

A Fleeting Prolusion on Transhumance and 21st Century Poetics

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~ Lissa Wolsak, an American born poet long transplanted to Vancouver, gives to poetry the term “transhumance”:

as understood and utilized in late 12th C., early 13th C. France [...] an agricultural motion or migration, a seasonal moving of livestock and the people who tend them....but transhumance also was a possible personal ~ social act of symmetry, reciprocity and redistribution.¹

In this brief series of fragments—in which I traverse the ground of the essay without ever putting down roots—I want to work a sort of co-relative response to Wolsak’s own essay—“An Heuristic Prolusion”—offering a series of further prolusions—and at the same time make something of a claim for its impeccable *contemporaneity*—this side of the post in postmodern.

~ We have reached the “transnational” stage of global capitalism, perhaps sped right past it, but what of the “transhuman”? Not just the phase of migrant labour and “free trade” that accompanies global capital—but as a side-effect of this (as Marx saw social cooperation as an unavoidable side-effect of the massification of labour in the development of manufacture and urbanization, 16th through 18th centuries)—a new sense of our “transhumanity”—across the board recognition of the human, through which the human potentially becomes the borderless category beyond which no one can be pushed—from which we can no longer allow anyone to be excluded—“symmetry, reciprocity”—“co-mercy” as an act of planetary “harmlessness.” At least—we might get there—to the opening up of the potentiality of our “species being”—a “conversation about” which is, as David Harvey notes, “desperately called for.”²

~ Dante was supposedly the first writer to use the term, and conceive the totality of, “humanity.” In *De Monarchia* he writes:

¹ “An Heuristic Prolusion,” *Squeezed Light* (Barrytown NY: Station Hill, 2010): 143. Hereafter cited parenthetically in-text.

² *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 207.

There is therefore some activity specific to humanity as a whole, for which the whole human race in all its vast number of individual human beings is designed; and no single person, or household, or small community, or city, or individual kingdom can fully achieve it.... [I]t is to exist as a creature who apprehends by means of the potential intellect.... And since that potentiality can not be fully actualized all at once in any one individual or in any one of the particular social groupings mentioned above, there must needs be a vast number of individual people in the human race, through whom the whole of this potentiality can be actualized.³

This “potential intellect” or what Marxists have sometimes called the “general intellect” is necessarily “transhuman”—symmetrical, reciprocal, and distributed. By being “potential” it is what we are forever *thinking towards*, what the sum or cognitive map of all our thinking might form. Wolsak’s epigraph to her essay, taken from de Certeau: “Why write, if not in the name of an impossible speech.” The speech of the potential intellect remains “impossible,” but no less desirable, no less sought after, no less—written towards, in the name of, a possibility which remains—possible.

I won’t go into the topic of poetry and potentiality here, as I’ve written about this elsewhere several times. But I will remind that the potential remains potential only via its not yet being actualized. That as long as we are impotent, we might still find our true—potentiality—but equally, as long as we remain only potential, we remain in some senses—impotent.

~ The problem for engaged poetics, for radical and utopian poetics, is how easily poetry is wed—formally—to the “matter of capital,” in Chris Nealon’s phrase. Capital (like poetry) is fluid, mobile, paratactic—a conceptualist which appropriates pre-existing forms. Somewhere David Harvey writes that “the only form of resistance is to move.” But capital never ceases moving either.

To be tactical now, to be oriented towards change (which is how I define the avant-garde), is to use whatever means, in fact all means, necessary. If capital co-opts everything—there is no staying ahead of it—use everything. Just because it uses all means to its particular ends doesn’t mean we can’t use those same means for different ends. The challenge, the ground of struggle, comes back around to those dirty and dispensed with notions of the past—to content, to intention, to reference, to the contested picture of the good.

³ Dante, *De Monarchia* Ed and Trans. Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9-11. I have cited this same passage before, in “Another Duncan Etude: Empire and Anarchy,” in *W 10* (2005): 35-47.

~ Paratactic constructions, fragmentation, escape from the constraints of normative syntax and grammars—the turn to the self-reflexive exploration of the materiality of our various media (the media becoming the message)—the shattering of singular identity and coherent “voice” into the multiplicities of possible and interchanging and changing minds bodies genders sexes—multiple voicings and pluralistic phase-shifts—the abandonment of narrative—spatio-temporal disruptions—collage—streaming consciousnesses—projective verse and its fluid bodily breathing moving instanter ever onward—all these and more techniques of the various poetic avant-gardes arose to disrupt capital and bourgeois society—to deflect, avoid, abandon, escape, outrage, critique business as usual.

→ But—capital was already becoming and now quite clearly is all these things too—*formally*—that is, structurally.

→ But—bourgeois society still prefers narrative—prefers its hand held and its culture spoon fed in easy linear dollops of the familiar and expected.

Poetry—now—to operate as an avant-garde—within *that* heritage—that is, to be oriented towards change—now must I think pursue both (dialectically) *formal* disruption/refusal (to mean, to be, to fix) and—at the same time—new/different *contents* that are for capital and bourgeois society still discontents.

→ What upsets the bourgeoisie now? Poverty. Indigency. Actual—transhuman—social responsibility and reciprocity. Claims upon land and property. Anything that runs counter to “convenience”: the “rights” of other species; concern for the “future.”

→ What disrupts capital now? Fixity/stasis (“actually we’re not going to develop this land/resource”). The common (so long as it remains fixedly common, does not open itself to enclosure, “improvement,” “innovation,” investment). Anything that runs counter to the intensive or extensive increase of surplus value.

These are all guesses. I only move in the shadow of what I don’t know.

~ Wolsak’s method: “To equipoise opposing forces, in their moving equilibriums, their tableaux” (145). There is something dialectical in this—and I have recently been interested in the ways in which poetry’s “innovation” (to borrow a word I’m no great fan of) is tending to play out in a variety of dialectical moves and formations. But here let me get to the heart of what I really want to say: what might seem “strange” about Wolsak’s work—her crossing of what some (in the “avant-garde”) might want to see as recidivistic “content” (that the “unconscious is the center of

our mental life,” that poetry brings us into the space of the unconscious and thus “nearer the divine”) and avant-garde “form” (radical disjunction, collage, “difficulty,”)—actually marks her work as supremely contemporary. We are now going both forwards and backwards. We are now more than ever suspicious of boundaries classifications contraries and polarities. Parties. Schools. Everything organized seems an epic fail. We go back, trying to find where we lost the trail.

When obscenely further back...malefic

democracy broken open,

optionally steps through you

disappearing in the dips,

and the bourgeois body

pursued to the limits of faded money

wills not

to jump its shark⁴

Wolsak—with her interest in the unsayable, her return to the Provence of Catharist heresy, her uncovering of obscured and silenced female voices from a history of violence and repression, and her focus on the spoken and the voice—all presented with a postmodern cheek and accelerated “plenty, pastiche, and parataxis”—from the 1990s and the early years of this past decade—from a poetic work begun “late,” in her 40s—Wolsak sets out a territory we are still, transhumanly, just beginning to find our way across in this early 21st century. It’s no accident that this point of presences and attention is the one to wryly remark that the patriarchal-democratic-colonial-capitalist dog-and-pony show has indeed jumped its shark.

~ I wonder about criticism, the point in writing it. Miles away, I am somewhere about a long poem, along its sides or gazing up at its undercarriage, wondering why it must be long, what the point of duration and extension is. Critically, I categorize, build containers, boxes to put things into the attic in. Sentences shouldn’t end in prepositions but they do and we, as critics, wrestle

⁴ “Thrall,” *Squeezed Light* 239.

things into place. I can only hope it's in the name of some cognitive map of the space poetry opens. I only hope, poetry opens space. The long poem as telescoped tent pole expanding the territory, holding it open. On stormy nights as we cross the Pyrenees.

~ Poetic form is wed to no necessary politics. That is, there is nothing necessarily (socially) "radical" about "radical" form. Thus, once again, capitalism's own penchant for "open form."

And yet—the politics of Wolsak's poetic form are clearly stated. Like Robert Duncan—the poet to whom she is, I think, most interestingly compared—the spiritual and political are inseparable—really, one and the same discourse or utopian dialectic. I quote:

~ Soul is under erasure. I peer into the sacrificial machinery to find the interpretive tools. Sign and signified in defeat / detente. Language and silence, the site of resistance to denounce current economic hegemonies ~ and possibly to lay disarming alternatives to unambiguous genocides.

...

In world-wide ideological deadlock each part of the planet persisting in terrorism, and urging war.

...

Capitalism's everything and nothing .. bottomlessness, depthlessness, euphoric waves of consumption, mimetic desire .. disillusion of autonomy, hunger and grasp.. (149)

To denounce—and to "lay disarming alternatives"—calling upon syntactic and semantic fronts across which—in transhumance—the poet moves with the seasons. The poem as space of commerce, the pages of which offer common access to the common experience of the unknown and unknowable, the unspoken and unsayable—the "consciousness collapsing events" that we, humanly, share almost daily.

~ I want to put this down here, in part because I sometimes think I'll never write an essay about poetry again—in part because I think I can get everything I need to say or know about poetry *from* poetry, directly. In part because there seem to be more important things to write *about*, right now. And I want to write poetry, *about*—something. Though that—something—will sometimes be language itself. Words. Lines. Snapped phrases.

But this is what I want to get down here now. It's about poetry and politics. Poetry and the political—because, for one thing, poetry is a field of political action, but at the same time, if it were the only field, we would be in sad shape—so poetry and the political because there is important social work to do *outside* and *alongside* poetry. The poets I tend to be interested in know and work out of this double sense of poetry as simultaneously a necessary field of social action and an insufficient ground of social action. So poetry and the political not because poetry is an ideal political tool, but because we *must* act in response to what is going on *everywhere*, in every facet of our lives—even in poetry, even if we are poets—or else there is indeed no hope.

~ I have long dreamt of being able to completely erase the borderline between essay and poem, critical and creative practices. I have long met with dismay and a sense of loss whenever I have found myself writing—“criticism.” I think perhaps Wolsak comes closest to erasing the line between essay and poem in “An Heuristic Prolusion.” But she also opens the door to another possibility—that the writer might practice a sort of generic transhumance, moving her resources north in summer to write poems and then south in winter to write criticism too. Or—within the same piece of writing—one might move across discursive ground from critical to compositional concerns, even from constructivist (conceptual?) to expressivist modalities and back again. Both poem and essay participate in the cognitive mapping I think we are so desperately in need of today. But they do so differently, and that difference is—ok. Form and content shuffle here uncomfortably along a cognitive borderland. Who is herding whom? “Down etymological spillways”? “Standing inside ancient echoes”?

Out in those hills
the avant-garde is on patrol

at a sandbar
two ducks discuss the Haitian Revolution

things go on
investments mergers acquisitions

lawns being cut
by bankers on holidays

thinking of the death
of every blade

The avant-garde has often played with this boundary: constructivism and expression are mutually exclusive; expression is the ground of bourgeois sentimentality, romantic subjectivity, and the consumer “expressing” himself through his purchases. But—expressivity cannot be limited to the “individual.” There are “structures of feeling” that enable social expression. But—I don’t want to be merely—against—those who are against expression.

~ If we cannot—erase—a border—and Wolsak skirts close to erasure to show us really we can’t—then we can perhaps find a way (literally) to—traverse—it, transhumanly—and so put said border—dialectically—into play. I will, briefly here, consult two such borders in play in Wolsak’s “poetry” and “prose.” As an adumbrated conclusion to—or really just here the beginning of—this essay I’d like to keep writing—in one form or another—on this singular poet’s work.

First border: that between “conscious” mind and “unconscious” matter.

~ A thing is a phenomenological presentation, with a depth, a complexity, and a purpose in a world of relations, with memory, history, and also possesses subjectivity, appreciated in how it presents itself, speaking to the imagination (146).

C.f. the OED definition of “thing”: (N) 1. : “A meeting, or the matter or business considered by it”; “A meeting, an assembly.” Things as assemblies—as relations—as intimately social. Think of Marx and the ossification of the process of labour into the “thingness” of commodities. David Harvey: “Human labor is a tangible process, but at the end of the process, you get this thing—a commodity—which ‘coagulates’ or ‘congeals’ value. While the actual process is what is significant, it is the *thing* that has value and the *thing* that has the objective qualities.”⁵ Things are relational either in their embodiment of a process of production or in their presenting themselves to consciousness. But their “qualities” also come into this.

~ Quantum physics engages the term ‘qualia,’ defined as those temporary states flagging our ‘immediate’ reality... ‘no more than dispositions... things that can float free.’ The ‘redness of red, the painfulness of pain.’ The whatness .. that which gives things qualities. Qualia are *the* essential substance of consciousness (146).

It is in the presence—the encounter—with the thingness of things—their “floating free” as raw relationality—that we experience what Wolsak calls “consciousness collapsing events.” It is here that poetry is to take us. To the point of collapse. To “the boundaries of affinity and repulsion.” To the incommensurability—and the dialectic—of self and other. Poetry as primary—

⁵ *A Companion to Marx’s Capital* (London: Verso, 2010), 34.

ontological—politics: how to reconcile *me* and *not-me*? How to “point[...] toward that which withdraws”?

The Greek Philosopher Democritus is said to have coined the words “thing” (*δεν*) and “nothing” (*ουδεν*) in order to make the atomist’s distinction between matter and void clear.⁶ Their relationship was dialectical and codetermining. Epicurus was to add the distinction between atoms, which do not change, and qualities (which compounds of atoms display), which do change.⁷ Consciousness is a swerve, somewhere between thing and nothing, between that which is unchanging—and that which, in its very swerving, is perpetually—changing.

matter is bound energy a
thewy moth pushing at my knee a
connoisseur of avid moments a
hawk accompanied by a roebuck⁸

~ **Second border:** that between the human and animal.

“[H]ow might one speak, if verging on extinction. I challenge notions of human hierarchy and border” (153).

Curled-up bison postulate
lunch on a scaffold
lash flowers to a post,
give birth on a banana leaf,
outwith
of the forenoon
a little breeze

⁶ See Cyril Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 118.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁸ “A Defence of Being,” *Second Ana*, *Squeezed Light* 207.

along the eyes
made the camels kneel
into all things severally⁹

Transhumance also signals our historical relationship to and reliance upon (other) animals. Ourselves an animal, we have—longer than culture itself—met other species, being to being. The impetus is to move with the herd to wherever they season. Transhumance cannot only—cannot stop at the border of—a movement between all peoples. It must move—“trans” (across) “humus” (ground)—to the other species and as another species.

Duncan: “My generation but begins to see that in taking the Grand Collective to be Man, we have been enemies of the commonality of species.”¹⁰

From the transhuman we must move to the transbiotic—all life met as symmetrical, reciprocal—harmless—“where the same relation may be observed throughout the whole universe.” Wolsak’s later poetry—“Defence of Being,” “Thrall,” take her transhuman poetry in this direction—linking the evolution of culture back into the wider biological evolution it is part and parcel of. Things and no-things. Qualia. The swerving drive of the energies captured in human matter.

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⁹ “A Defence of Being,” First Ana, *Squeezed Light* 179.

¹⁰ Robert Duncan, “The Delirium of Meaning: Edmond Jabès,” in *Robert Duncan: A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (New York: New Directions, 1995): 222.