think that recognition of the dual edge there is really, really powerful, and a deliberate choice on Rob's part. One I admire very much....

**RO:** The double character of the lyric you point toward—the interior split that allows the lyric to carry within itself a space for guilt (the recognition of a “bad faith” within fixed coordinates) and also resistance (lyric as this exalted thing imbued with immense power; the most privileged form of language, poetic language) reminds me of an exchange between Keith Tuma and Keston Sutherland on Ed Dorn addressing the question of how Dorn himself understood the relationship of his poetry to his prose (Cf. *Chicago Review* 50). At one point in that exchange Sutherland says something about “squatting down into the tenement of prose.” The exchange between Tuma and Sutherland is a little too complex to unpack here—and not immediately connected to our discussion of *Disaster Suites*—but what I think *this* particular phrase of Sutherland’s gives us—and Sutherland is himself painfully aware of this—is the extent to which the lyric, fettered within the frame of a persistent Kantian aesthetic, has been *both* exalted *and* imprisoned, effectively wrenched from the world and stripped completely of any practical use value it could otherwise have. The lyric according to this logic is like an angel or ghost—a beautiful thing that might be in the world but is not properly of it. I always thought Duncan was a scumbag for his dismissal of Levertov’s poetics (a poetics that at least *aspired*, like Rob’s I believe, to be a poetics of contingency), but your reading of that dispute *through* Rob’s work in *Disaster Suites* helps me now to see that Duncan may have been right—but in a sort of lazy way. That is, Duncan may have diagnosed the problem (“there was no uncompromised place from which Levertov might levy a critique”) but here Duncan fails, despite *Ground Work*, to rework the ground itself and instead abides by the rules and plays within the limits—which is to say, Duncan’s lyric is a *proper* lyric, a lyric thrown into the world but not properly of it. Duncan’s is a lyric that refuses to squat down into the tenement of prose and in doing so accepts the terms of this framing. But Rob works in *Disaster Suites* to rework the ground that Duncan named in his dispute with Levertov. Your focus on de-linking, and especially that renaming of “disaster” that shakes it loose from the language of trauma—disaster as “dis-orientation”—is incredibly helpful for me because it is exactly here that what Rob calls “bad faith” suddenly becomes something else when thrown into the spaces between fixed coordinates, spaces that refuse the map of constellations that would produce such a disempowered idea of the lyric. You read *this* sense of disaster as Rob does when he says, in his clearest formulation: “one might alternately locate disaster in the coercion of common sense truths about disaster...” For Rob recognizing where *his* body falls among others in disaster rather than accepting the truths that would exclude us from disaster offers the potential to rebuild an idea of a more affirmative sense of disaster that dismantles or splays open common sense in the strict Gramscian sense.

Trauma is definitely a part of it and is in fact the center—*Disaster Suites* written *after* Katrina and finished just weeks after kari edwards’ death—but I think Rob seeks to respond to these moments in a way that, on one hand, struggles to refuse the desire to represent (the desire to throw oneself into the saying of the utterly unsayable), and on the other hand Rob seems also to disavow an idea of the lyric (or, more broadly, art) as the static receptacle of a (never more than partial) remembering of fundamentally unrepresentable phenomena. Andrew, I know I may be muddying your clear sense of these terms and failing Ranciere’s reading of the situation, but I think there’s a double

movement in *Disaster Suites* which registers and responds. But registering an event (in the big sense) is not the same as making a claim to adequately remember it. And responding is active—like you say, the lyric as a listening or an order of receiving (surrender) but one that is active, willful, marked by clear decision. Man, there's a clear gender component here. But I'm inclined to hedge around it for fear of speaking too irresponsibly about the opposition you call attention to—the tension you identify between Olsonian projection (gendered masculine according to common sense) and an *active* taking in or receiving (gendered feminine according to common sense). But it's the active character of this taking in that, in *all* of Rob's poetry, troubles and shorts the circuit completed and sustained by the gender split. Sexual activity is writ large in Rob's work—including *Snow Sensitive Skin*, another work occasioned by distraction that, if I recall, also interrupted work on *Music for Porn*. At all times sex—fucking laid bare—is fused and *confused* with the language of finance and technology. Just as Rob semantically retools disaster so that it's not something that happens to us in the world but is rather something that offers an alternate way of seeing the world, sex too in Rob's poetry refuses the common sense illusion of privacy and compartmentalization and exists instead within the poems as deeply integrated in (compromised by) the social totality. It seems difficult, if not impossible, to talk about these poems without confronting the complexities embedded in the fucking that takes place in them—scenes of intercourse that at one and the same time offer sanctuary (I'm thinking here about your earlier comment regarding “first solace”) and sully the experience (the solace in sex compromised by the inability of sex to shake itself free of the economic and social determinations that shoot through and inform it as event).

**AR:** Hm, this is getting thick and wild—a wonderful forum for some dangerous thinking! I love it. That quotation from Sutherland is great—“the tenement of prose”! That goes in at least two directions for me. One, it reminds me of a talk I saw Craig Dworkin give this past summer at The English Institute's conference on “genre.” So much more to say about that, too, than what I'll say here (!!!), but Craig got up and spoke about the possibility of prose as a genre. The argument was parallel to the idea of whiteness/maleness etc. as untheorized categories etc. and, the same way those categories determine experience and yet are often treated as transparent, so too with prose. Craig remarked that our heuristic method of discussing verse according to linebreaks presumed a normal literacy, one unaffected by conditions like dyslexia and so forth. He then proposed that the block of text, like the line in verse, be considered as something of a prosodic unit. Not like Stein's “paragraphs are emotional / sentences aren't,” but more as an index of how textual presentations of the world in turn affect our *readings* of that world. I.e.—viz. all the “appropriative” projects based in fragmentation...c.f. the line, linebreak, anyone? Craig read the block of prose as something like Soviet architecture, a homogenous, opaque, and oppressive square, and cited a raft of examples after the advent of typographic reproduction through to the modern era (!) where the rectangle bears ideological weight.... The *other* side of this, thinking the split between prose and verse, comes right through the classics into the 19<sup>th</sup>. c.—Aristotle/Longinus etc.: What is it, Aristotle says a medical text in verse isn't a poem, it's a treatise in verse; Longinus something similar; Wordsworth also; JS Mill, too. The idea being that lyricism is something independent of form. And while, on the one hand, it may pitch it into a realm

of Kantian ideals, it might also (at the same time?) confer a radical and functional contingency on lyricism? It's this latter consideration that has led me to avoid as much as possible the phrase "*the* lyric." I think of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*—and this is your territory more than mine, but doesn't that title alone require some intense parsing!? Lyrical as an adjective, applied to the currency of popular song forms? As if popular song forms aren't innately also lyrical? Lyrical as nothing without a direct object to modify? And I remember here Wordsworth in either his Advertisement, Preface, or Afterward to the *Ballads*, writing that he chooses rude or common life because invention and idiom (cult of "the new...") are often mistaken for truly elevated experience—he calls the affectation of idiom the "hubbub of words." So it seems like Wordsworth is trying to reduce the experiment (and I do think Wordsworth is experimental *precisely* in the degree to which he mobilizes folk forms, attempts various forms of empathy, and considers his use and circulation of the currency of metrical patterns...) to the lowest common denominator, to cut out Shelleyan whim and explore what remains as the possibility of lyricism. And so again (or, previously?), the coin of Wordsworth's practice is *receptive*—a transparency to the circulated and worn metrical forms, offering structure and object for the performance of lyricism. Like Rob discovering new currency in the looters vs. foragers (that coin much worn) and finding lyricism there. Perhaps that radical contingency to lyricism is in fact what drives some to locate it in the Kantian schema, exalted and imprisoned, as you note. *Is* that exaltation/imprisonment in fact evidence of its functionality? If lyricism, or lyric even, is a mass of coin, then lyric—lyric after Aristotle/Longinus/Wordsworth etc, and not medical treatise in verse—is response that looks like no response, is faith that looks like bad faith, is an orientation to contingency and thus dis-orientation...?

And I don't think you're muddying the issue re: remembrance/representation at all—in fact, I think you're pointing to precisely the *why* of lyric especially, in Rob's practice. Ranciere's got a real quick example of two artists (plastic) doing similar work: one has built a memorial to the Vietnamese dead from the Vietnam war. It consists of bronze plaques inscribed with Vietnamese-*sounding* names chosen at random from US phonebooks. The other piece is a room with a large table, a chair, and bookshelves full of US phonebooks along the walls (10 – 11). One is from the immediate aftermath of Vietnam, the other from the late 90s (I'm remembering here, perhaps poorly). Anyway, Ranciere points to the former as an example of contextually-specific work: the anonymity of the Vietnam dead, the intentional cultural blindness of the selection of the names, all pointing to the larger issues surrounding the war (and the real lack of a monument to the Vietnam dead). In a public, plastic artwork, this one mobilizes its plasticity and publicity to contribute toward its meaning in the political context. The latter artwork, however, Ranciere has a problem with. It uses the same "materials"—public space, participatory features, anonymity—but rather than focusing attention on the social context of these features, it instead reduces to the now-reified isolation/solipsism of the single observer. I think that latter is an interesting analogue to what people *think* lyric is or does, while the former is an interesting example of what may be possible with lyric. And to bring it back to Rob, I think it's precisely these considerations that lead him to such a strong declaration of lyricism in his own work—receptivity to social, sexual, historical vectors, and a rendering indistinct of these as anything separate from one another. A comment

upon the incommensurability of the social totality (like the chair and the table) only reduces to the solipsistic individual. I remember our hearing Rob read new work at Orono two summers ago. The “is it in yet” poem that Kevin Killian reacted to. It’s not a place for the entombing of personal anxieties or a theater for sexual provocation, but—in bad faith—metonym for, or extension of those real and active anxieties in the inadequacy of the poem between *two*. Fucking and otherwise. The individual as part of, integral to that incommensurability, like the plaques that work with the viewer’s ignorance to activate it but not reify it, incommensurable itself, does real work and escapes static deposition (even if *escape-to* remains undefined).

**RO:** Thinking about Wordsworth and the mobilization of folk forms—that the ballad as form needs a qualifier in order to somehow recuperate or revitalize it, like the coronation of a peasant—man, my jerking knee coughs up Ives (selling insurance against the wrong disaster). In Wordsworth the modifier serves to elevate, right? I mean, everyone has an idea they know what a ballad is. It’s this degraded thing shot through with a sense of pastness, cultural infancy and a charming but sometimes dangerous rusticity that needs to be carefully framed and reigned. In the case of Wordsworth, his appeal to ballad practice—and lyric—is, like you say, considerably more complicated. In most cases ballads are nothing more than vehicles hijacked or manufactured to map a desired past onto the poverty next door—a sort of slumming that brings the black sheep of the family to the funeral that never ends. I mean, ballads are those angelic whores from the other side of town that rich men sometimes marry—but only in fairy tales (the appeal to gender is essential). There’s a lot here that needs careful unpacking—but, to bring it more firmly round to *Disaster Suites*, you mentioned the ambiguity in “suite” earlier as both musical form (temporal) and two conjoined rooms (spatial) and I wonder now how framing these poems as “suites” (within the architecture of the book, poem facing poem across the gutter and in fact conjoined by the gutter) works to further dis-orient. *Lyrical Ballads* as a name or mantle comes to us as self-evident—albeit in deeply complicated and troubling ways. *Disaster Suites* does not. And I don’t think any edition of *Lyrical Ballads* can be adequately read outside its articulation with eighteenth and nineteenth century antiquarianism and the ballad industry that precedes and extends beyond it (from Percy’s *Reliques* through Scott’s *Minstrelsy &c*). Now, however, there is no suite-producing industry as such. And there’s something utterly opaque about *Disaster Suites* as title and form—something that recognizes and refuses the illusion of the hearth offered to us through the ballad industry (i.e. that call to a folksy Palinesque down-homeness which is never more than imagined). These poems instead signal a desire for the hearth in the Heideggerian sense, the hearth as a source of core heat or site of being-homely (i.e. the sort of being-at-home that can never be for an alien guest that is nonetheless invited by way of a certain ideological *politesse* to make himself at home):

I’d be anything to wind you back around  
Reacquaint ourselves with lost sensation  
Invent a world to save us from the world

Just feel this — *damaged roadside fridge*

The desire to “reacquaint ourselves with lost sensation” here jettisons any possibility of nostalgia-driven return and seeks instead to reacquaint through invention. And when I say opaque I mean resistant. Like the boarded up door that tells us we’re on the porch of a house that refuses us. We come up *against* something when we encounter the figure of the book. The book is a book and even before we crack the cover its very title resists us. These poems, the title tells us, are not “ballads” or any genre that offers the illusion of familiarity or invitation. But once we take up the invitation to move past this uninviting surface and enter *into* the suites things shift. What at first resists our approach then refuses to let us go once inside. Enjambment seems crucial to the poems in this way. Once inside the book the poems enact a weirdly desperate embrace on the level of syntax and lineation. Aside from the poem I quote here—a rare exception—almost every line in each poem is bound to lines before and after in each poem, so much so that no one line can be wrenched from the poem without losing—well, in short—everything. The lineation is carefully constructed I think and every phrase is interlocked in a way that creates a kind of clutch—and clutch in a triple sense: a firm grasping, a mechanism that engages *and* disengages, a constellation of the not-yet-born bound within the limits of a single nest.

This—if it’s clear—comes back to what I think you’re saying about lyric *after* the usual suspects, and also back to my earlier mention of use value. Prior to the afterword in *Disaster Suites* the poems themselves seem to do a good deal of theorizing but they resist the reduction to medical-treatise-in-verse and offer instead something that aims, as you say, to be “a response that looks like no response.” And your phrasing is important for helping me think what’s happening in these poems. Because they do theorize and they do, at the same time, seem to perform, register and respond. But these poems are not tools. They’re not hammers or shovels and, at the same time, they’re not Duchamp’s shovel (at once torn from the world, aestheticized, ironized, mocked). Man—apologies if this sounds banal—but I think the poems struggle to imagine an order of value that allows them to critique and intervene in specific and interlocking systems of exchange (linguistic, economic, sexual) in a way that refuses the reduction of these poems to any sort of measurable value. And specifically in the case of these poems—or at least what I think they aspire to do—I’m not so sure their lyric character is exalted or fettered as I meant this earlier (my comment was a little unclear). If so, I’m not sure this fetteredness would be a measure of their functionality but rather a measure of their disconnectedness from the material conditions of their making. But I do think our sense of what *Disaster Suites* is doing is in alignment, however unclear my earlier comment might have been.

**AR:** I’m really enjoying the push-and-pull of these exchanges—moving outward and through *Disaster Suites* in wild centripetal circles, and at the same time, pointing some exacting attention at a few lines here, a few words there. And that’s not an aside or a whisker to this conversation, either—I think that experience is exactly parallel to the idea of the line you’re talking about in Rob’s prosody. What’s it called—*apo koinou*? Greek for “in common,” right; two clauses with a word or phrase they both share and depend upon, a sort of hinge in the middle? And we’re talking about value and currency, sharing, etc. I think this is all very much on point. You write here “Enjambment seems crucial to the poems in this way. Once inside the book the poems enact a weirdly

desperate embrace on the level of syntax and lineation. Aside from the poem I quote here—a rare exception—almost every line in each poem is bound to lines before and after in each poem, so much so that no one line can be wrenched from the poem without losing—well, in short—everything.” And I think that’s a perfect description of what’s at stake. There’s something like a frame or moment that Rob’s very adept at moving along the line, in such a manner that the abstraction (literally pulling-away—is it Creeley that says this?—like with a tractor) of any element of that frame or moment is unsuccessful. So, I’ll put a whole poem in here (a short one), but with the caveat that I think the poems also do that sort of sharing that you note the lines for doing. Actually, I want to throw in two. This is the section that begins on page 68 (and—perfect—the epigraph here is “As stars with trains of fire and blood, / disasters in the sun. // —Cry of the Town Crier”—that one who sings news rather than his own interiority; his song composed of the public life...marking time in the night). Anyway, p. 69, and then 72:

With no  
Arms I  
Can’t be

Yr model  
Of reach  
To reach

For things  
Not here  
To break

The grid  
The real  
Event like

Love this  
One can’t

—*be tested.*

I think this can be parsed into anywhere from two to maybe six distinct phrases, and only with a little grammatical bending extended beyond this—one long tortured iteration, or an array of short fragments numbering seven or more. And it’s emblematic of the stakes involved in reading something like this when the appended italicized phrase performs almost a complete 180 on the meaning to that point—the failure of “The real / Event” to measure up to “Love” flips into its similar untestability, an obduracy beyond question. It’s Niedecker, right, who calls this sort of prosody “lines looking forward and backward”? She writes this in relation to her late work, and talks about creating a common mind through the poem, *or* recording the experience of common mind in the poem (178). That’s something we can be skeptical of or not, but regardless, a prosody that renders problematic its own temporality, and does so in self-conscious attempt to call

attention *to* the operations of prosody on the reader in her own temporal situation... what a crucial effort. Like here in Rob's poem, it can become a "model" for thinking connection, connectedness, or disconnectedness (as connectedness?). Even in this radically torqued two-word /three-line stanza pattern ("grid"?), that reaching, that tentacle of possible connection is incredibly potent. I want to cite one more poem in this context, and before I do, I want to note both that epigraph's and this poem's re-iteration of the constellations / disaster we talked about before. Here's the poem:

Now we've cut off our arousal at the root we love  
Our newly de-linked centers getting off on a few  
Bad eggs see you can do bad things to them watch

How they perform on the night shift as others  
Get off easy on time accrued wearing puffy green  
Parkas thick w/the shit of peaceful dreams

—*things get worse when you come so don't.*

I don't think I did this on purpose, but both of these poems speak about love and connection, or love and the failure to connect, love and cutting.... I don't know if I can unpack the scene being figured here—"Bad eggs" makes me think of the bad apples at Abu Ghraib; "night shift" makes me think of carceral systems, too; but "puffy / green Parkas" and "time accrued" leads me to think of something domestic—prison, mental institutions, etc. In any case, all these are, of course, systems of division. And does the poem speak of how these systems depend upon our denial of humanity to those enmeshing in such grids of power? And here, of course, the humanity of him caught in the system is supplanted with an objectivity or instrumentality: a withdrawal of "arousal" becomes a "love" of "getting off." Of course, I'm trying to construct a reading out of precisely those de-linked grammatical units, and this might be complicated or contradicted by the very same lines I'm using to support myself. But if I'm reading in anything like a fruitful direction, I'd want to add that this leads me to think of Agamben's remark in his *Means Without End* that the figure for thinking human rights in the twenty-first century will be that of the refugee—statelessness, a lack of access to citizenry are for Agamben evidence of the fact that human rights are only accorded those who belong to nations. Thus, our new responsibility is to think a place for humanity independent of national affiliation (3 – 26). We might add to the refugee other sub-citizen categories: the physically impaired, the incarcerated, and the mentally ill. In any case, I'm so tempted to say that that temporal uncertainty, that refusal to arrive, the momentariness of Rob's reading or scanning frame as it moves along the line—I'm tempted to say that such a place is something like the new space that Agamben calls for. But of course this is my own reading of two poems here in our conversation....

I think this sort of function to the lines is something like what you're saying re: the poems thinking themselves, prior to the afterward? And only to go back for a moment to Wordsworth—I think why I read his remarks re: *Lyrical Ballads* in so positive a light is that JS Mill reads him in a *negative* light. For Mill, Wordsworth is like a parsimonious

housewife, economizing every last drop of the line, whereas Shelley is a profligate masculine spender of lyric energy and fancy, moving from flight to flight (343 – 365). Speaking of gender, I find these terms (Mill's) fascinating: WW isn't lyric, because he's too rational and too economic. But Mill is forced to call this feminine, because he wants lyric to be part of the myth of the Romantic (male) poet; and he characterizes Shelley's extravagance and "irrationality" as male, for the same reason? And along with this, Mill walls off the lyricist from social contact and efficacy (that infamous heard/overheard distinction; itself based in a prison metaphor)—Wordsworth's listening and transparency to the social (however problematic in practice) removes him from Mill's lyric. I want to reverse this, and I think Rob's work is in the vein of that reversal: lyric as transparency, as listening....

**RO:** So the other day I'm watching this episode of *Doctor Who* where the Doctor and his sidekick (in this case Rose) are looking up at the sky and watching on in terror as the stars disappear one by one, leaving in their wake a pure horrifying blackness. Pound's "rose in the steel dust" came to mind (an unmapped constellation), but so too did a remark in the *Disaster Suites* afterword. Commenting on Benjamin's claim that *Les Fleur du mal* was the first book of poems not illuminated by starlight, Rob writes: "I think the stars are extinguished in Baudelaire because the poems successfully dispatch all sanctioned coordinates of progress and meaning as soon as those coordinates become the pegs upon which capitalist production hangs its own hat" (*Disaster Suites* 83). Baudelaire, in Rob's reading of Benjamin's comment, willfully extinguishes the stars that steer. No star tows and, without the determining influence of stars, the disaster suites become "fateless," kicking against "the death-in-life prescribed by a new world of commodities that have themselves taken the place of stars in a darkening universe." Where the Doctor—with all the wild extravagance and seeming irrationality of a Shelley—thrusts himself into the task of restoring the stars (the narrative structure insists on this; the action is male), Rob, by way of active surrender, invites this radical negativity and gives himself to the possibilities of fateless (stateless) drifting that emerge in the absence of stars—like that amazing phrase you use, but maybe a little out of context here, "marking time in the night"—The cry of the town crier offers us weeping, mourning and not because the stars are falling away one by one but because they fail to fall away and instead remain fixed. The crier cries out because the stars offer disaster in the conventional sense, as wreckage, fire and blood. But it is the crying rather than the crier that carries the news to us—or as "A Drifter" says in another epigram, "*How you'd please me, O night, without these stars!*" (Baudelaire 143; Cf. Benjamin 267). The drifter's line is drawn from Baudelaire's "Obsession," where that narrator Rob frames as a "drifter" knows "the cold hilarity / Of vanquished men; the hidden weeping and the insult." The drifter hears these things in the laughter of the sea whose tides are determined by the fixed positions of astral bodies. So it's not an instrumentalization of the stars the drifter seeks in order to use them for steering (making the best of a bad situation; a *bad bad faith*). It is instead a listening to the wreckage they leave in their wake which steers—which is the sort of listening I think you're talking about, not a leaping in and intervening (i.e. Shelley or the Doctor) but a listening *to* the *cry* of the crier. Economy—the tight efficiency Mill identifies with the feminine in Wordsworth—enacts this listening.

Thinking a little further through your mention of Wordsworth—your sense that Mill’s reading of Wordsworth fails to hear the listening that takes place in the poems—an anecdote told by a Cumberland innkeeper that knew the Wordsworth family comes to mind:

Many’s the time ... I’ve seen him a-takin’ his family out in a string, and niver geein’ the dearest bit of notice to ’em, standin’ by hissel’ an’ stoppin’ behind a-gapin’, wi’ his jaws workin’ the whoal time; but niver no crackin’ wi’ em, nor no pleasure in ’em—a desolate-minded man, ye kna ... It was poetry as did it (Wales 113-14).

Bracketing out the incredibly demoralizing character of the transcription, if we take the anecdote at face value the innkeeper reads Wordsworth’s silence—which may in fact be a misreading of *active* listening—as a sign of disinterest and displeasure. But here Wordsworth tows his family (“*Many’s the time ... I’ve seen him a’takin his family out*”) but he tows them from behind, quiet, listening, grinding his jaws (actively thinking). The innkeeper’s possible misreading of the scene is comparable to Mill’s misreading of the poems. In both cases—and across classes—the work of listening is radically misrecognized and dismissed. I mention this because I think it articulates so well with what you’re saying and, specifically here, with one of the more chilling poems from *Disaster Suites* that addresses listening directly:

Everyone out there listening knows  
My body feels so way off the ground  
As all the big stores go reaching for me

I’m a zero-degree in global production  
Whose real event’s what no one hears  
A structure of value as it decays in time

Ungroundedness (the body “way off the ground”) seems here a bad thing—not exactly alienation or estrangement (there is no authentic self to return to) but the very specific locatedness of a body (“My body”) produced through a system of social relations, a body located such that “all the big stores” *can* “go reaching” for this body. Ignoring Barthes, I think the “zero-degree” here—the body itself—suggests the point of freezing *and* ground zero, freezing *as* ground zero (which, most might agree, means differently in a post-911 context). Freezing is the center, the normative state of being. This freezing is the paradoxical cold that stars, as burning suns with a merciless pull, bring to the bodies set in motion through their power. Apropos: a connected line from a poem in the last suite: “And what networks of power hail us still from this place beyond that dream.” And the big reaching stores, embedded in that structure that “no one hears”—where “no one” hearing stands in for a public incapable of listening—calls my attention to a few unsettling lines from an early Prynne poem: “The public / is no more than a sign on the outside of the / shopping-bag; we are what it entails and / we remain its precondition.” A

zero-degree in global production, a sign; not freezing itself but the mark on the measuring rod that tells us it is freezing.

**AR:** You know, thinking *Les Fleur du mal* and starlight, Benjamin (ur-Frankfort, etc.), your phrases “active surrender,” “radical negativity,” capital and “sanctioned coordinates of progress and meaning, I can’t stop myself from stumbling over and over again on Keats. I’m thinking of Keats “in embalmed darkness, guess[ing]” each flower at his feet. Is it ground-fog, poetic reverie, or darkness itself that lets Keats only access flowers through scent and imagination? Regardless, and despite the other thing he’s most remembered for—existing in uncertainty “without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”—he goes on to name them, quite certain although he can’t see. Which I guess I bring up to make the point that Keats’s staging of himself “in embalmed darkness” is really just window-dressing designed to pull the reader to the final question that controls the progress and arrival of the poem: “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music:—Do I wake or / sleep?”

I mean, what a poem, right?—but at the same time, it seems utterly in control of itself. And if we’re talking about lyric, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and into the depths of your incredible archive in your last remarks (!), then I can’t shake the fact that what we’re saying will sound the same in letter if not in spirit to their early claims: lyric as experiment in empathy (Wordsworth), as effusive, as ‘exhalation’ of pain or inner strife (Shelley’s efflorescence of exclamation marks; and then Mill’s Shelley), negativity or uncertainty as something of a radical passivity or patency (Keats)....

But I think we both share the sense that Rob’s work is doing something to revivify lyric, something that works against or under or covertly in re: these very familiar descriptions of lyric. The sense of a fallen world, a demand that we account for and remember that fall, the incommensurability of world and art (Rob’s terrifying phrase “as if the lyrics were aiming to console my disbelief in the world *or to take revenge on it* while still doubting whether the poem can do or say anything other than what the world is already doing and saying”)—these have been handed down especially through the New Critical isolation of art from the world and, on the other side, the Frankfurt rejoinder to responsibility yet within the same paradigm of aesthetic autonomy. And here I guess is where I’d want to suggest that Rob proposes something alternative to formulations that have become somewhat hidebound. Is this part of his fluid prosody, that we discussed a few days ago—that shifting semantic/prosodic frame that shuttles back and forth along the line and over the end—a precondition of that prosodic gesture, or an effect of it?—I find myself productively suspended (as in solution) in that aoristic space. And here I’m caught, again between two, thinking back to Rob’s note in *Biting the Error* which, more and more, I’m finding essential to my reading of his lyric practice (though those patrolling the borders of genre would note that that statement, and that volume, attempts to engage *narrative*...). In his “Committing the Fault,” Rob is using these terms that we’ve found so important in our reading of his *Disaster Suites* and its afterward; Augustine’s confession to the horror of “faulty grammar” (rather than envy at others’ proficiency) seems to open for Rob a place of productive uncertainty (though his richly gnarled prose is something I’m still unpacking). Rob writes

Insofar as a belief in proper language is alloyed with a belief in property – ‘*the self*’ being but a fiction of primordial possession – the fault becomes a scene of persistent crisis, a crisis of belief towards which Augustine’s narrative tends in all its various registers. And if one’s avoidance of the fault tacitly enacts a complicity with language’s good conscience, it is the *bad faith* of good conscience, one might say, that Augustine regrets having *not* avoided (55).

Yeah, I’m tied up in knots here, but I think I get that proper grammar is a form of complicity (and a complicity of performance, hence its tie to property), and Augustine, rather than seeking the “good” of “envy-of-the-good” instead finds horror in his fault / failure. Rob goes on to discuss competency in grammar as what confers the unquestioned transparency of narrative, and to remark that

Just as struggle amplifies our need to grasp what’s really going on, it informs a visceral and an intellectual apprehension of history being made – *and our participation in that*. Faulty narrative would be a practice whereby ‘the senses become their own theoreticians’ (Marx) – *the visceral and the intellectual, inseparably fused, like writing and critique*.

To the extent that prosody is a register at the bodily level of the rhythmic qualities of language, and that, complemented by semantic and syntactic expectancy, I find Rob’s line—particularly its hinge, its looking backwards and forwards at the same time (LN)—to be something of that “visceral and intellectual” register of time passing / history being made. To be suspended in that fault is Rob’s particular contribution to lyric here at this point, the creation of a sensual *common* in the faulted line.... That Rob proposes this as a feature most prevalent in *narrative*, though, requires some more thought. We’re supposed to understand lyric as essentially non-representative, right? As more mimetic than anything else? Is this the sense that you have of lyric in the last 100 years (c.f. Pound’s list of don’ts, Zukofsky’s objectivism, Olson’s projectivism, etc...). But isn’t it the case that our foundational lyricists (at least, after canonization by the New Critics) are mostly telling stories?

Even if we grant all we can, and allow the question all sincerity, in Keats’s Nightingale poem, we’re still at the end of a poem that renders human experience as peculiar narrative in an arena of accumulation (i.e. let me tell you about this bird; one time...etc.). Beautiful as the poem is, it always pushes toward that question, and while it’s nothing so formal as a sonnet or sestina, for example, it moves toward that final question with a relentlessness that—even though it’s asking a *question*—is still pretty insistent and certain in its desire to ask that question. Or is this just the way we’ve been taught to read poems? (What’s the poet doing? What does this metaphor seem to mean, etc.). And, ok, 100 years later, isn’t this how people still talk about poets like Ashbery and Palmer? (c.f. Perloff on the signature in Silliman and Howe.) What I read in Rob’s work, though, is something of a never arriving, always faulted narrative—and thus, isn’t his choice of *lyric* a choice toward the fault, a choice toward incompleteness? Never an ultimate question, as Rob notes in “Committing the Fault,”

...recourse to technical mastery over what can't even be related belies a certain *bad faith*, and this is what a faulty narrative practice would struggle to overcome. How well technique can adequately respond to exploitative technologies of exchange – *world trade organizations, war without end* – without struggling beyond its own effects, is a question that needs to be reckoned into the work of narrative itself through an engagement with its own technical *weakness*.

I'm beginning to think, in my own reading, that *Disaster Suites* is where Rob takes up his own question—a practice that resides in its failure, acknowledges its bad faith while performing on the technical level, recognizing technical proficiency as the work's strongest asset and fiercest limit....

**RO:** This is astounding. Like your earlier mention of Wordsworth, Keats seems here to open up—or render legible *to us*, maybe in some sort of distant way—what the poems in *Disaster Suites* are dragging themselves toward. But your mention of Keats extends beyond beaten-to-death appeals to negative capability—or at least marks the limits of negative capability and moves, to my mind, more into the territory marked out by Gramsci—and Laclau and Mouffe in their readings of Gramsci—a theorization that doesn't offer ways of naming and living with the irreconcilable, but rather a theorization of antagonism itself as fundamentally interminable. This, I believe, has something to do with the “never arriving” you see Rob's work enacting—that “suspension” that refuses the possibility of a final suture and also the possibility of a return to some edenic moment prior to what comes to us now as a world fallen long ago. And your word choice is incredibly essential to this thinking—what you see as Rob's struggle to “revivify” rather than simply return to lyric practice, a struggle to retool lyric practice to meet the demands of the present moment.

The gesture toward incompleteness you mark in Rob's work brings me back to your earlier comment on prose—and again, back to his reading of Baudelaire. When you address Craig Dworkin's talk at the English Institute you mention his reading of prose as something that—like Soviet architecture—bears “ideological weight” through the geometry of the rectangle. This is crucial on one hand because Rob's commitment to lineated verse is a carefully considered and decided commitment—and it is precisely that: a commitment. In his essay on Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose* (Paris Spleen)—the essay subtitled “The Beginning and the End of Commodity Aesthetics”—Rob writes:

By cross-dressing as common prose, modern poetry insinuates itself within the newly dominant system of commodity exchange where it finds a way to go on circulating. But this formal masquerade ... like the poet's “incognito,” is dialectical insofar as it simultaneously betrays and preserves poetry's social mobility, allowing poet and poem alike to do strange commerce with the “foul acts” and “debauchery” that describe the most common economic behavior under modern capitalism—*selling*—which not even the most militant of poets could definitively defy in good faith (2).

The essay the passage is drawn from appeared in the summer 2009 number of *Modern Cultures*—a British magazine out of Birmingham University and the location in the UK, although it may be incidental, alerts me to the interest a number of British poets have taken in French Symbolism, particularly Sean Bonney (in his visually striking “translations” of Baudelaire) and Peter Manson (in his defamiliarizing and semantically disorienting “translations” of Mallarmé). I get the sense that for Sean and Peter there’s unfinished work in Baudelaire and Mallarmé that, if developed further, might allow us to sound the specificity of bodies articulated with *this* particular stage in the unfolding landscape of capital. In the first of the endnotes to *Baudelaire in English* (Veer Books 2008) Sean writes:

or perhaps you’d rather have something you can understand, some anthropomorphic office worker, for example, taken on those terms, love is unacceptable payoff smirk / translate that as the ATM machine we are squirting through. but just as you write that on your arm then everything fluoresces & all is blue winter varied stars / we are held inside 500 cameras (Bonney 85).

Now I think the UK’s relation to surveillance is a little different than our own (Britain is famously the most heavily surveilled nation in the world; cf. the 2006 Scottish film *Red Road* or the endless references to closed-circuit television in BBC drama and comedy), but consciousness of the active gaze that interpellates (“what networks of power hail us still from that place”) is as active in Rob’s Baudelaire as it is in Sean’s. And so for Rob the “cross-dressing” that takes place in the prose poem is a cross-dressing *toward* the gaze of capital so that lyric practice can, on one hand, guarantee its own survival or continued relevance and, on another hand, open up a necessary space for further strategizing against the forces that, to use Sutherland’s phrase, compel the poem to squat down into the tenement of prose. And here’s where I think your recognition of Rob’s work as something that aims to revivify rather than return to an idea of the line as fundamental to continued lyric practice is important. As you say, a “technical proficiency as the work’s strongest asset and fiercest limit” resides in its own failure. But Rob’s inability to work within the limits of a larger conceptual project—his acknowledgement of the extent to which larger project-based work can never adequately respond to contingency—coupled with the open-ended character of lyric as a daily or guerilla practice that forecloses on completion—well, this makes me wonder now whether “failure” as a descriptive is still appropriate to the task of thinking the work.

In other words, I get the sense the thing that, as Rob says, a “faulty narrative practice would struggle to overcome” is not “bad faith” alone but also the preexisting and persistent conditions that make such bad faith possible (i.e. when you say of Keats’ Nightingale, “we’re still at the end of a poem that renders human experience as peculiar narrative in an arena of accumulation”). But these preexisting and persistent conditions shift across time such that today’s bad faith is not exactly the same as yesterday’s. Here the ongoing “struggle to overcome” might be better identified as something other than failure because the thing a “faulty narrative practice” (revivified lyric practice) aims to overcome also changes across time in an ongoing and interminable dialectical movement articulated with developing lyric practice.

Rob's essay on Baudelaire's prose poems is especially useful here. He opens the thing with a careful reading of "Halo Lost," one of the spleen poems where "through the shifting chaos where death comes galloping from all sides at once" an angel loses its halo "in one abrupt movement." The halo falls into the mud. The angel doesn't "have the guts to pick it up" but moves on instead, free now to indulge as he pleases and run among ordinary mortals, living in the world "just like you." According to Rob's reading of the poem, "Instead of clinging to the halo and nourishing a melancholy identification with its loss, the poem's angel *sans auréole* recognizes the halo's loss as a critical event, perhaps even an *opportunity*." And it's precisely this sense of loss as "opportunity" that, in a way, reimagines loss as change, temporally bound and not to be undone. Instead the site of loss is one from which the angel must take stock of the loss and then depart from. At one point Rob refers to this turn away from the halo as "resignation," but then the following analysis points toward something other than resignation and suggests the turn away is far more than a despairing decision made in a fit of utter powerlessness: "By resigning himself in this way, the poem registers an awareness that the traditional artwork or poem could no longer claim a unique value, and that aesthetic authenticity—in this case, the elevated status of lyric poetry—had become incompatible with modern experience, whose transformation, Benjamin argues [in the *Arcades Project*], was inseparable from domination of life by the commodity, and the disfiguration of social relations by the dynamics of capitalist production." In this way the "descent" into prose seems a necessary and active strategic movement—and this movement is strikingly similar to the architectural descent from the world of abstract value into the bowels, the mud, of production that takes place in the second half of the first volume of *Capital*, first published just two years before Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose*.

I'm not sure about this, but I think the "cross-dressing" of modern poetry as prose that plays itself out in widely varied ways during the twentieth century—in, for instance, Pound, Williams, Olson and so much of the New American trajectory no less than Stein, Zukofsky and Language Writing—runs up against a threshold that marks the limit of this writing not because so many of these projects failed to exceed that threshold but because the threshold is itself a fluid and shifting thing that dialectically reconstitutes and repositions itself across time and in response to the cultural forces that challenge it. And I get the sense that here—if my reading isn't entirely off the mark—the descent into prose is simultaneously a hiding out (recall Spicer's *Billy the Kid* as "a poem somebody could hide in with a sheriff's posse after him") and an attempt to unravel and turn a situation outward from the inside (i.e. Lenin's remark about capital giving us the rope by which we can hang it). So here and in this way I'm beginning to think about Rob's incredibly well-informed commitment to lineation as an extension of this work of inversion from the inside—a working that is *both* an extension of Language Writing *and* New Narrative, both of which share a sort of common denominator located in the turn to prose (the last refuge of lyric practice and something we might identify with the earlier turn toward common speech).

**AR:** Your remarks on the vector of cross-dressing in particular have got me thinking right now. I've been reading Tobin Siebers' recent *Disability Theory*, and like many

current disability scholars, Siebers reads disability as doing some of the same work, or at least sharing some of the grammar of queer studies. In particular, Siebers notes that “camp” and “passing” are significant within disability experience, and do some serious critical work. And Siebers notes that there are two forms of passing (at least) within disability culture: the one that we might be more familiar with, i.e. passing for *non*-disabled (i.e. refusing to use a cane or wheelchair, leaving one’s hearing aid or glasses at home, various other forms of cosmetic ableism...); and, in Siebers’ account, the complement to this, passing as *more* disabled—Siebers tells a story here about himself, as a polio survivor with perpetually weakened legs. Since he can walk short distances, and even this (such is our built environment) is a higher degree of mobility than wheel-chair use allows, Siebers doesn’t use a wheelchair. And neither does he use a cane. But he’s found himself opting for the early-boarding call when flying—afraid of getting jostled and having his legs go out from under him, needing extra time to lift his bags overhead and vulnerable below the waist when he does so. The thing is, though he’s aware that disability is a spectrum rather than a binary—and as one of the foremost disability scholars out there, he’s *responsible* for this notion!—he’s found that when he takes that early-board option, he *exaggerates* the limp he’s spent his lifetime hiding, to avoid precisely the sort of narrative (...) that unquestionably justifies his early boarding.

Siebers calls this the masquerade. Structural inverse to dominant notions of passing, but similar in effect and relationship to the median. I guess I come back with this because I’m struggling with Siebers in other areas right now (and you can’t help but notice the intimate link between poetics, lyric especially, and ableist conceptions of experience—You think my gait spasmodic, writes Dickinson, and she’s meaning metrical feet when she writes to Higginson...), and as in his passing/masquerade twinning, I’m tempted to think that squatting down in prose cuts both ways as well. That is, the actual practice of the block, on the one, and a masquerade into lyric on the other. That masquerade, like the exaggerated limp, is to step wildly (spasmodically) for others while recognizing one’s own internal interpolated rhythmic proficiency—to protect the acquired normal by performing a more radical difference. Or, not protect, but something else? Let’s not say protect, but...I don’t know. Perhaps, exaggerate difference (in language practice or walking) in accord with one’s sense of the spectrum of sharing that makes such difference a *common* feature (again, in language or walking). If disability (as a spectrum, something we all participate in) and language are all relations to commonly held difference, then this is something I’m inclined to think more about, perhaps as a way of addressing the bad faith you note, and its particularity in our own time, “the preexisting and persistent conditions that make such bad faith possible (i.e. when you say of Keats’ Nightingale, “we’re still at the end of a poem that renders human experience as peculiar narrative in an arena of accumulation”). But these preexisting and persistent conditions shift across time such that today’s bad faith is not exactly the same as yesterday’s.” After all, bad faith in its relationship to the good *can* be as Kantian as any other ideal—but I think we share a sense of this element of Rob’s work as his particular adjustment to or intervention in things to date.

And with this, I think I’ve got to put the period on. I mean, this has been some wild spiraling in response to a very necessary book. And I really share your sense of this

conversation as impossible without the intervention of each missive in a particular line of thought. Perhaps this is true to Rob's practice as well—he writes of addressing his writing to the particulars of the social scene, the bodies we so love—and imagine getting one of those poems in the mail!—but the overwhelming sense I have is of something akin to a field of vectors, bristling, but somehow welcoming; every way in and through. I don't feel nearly complete in what we've tried here, but I do feel as though this has perhaps been the best way for *me, now* to address this book. I'm really grateful for that, to Rob, and to you.

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