

PHILLY TALKS
#2
4 & 5 November, 1997

Andrew Levy

JACKSON MAC LOW
Reading Tuesday
4 Nov., 5 p.m.

ANDREW LEVY
Reading Wednesday
5 Nov., 5 p.m.
Panel
to follow

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Jackson Mac Low's *Barnesbook*

At first, I had thought to pick only one of the "four poems derived from sentences by Djuna Barnes" in Jackson Mac Low's *Barnesbook* (Sun & Moon, 1996) for the purposes of this talk. I read the book early this past summer and found myself swept up in its melodious whisperings and fugue-like (i.e., musical and psychological) recontextualizings of *fortitude*, *immunity*, and *innocence*; three words about which in consecutive order the first three poems invent themselves, and thereby, the meanings a reader may draw from them. In the fourth poem the *provocation*, "First whisper whisper in my mysterious was" (the past of BE echoes & returns at the ends of several sentences throughout the book), addresses the reception of a feminine listener's ear, "moving her ear," "her very ear," in the sharing act of whispering and listening to the "something Greek around and ground." I found these rearrangements or mixings of Barnes's sentences so mesmerizing that I was enraptured, only registering in an unconscious way that I was in the midst of a profound meditation on the relationships between speech, sentence, mortality (especially in *Barnes 3*), and immortality as the narrative of a form of 'continuity' ('contact') between Jackson's "treatment" and the original texts of Barnes's five works: *Spillway*, *The Antiphon*, *Nightwood*, *Ryder*, and *Smoke and Other Early Stories*.

(In an *Afterword* to his book, Jackson sets out in exact detail how the sentences were drawn from Barnes's works using "irregularly biased random digit triplets to lead ... to a chance-determined number of sentences in these works and to mix them" [50], then entering these groups of mixed sentences into the DIATEX program and editing the output.)

From *Barnes 3*:

"Was art's portion *morte* or way above them?"

.....
"Who knows what art shall add?" (34)

"Lamentation" and "death," "mercy" and the "niggard," wander mysterious throughout *Barnesbook*. These terms I take to be as much Djuna Barnes's obsessions as they are Mac Low's. In fact, as with Jack Spicer's correspondence with the departed poet in *After*

Lorca, I can't tell what might be by Barnes as one would find it in her writing (except for where I detect the syntax has been skewed as only Jackson knows how), and what's Mac Low. In other words, could Jackson (and DIATEXT) have juxtaposed sentences and phrases from disparate places within Barnes's texts while leaving their discrete and "original" composition intact? Might Djuna Barnes have written the following sentence: "One knew when one's lovers adding lovers had swung, / adding favorite portions for whole stars, / no thrippence portions where thrippence sleep returned, / worth no live crown where any man had guilty art / and business returned ahead of autumn's immunity" (29). Part of the difficulty is that I have yet to read any work by Djuna Barnes, which may be an unfortunate limit for the purposes of this talk.

Jackson visited a class this fall I'm teaching at NYU in collaboration with a friend, Ruth Danon. In response to a student question on the importance of reading, Jackson commented that "writing must take place within a context of reading other writings." In the context of the class discussion, I do not think he meant that writing must always draw literally from the text(s) of another author, but that one might consider the act of writing as a form of "dialogue" with others, texts and persons. As Jackson says at the end of his *Afterward*, "it is only a dialogue by courtesy, since Djuna Barnes cannot speak back except through her texts" (53). Another writer and friend, Robert Kocik, has said that (and I'm quoting from memory here) "the poet's place is at the point of pure research in any materialization. That ... poems have *beings* of their own ... possess the full status of personhood." In *Barnesbook*, Jackson has condensed the trials and tribulations of an epic within thirty-nine pages, having written an incredibly allusive, resonant and lovely "novel in verse."

Sharing of creativity is the social character of experience, its aspect of sympathy, participation, identification with others. Moreover, even one's own past self is, strictly speaking, 'another' as hundreds of thousands of Buddhists have, for over a score of centuries, been trying to tell the world. I hold that in all this they have simply been accurate.... *Sheer identity or sheer non-identity cannot be the correct account of this matter.*

(Charles Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* 8)

First.

Something mysterious.

Something.

Something quick.

(*Barnes* 4, 38)

Here are the main characters, or *beings* in order of their appearance in *Barnesbook*:

(*Barnes* 1): Miranda

(*Barnes* 2): Authors, Meredith, George Moore, Robin, Dumas

(*Barnes* 3): Soldiers, the Congregation, Allan, Percy, Moydia, the Doctor

(*Barnes* 4): Hisodalgus, Medici, God, She

I don't know how these figures work within the world Djuna Barnes fashioned in her stories and novels, or what their relationships with one another may have been. I also don't know which characters are to be found in which books. I do have a sense that some of these "people" are intimate with, in love, separated from, at odds, angry at, barely tolerant of, concerned for, and severely depressed over one another in Jackson's *Barnesbook*. There is the context of a world at war, of different "authors" and their interpretations of the historical and personal text(s) of their time (the figure of Dumas alluding to yet a third author's work; an irregularly biased random digit triplet?), "the Congregation" in prayer for the "immunity" of Percy who has been cared for by "the Doctor," the "Medici" (what are the rulers of Florence in the 15th century doing in the work of Jackson Mac Low? Medici... to Mac Low? Roman Catholics turned to Jewish Buddhists? Perhaps a *nonintentionally* made family lineage), and who is "God" anyway? Who is "She"? The entire assembly made up of literary ideas and fragments rendered in an aphoristically styled lyricism. But I think I can answer that last question.

I believe that 'She' may be the "vixen" Miranda at the age of fifteen in *Barnes* 1. She lives by the sea and must store up a "sea

fortitude” for the “journey home.” Later, as an adult woman, “Her Medici ways” have come in contact with (in both conflict and attraction for) the lowly but mysterious ensign Hisodalgus, home from war. He presents her with a provocation, which is “something Greek”:

Now mysterious Hisodalgus was moving her ear.

And God works.

Around she faced – quick.

Her Medici back?

She that she faced.

(*Barnes* 4, 40)

And the last two stanzas on page 45:

Would her mysterious ways?

Now to him his Hisodalgus moved.

Ensign very dear, very dear, carry the ear.

Matter against what?

She faced provocation.

And against the dear ensign moving against the works.

Wondered wandered mysterious.

He than the ear and the up.

The entire section of 4 of *Barnesbook* must be one of the most sensual and erotic final chapters in contemporary American poetry. Love has come home: “Now very never more never more no” (39).

An echo: “I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.”

Spillway / a passage for surplus water from a dam.

Antiphon / 1 A hymn or psalm, the parts of which are sung or recited alternately by two groups. 2 a versicle or phrase from this. 3 a

sentence sung or recited before or after a psalm or canticle. 4 a response.

Nightwood / “Cried floor volume, / Dumas innocence slumber trousers.”

Ryder / I’ve heard of a golf tournament called the “Ryder Cup,” begun in 1927 in the U.K.

Smoke / 1 a visible suspension of carbon etc. in air, emitted from a burning substance. 2 an act or period of smoking tobacco (had a quiet smoke). 3 colloq. a cigarette or cigar (got a smoke?). 4 (*the Smoke*) Brit. & Austral. colloq. a big city, esp. London.

The “plot” seems to break down this way:

Barnes 1: would seem to draw its sentences from *Spillway*, water imagery dominates. “Once on,” the very first line of the poem rhymes with “once upon a time...” The 2nd and 3rd lines, “Once like,” and “Once on the she them sea attention” introduces the longing for love and the love of home this first poem circles around. Also, the journey, death, fortitude, needing attention, rebirth, crying... the child, for the departed. The lines in this first poem tend to be the shortest in the book.

Barnes 2: responsible shadows – a meditation on an author’s responsibility if he be a gentleman; the passage of days marked on calendars “creased shiny,” “strange calendars” “that dangle plague”; strange lands and “unbuttoned innocence,” abandoned buildings. Authors: “estranged abandoned us.” The stanzas in this section grow longer, denser, the lines “stretching strange mercy.”

Barnes 3: “Yet her favorite art has been immunity / and’s been here when her portions lived two autumns.” Each character, the Congregation too, suffers a “cold immunity” in “the whole niggard autumn.” “Was art’s portion *morte* or way above them?” This *feels* like “nightwood” to me.

Barnes 4: Love is home, everything whispers, coming together in the art of the “mix” – “Something quick,” with “more mind” and lots of (Joycean) ear, suspended in the air of these four line stanzas. All bodies mixing.

I’ve been reminded of a book from some time ago by Jacques Attali. Yes, I still have it, it’s called *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (trans. Brian Massumi, 1985):

Music effects a reappropriation of time and space. Time no longer flows in a linear fashion; sometimes it crystallizes in stable codes in which everyone’s

composition is compatible, sometimes in multifaceted time in which rhythms, styles, and codes diverge, interdependencies become more burdensome, and rules dissolve. (147)

Jackson Mac Low

A Response to “Struggle Against Misery: “to Jude” (*Continuous Discontinuous: Curve 2*) [Potes & Poets, 1997], pp. 130-131)

In other words, a centerless rhythmic assemblage of desire.

Jackson Mac Low’s art is akin to that of musical improvisations, but the emphasis is constructivist, rather than the supposed self-expression of the unitary, intending subject. What *Barnesbook* presents is the challenge of experimenting on our own identities; or better, to suspend identity indefinitely.

To reach nirvana.

“Where is the way?”

“Here.”

(*Barnes* 3, 34)

The first three words of the first line, “articulation of it.” – starting in the middle of an utterance, as indicated by the initial lowercase “a” and no antecedents or following predicate – seems to refer directly to the title: the poem will be an articulation of (presumably the poet’s) misery. The rest of that line and the five lines that follow it,

... From my
world I jump through
my thoughts to what most
expresses my love
in the ‘outside’ that my heart
belongs what to do with words,

give the ostensible cause of the misery: the difficulty of expressing his love – in words – to that which is “outside” his consciousness. One wonders whether he means by “outside” both the person loved and the rest of the world unconcerned with his love. The syntax of that second sentence seems to enact the difficulty. There are jumps within the sentence itself after “outside.” It breaks into two syntactically disconnected dependant clauses: “that my heart / belongs” and “what to do with words.” The first begins to say what there is to express, but the second jumps to the difficulty of expression itself. (And, as we will come to see, it is the dilemma at the heart of this poem.)

The following three lines tell what is happening during their writing:

My mind, if that’s it
discriminates & verbs
become something I can say.

First there’s a doubt that it is “my mind” or something else that’s “discriminating,” and then we notice that he’s already “said” *several* verbs: “jump,” “expresses,” “beings,” “do,” “s” [=“is”], and “discriminates.” And the next line,

The world of floods,

is a sentence *without* a verb. What is happening is that “the world,” the “outside,” is flooding into the consciousness and preventing the expression of love that seemed to be beginning. But why,

then, doesn't it come out as "The world floods in." instead of the more indirect and abstract "The world of floods."?

Then

My whole body
becomes indistinguishable
from that world.

Is it that the body becomes as "outside" as "that world" or that the self itself is dissolving in the world-flood?

The following three lines seem in apposition to "that world":

The baggage good and bad that comes
all that exists
in the things filtering through.

What is it that the good and bad baggage is filtering *through*? The mind-body's skin? The "discrimination" by the mind or something else?

Then, after a strophe break, a doubting reflection upon the whole enterprise:

I would not altogether trust
every day and every hour for
the writing of poetry.

It's as if the whole attempt at expressing love is being abandoned. It may be the wrong day and the wrong hour for the writing of *any* poetry – not only a poem expressing love.

Then another jump to another clear reflection, seemingly couched in more abstract terms:

Principles and the inner life
are alibis the moment
they cease to animate
external and everyday life.

But they jump to the heart of the matter. The inner life is not animating the external life. It would seem, rather, that it is *obstructing* it. Specifically, it is obstructing the expression of love. Because he's jumped *through his thoughts* to what *most* expresses his love, rather than just expressing it and not worrying about whether this action "most" expresses his love, it never gets expressed.

But what "principles" are involved here? And in what senses are they and the inner life itself "alibis"? For not acting, but just thinking about action?

Then a huge jump, but perhaps no jump at all:

Walter Benjamin wrote,
"A writer who does not teach
other writers teaches nobody."

Is the poet saying to other writers, "Don't let your inner life paralyze your external life?"

The last strophe on the first page of the poem:

My lessons in a grey society
would be wearing the skins
of myself and the ghost of yourself
seeing the messages that give
them Time.

is the most complex so far. The lesson of this first page of the poem, what it *seems* to be teaching, especially to other writers, is that one should not allow the inner life and one's principles (which to this reader, at least, remain unspecified) to become mere alibis for *not living* in the so-called external, everyday world. (But we will see that it's not only "not living" in the external world that is lacking, but also not *doing* something in it to change its nature.)

The poet sees that the poem itself is not so much an expression of love as a clothing of the very lessons it embodies in the skins of himself and of his inner representation of the person he loves as they "see the messages that give them Time."

Many questions arise from these five lines: Why is this a "grey" society? In what sense is it grey? Is it that the society is one that encourages a barrier between the inner life and the outer, between the feelings and action, so that when one tries, for instance – the whole experience becomes an *example* of the kinds of dilemmas that arise in the society – to express love, one wanders away or floats away "upward" from the expression of love to articulating general lessons about the society in which all this is taking place?

The last two lines are a little obscure to me – at least up to this "point in time" when I am writing the concluding words of my response to the first page of the poem. How do these messages – essentially, it occurs to me now, the major "message" [of *this* page of the poem] is that of Lambert Struther in Henry James's meditation on similar dilemmas, *The Ambassadors*: "Live!" – how do these messages "give" the poet and his representation of the

person he's addressing "Time"? Do the "messages" make them aware of the present, of the contingent, of what is happening at each moment in the world that is always both internal and external?

I don't think these questions are answered or were meant to be. Once the "grey society" has been allowed explicitly into the poem, quite other things begin to happen:

Thoughts just barely themselves
before they too begin to change.
Machines of thought do not exist.
Reproductions do.

Is the poet referring to his own thoughts as they were happening during the writing of the poem? It seems so. Strong general statements occur now, averring the nonexistence of "machines of thought" and the existence of "reproductions" (presumably of thought). The latter declaration inevitably – because of the earlier reference to Walter Benjamin – brings to mind the latter's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which has become overwhelmingly a *propos* during the years since Benjamin wrote it. Works of art are not only increasingly and more accurately being reproduced – they often include within them (as in the works of Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns) both accurate reproductions of earlier works of art as well as ones made deliberately less accurate by fragmentation, blurring, partial obliteration, and similar processes of image-degradation. Often now, reproductions constitute many works' only existence.

These reflections and others take their places in the "preconscious" of the poem. The poet rebels against the supersession of thought by its "mechanical reproduction." It may be all very well that the "aura" of works of art be dissolved by the processes of reproduction (as Benjamin averred in middle '30s). Few except art dealers and buyers and museum curators value "authenticity" nowadays. Both the "authentic" works and their reproductions are valuable commodities, though the former are still much more valuable than the latter in the marketplace. Which leads directly to the next strophe:

It must not turn
into an object of consumption.
Nothing exists inside the marketplace.

Here Marx's observation that the processes of capitalism dissolve all existing things into thin air by the process of commodification thrusts its way into the poem. This very strongly prescriptive strophe is declaring that thought must not be allowed to be dissolved into an "object of consumption" in the marketplace. Thought would cease to exist. With this forceful precept the whole tone and atmosphere of the poem changes. *This* thought is *fully* itself!

Then he turns to the quality of life of those existing (or dissolved into commodities!) in the market society:

Buried in work. Is that diligence
central in men and women? Did anyone,
without external reference, ever find
peace in poems? Has that elegance
headed 'the ink's desperation'?

But the poem turns again, within the oppressive representation of the commerce-driven "grey society," to the writing of poetry. A despair that it may ever lead to peace. (or secondarily, that *reading* it may do so). Or – does the despair come from its being "without external reference"? — Does "the ink's desperation" come from the lack of connection, between the poetry, "the inner life," and the "external": if the "inner life" does not "animate / the external, the everyday life," it is like isolated sterile "principles" are mere "alibis." For what?

An immaculate imagery
must be a fiction. It is
time to choose. The lights burning out
pull down the shades. Not metaphor.

Tend to your business.

Alibis for inaction! It is time to choose whether to make "immaculate" nonreferential poetry or to *do* something, presumably in one's writing, as well as in one's life. Here "fiction" means *mere* fiction - it is a *worthless* fiction when the lights are burning out. The poet has to do more than make metaphors. The poet's "business" is to "animate the external and everyday life" - all that is real - authentic thought as well as all other things of intrinsic value must be must be rescued from the marketplace.

Not "business" — the business of the commerce-driven grey society of the marketplace — but helping effectuate our rescue from it, to resurrect men and women from the grave of work and consumption in which they

are buried, from the grey society which has dissolved everything into thin air except its “busy” self — this is the *poet’s* business, and the poem ends with that ominous and urgent admonition: “Tend to your business.”

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“My whole body
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Andrew Levy

Struggle Against Misery
to Jude

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