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THE POET AS CRITIC, CRITICISM AS POETICS: ON BARRETT WATTEN AND ROBERT SHEPPARD

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In his essay 'The Expanded Object of the Poetic Field; Or, What is a Poet/Critic?' Barrett Watten performs what he calls a 'thought experiment' in poetics. Part of this experiment consists of tracing the status of the 'poem as object' in postmodern writing using examples from his poetry and what he calls 'hybrid (critical/creative) writing' (Watten, 2007, p. 281). The other concern of the piece is to reflect on its own processes which Watten frames with the dyad of the poet/critic:

For the poet/critic both kinds of writing are primary; neither aesthetic work nor poetic discourse is supplementary to the other. Poetry and poetics thus form a dyad in which questions of a greater comprehension and agency are expanded toward new meanings. (Watten, 2007, p. 271)

To my knowledge, the designation 'poet/critic' is actually a fairly common job-description in the US, but Watten here clearly wants to intervene in whatever assumptions usually determine it. His intention to 'expand toward new meanings' is characteristic of his work on poetics since at least the mid-eighties and expresses his interest in relating the poem to the larger 'social logics' it is implicated in. However, my concern here is to critique Watten's slide from 'critic' to 'poetics' above, and explore its consequences for his argument in particular and for the poet/critic in general. I will illustrate this with examples from my own work across criticism, poetics and poetry.

Watten's critical argument starts with the 'competing paradigms' of American poetry in the 1950s, between the New Criticism of W.K. Wimsatt and the open field poetics of Charles Olson; between an emphasis on the poem as 'concrete universal' and the poem as a field of meaning refusing distinction between object and subject. Watten reads this tension psychoanalytically in ways which are persuasive but need not detain us here. What is crucial however is the way in which Watten, declaring 'I am free to argue both through discourse and by example' (Watten, 2007, p. 274), uses a sequence of examples from his own poetry and poetics as a means of arguing for the refunctioning of the poetic object in postmodern writing. Watten sees this as leading to a transformation of the poem into a 'hybrid object' that places it within 'larger cultural logics' (Watten, 2007, p. 278).

I am sympathetic to Watten's argument and his insistence on a poetry that bears its 'connection to the conditions of its own production' (Watten, 2007, p. 287). As he summarises and concludes:

The poet thus becomes the maker of an object that enacts and criticizes the conditions of its own possibility, while the critic becomes the site of discursive knowledge that explains and expands the resulting reflexivity of the object. [...] the poet/critic, [...] open[s] the work as site for poetic agency and social meaning to much wider frames of activity. (Watten, 2007, p. 288, p. 290)

It seems useful to think of poetry as a critical process, and the role of criticism as expanding on this critical reflexivity, contextualising it within larger cultural patterns. Nevertheless, Watten at points registers the risk he is undertaking by presenting his poetry as evidence in a critical argument, and indeed reading it critically:

It is important to note that what I just performed here is illicit – I read my own poem [...] I am sorry if you don't like it. (Watten, 2007, p. 276, p. 291)

There is a problem here with the dismissal of possible objections: merely stating that one has considered them does not guarantee immunity. What I think is problematic in Watten's approach is what amounts to a conflation of literary criticism, which I would argue is necessarily a critique of *others'* work, with criticism of one's *own* work which, following Robert Sheppard's use of the term, I would call poetics. In his essay 'The Necessity of Poetics', Sheppard argues the case for poetics as a 'writer-centred' discourse representing the 'products of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing' (Sheppard, 1999, p. 99). In contrast to Watten's sense that 'neither aesthetic work nor poetic discourse is supplementary to the other' for Sheppard 'poetics is a secondary discourse' although 'it doesn't simply react to making' (Sheppard, 1999, p. 100). Importantly poetics is also distinct from literary criticism:

Poetics can stop being absorbed by the metalanguage of literary theory or criticism by asserting its own claims as a discourse, a language game with its own players, rules and purposes. (Sheppard, 1999, p. 104)

Part of the background to this need to distinguish poetics from criticism includes Jerome McGann's wariness of critics' tendency to read the poetics of Romanticism alongside its creative productions as unproblematic description and interpretation. For McGann 'literary criticism too often likes to transform the critical illusions of poetry into the worshipped truths of cultures' (McGann, 1983, p. 135). Watten himself cites British Romanticism as a touchstone – approving of Wordsworth's Preface for bringing together the 'value-conferring critic portion of the poet/critic' with the 'object-making poet' wherein both 'set the terms for social reproduction' (Watten, 2007, p. 280). However, despite or perhaps because of Watten's defensiveness, it seems difficult to justify his decision to use exemplars exclusively from his own creative work in a critical argument precisely because in this context it seems to confer value on his work alone whilst eliding a whole range of other potential exemplars. Wordsworth at least aimed simply to introduce a publication of his own work and that of Coleridge, and in this sense the preface seems a proper example of poetics – a reflection on the thought processes that went into the creative work. To the extent that Watten tries to make his work stand in for an overall tendency in recent writing he fails to convince because the story is much bigger and more complex than one person's writing can convey.

What Watten's essay actually represents is far closer to poetics in Sheppard's understanding of the term than criticism. This seems particularly clear in passages towards the end of the piece which are far more outspoken and personal than one would

is still here for a little bit
of time
in its pure state leaves
moving
light water falling metal
barricade
collapses

(Thurston, 2008, p. 90)

the road to ennui a right turn and level growth in heat emptying out knowledge	easy take a left or you're there rising sea how long to keep information til it stales
I don't doubt that new solar system diverse planetary matters disappearing this time	I can't keep this closed circling cells following transverse traces into a new universe

(Thurston, 2009, ms in press)

I want to avoid setting myself up as a literary critic in relation to my own poems – they are here presented within the context of an academic enquiry, but one in which the genre is poetics rather than criticism. All I would point out for now is that the poem from *Momentum* partly borrows and rearticulates phrases from the Proust translation and the poem from *Internal Rhyme* rearticulates phrases from the Deleuze. This approach to these materials at the time was more intuitive than programmatic – these were the things I was reading and which simply fell within the purview of the materials for the poem, just as much as other various experiences, memories and images informed these and other poems.

I now want to introduce another discourse – something which is perhaps a purer form of poetics – in the form of a letter to my friend the poet Adrian Clarke in which I sent him some copies of recent poems:

The overall way in which I'm approaching the sequence and book structure too also seems underwritten by Deleuze and Proust. I'm writing a poem a week aiming at numerical targets – three sequences of thirty for the last book, now four sequences of twenty for the new one. The final presentation of the poems is in the order in which they were written, and I don't go back to re-order or try and bring out or repress any particular aspects. I'm not aiming at any consistency of theme or any continuities, but am basically trusting that by really opening up to the possibilities as they emerge, that the whole will have its own integrity, without being too coherent. In a sense it's process showing. Deleuze's references to Eco

underwrite these strategies as classically post-modern: the resistance to totality and unity and the recognition of the work of art forming its own rules in the midst of chaos (reminds me of Lyotard). Time is the crucial element I'm trying to make visible in the work – hence the title 'Momentum'. Deleuze:

Time, ultimate interpreter, ultimate act of interpretation, has the strange power to affirm simultaneously fragments that do not constitute a whole in space, any more than they form a whole by succession within time.

[...] It is as if to say in this way I make my life visible in the only way I can – not as unity, but as fragments (something about the role of death here, as well as the ending, that does produce a kind of unity).

(Thurston, 2007, unpublished correspondence)

Again I don't want to assume a straightforward relationship between this statement of poetics and the creative work. However, I value what I was able to communicate in this context as giving me more insight into my intentions and perhaps strengthening my resolve to complete the sequence. To some extent this revealing of intention is what I am interested in when I interview poets about their work, as with innovative procedures this kind of information can be useful for both creative and critical understanding.

This is another kind of poetics discourse that I am currently engaged in as part of a project funded by the AHRC called *Talking Poetics: Dialogues in Innovative Poetry* in which I have interviewed four poets – Caroline Bergvall, Andrea Brady, Karen Mac Cormack, Jennifer Moxley. The purpose of the research is multiple – gaining an insight into the issues these writers are engaging with, exploring their technical decisions and also testing out my own ideas about poetics in a writer to writer fashion. I have been interviewing poets for ten years and I consider it a major part of my practice as a critic and poet. The work informs my poetry writing but it also informs my critical work. The following exchange bears interestingly on the themes at hand. The context is a conversation with Karen Mac Cormack in which we discussed an essay by John Hall on her book *Implexures*:

KAREN MAC CORMACK: From a critical point of view it seems extremely apt and insightful. From the creative perspective, it's interesting to see it laid out that way, and I'm grateful to him for that essay, tremendously grateful to him, but for me, as an experience it wasn't like that.

SCOTT THURSTON: I can accept that completely because my understanding of your work is that you're not going into it with that approach.

KM: And I don't think that the act of creativity... I mean with the exception of people who say 'alright I am going to do x, y and z', and seemingly this goes more with works that come out of formal constraint. I mean Joyce obviously, when you think of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, there were large concepts which served as umbrellas for both, but wasn't Joyce infamously on record as saying

‘well, this should keep the academics busy for the next two hundred years’?! How one operates within any project or within the parameters of any poetics is very different, at least for me, as an experience than for somebody to say ‘right, I’m going to write a series of essays on...’ It just seems much easier to produce outlines and structures for essays and critical approaches. Musil, perhaps, is an exception to this in his work *The Man Without Qualities*.

(Thurston and Mac Cormack, 2009, unpublished interview transcript)

This discussion I think usefully reinforces something about the tension of the relationship between critical and creative work that perhaps needs to be acknowledged rather than absorbed by moves such as the poet/critic.

Not long after writing the letter to Clarke I discovered the work of the late North American poet Gil Ott via Ron Silliman’s blog. In a fairly short time I acquired all of Ott’s major books and immersed myself in his work. I decided to write about Ott’s little book *The Whole Note* for a conference paper in Poland on the theme of ‘ambiguity and the search for meaning’. Composed mostly in California in the 1990s, *TWN* is a meditation on death, dying, ageing and illness and uses the sorts of experimental techniques associated with Ott’s peers the Language Poets, such as ambiguity, discontinuity and non-standard syntax.

The process of re-reading *TWN* for the paper was a very challenging one as I’d already read the book in a comparatively impressionistic way, enjoying the freedom of thought and the relationship to language that it engendered and the ways in which I felt it validated certain aspects of my own poetic concerns. John Wilkinson in his collection of poetics pieces *The Lyric Touch* calls this activity ‘following the poem’: ‘following the poem [...] the reader can become involved in the evocation and enactment of a radical hybridity’ (Wilkinson, 2007, p. 196)

Re-reading *TWN* for the sake of critical work involved a process of re-examining these impressions, which were by no means compromised by the process of study, but which underwent considerable development and change. This suggests a version of literary critical analysis as ‘reading in public’ – once an interest is declared outside one’s own immediate concerns, one suddenly has a very different relationship to the work, one that has passed through to another stage of engagement.

My first paragraph of close reading contained the following observations and interpretations:

The statement “First to write them, then get to know the less and less form assuming” (Ott 1996: 13) suggests an open-ended, exploratory process of composition wherein writing is the primary act followed by getting to know what has been done, not unlike Jean-François Lyotard’s famous formulation “The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*” (Lyotard 1984: 81). Paradoxically, what is written then seems to assume form less and less, rather than more. Elsewhere the limits of writing are acknowledged in statements such as “I take time writer to sit, remove you to whom magnified parceling you out teases alterity” (Ott 1996: 23).

(Thurston, 2008, article in press)

What is revealing here is how readily I responded to the book's self-consciousness about writing, its concerns with its textuality and its tensions with formal constraints. I even include what for me is a vintage touchstone for my own work – the quotation from Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. In other words, this is me reading as a poet, as much as a critic – and yet with a precision, a rigour that was not present in my initial, more absorbed reading. I do not want to privilege one mode over the other but to note the differences and, more importantly, the interactions of these entangled activities.

What was perhaps most revealing about the process of entering into the critical reading of Ott was that the impressionistic view that I first had of the book gave way to seeing that it was far more thematically determined than I had thought and that its major themes were of illness and dying. This actually came as a surprise, and one that might simply have been the result of re-reading rather than critical reading, if you can separate them. However, it was this realization that Ott's book was concerned with the process of dying (I also found out that Ott suffered from kidney disease for most of his life, undergoing numerous failed transplant operations, and died at the age of fifty four in 2004) that connected my thinking about his work back to Deleuze's work in *Proust and Signs*. The same passage as I cited earlier in my letter to Clarke went into the paper as did the following quotation:

The idea of death as uniformly imbuing all fragments, carrying them toward a universal end (Deleuze 2000: 157)

Therefore this piece of critical work actually brought me full-circle in terms of the ideas going directly into the poems written over a year earlier, which were then discussed in the context of correspondence with a fellow writer and finally put to use in working through the complexities of Ott's writing: in short, the concern with writing as process and the interest in building a structure not by planning, but by accumulation in time.

Whilst I may have run the risk of repeating what I consider to be Watten's error in treating his work as exemplary, I hope to have managed this risk by framing my discourse as poetics. Therefore this paper represents my attempt as a writer to understand the interactions between the different kinds of writing I produce as a poet, as a critic and, crucially, as an author of poetics. Whilst I feel that I can inhabit Watten's poet/critic designation fairly readily, I don't feel that it really allows a complex appreciation of the interaction between these discourses. Ultimately I can't see my creative, critical and poetics as all primary – the fact that I am a poet (perhaps this is because I began writing poetry before I began writing criticism – or did I? Essays on literature at school) means that any other work I do is informed by this fact in the way that critical work will be primary for any critic who is not also a creative writer. Even the ordering of poet/critic rather than critic/poet implies this.

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