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**Camp Messianism, or, the Hopes of
Poetry in Late-Late Capitalism**

Recent innovative North American poetry is a good place for thinking about the status of a new aesthetics, since it's been busy writing one. I'm thinking of American and Canadian poets, most in their thirties and forties now, who are writing in light of the poetic and critical projects of Language poetry, though they are by no means simply following them out. These poets, referred to as "post-Language" writers in the small-press world in which they've emerged, raise interesting questions about new habits of literary criticism, since their poems read both as theory and poetry. Although these poets have not yet produced a body of writing like the criticism and theory of the Language poets, their poetry reads like the yield, if not the foregrounding, of significant theoretical effort.

More specifically, many of the post-Language writers seem to have taken a kind of Frankfurt school turn in their poems, by which I mean not so much that they are crankily denouncing a culture industry—though they may—or critically miming "authoritarian" types of language—though they do—but that they have become invested in a historical story about what Theodor Adorno called "damaged life," or what Susan Stewart might call the "fate" of the material world, its pasts and possible futures.¹ Unlike Adorno or Walter Benjamin, though, many of the post-Language poets have struck a kind of camp posture toward the "damage" of late capitalism, in a way that borrows from but reinterprets both the messianism of Adorno and Benjamin and the subcultural (especially queer) trajectory of camp.

The best sketch I can offer of the Frankfortian part of this historical story about a "damaged" material life is to say that it's not

just a story of the culture industry whose workings Adorno and Max Horkheimer detailed at midcentury, nor even of the “late capitalism” Fredric Jameson first diagnosed in 1984;² it’s the story of something like really, *really* late capitalism; capitalism in a fully globalized and triumphal form, the destructive speed and flexibility of whose financial instruments alone make Nixon’s lofting the dollar off the gold standard in 1971 look thoughtful and conservative. Depending on how one understands the massive glut of capital unleashed on the world markets since the collapse of the Soviet Union, capitalism has either taken on a new, omnipotently viral character (traveling across national boundaries, for instance, with the power to imperil entire economies for no other reason than to keep a tiny group of wealthy investors’ portfolios mobile and artificially inflated); or it is in the last, seizing phases of a horrible addiction to its own mobility. In any case, the privatizing, shock-treatment destruction of the post-Soviet economy in the early nineties, the collapse and bailout of the peso in 1995, the Asian currency crisis of 1997, and the bottoming out of the United States’ supposedly posthistorical new economy in 2000—all these indicate a volatility to capital on an order of magnitude beyond even the ricochets of the early twentieth century.³ If Adorno and Horkheimer made much of how the Enlightenment’s dream of the equality of all people had become the nightmare of the interchangeability of all people, that interchangeability could now be said to have become entirely liquid, even quicksilver.

We might say that the camp aspect of post-Language writing, meanwhile, is the rueful astonishment that, against all odds, this liquidation is still not complete: post-Cold War global economic volatility has not resulted in wholesale disaster for the United States or Europe. Instead, late-late capitalism gives texture to our everyday lives more murmuringly: most of us are at least intermittently aware of being solicited day and night by a kind of manic mass culture that seeks, ever more aggressively, to stuff our attention to the gills. When Andrew Ross remarks, then, that camp “is the re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor,” he touches on a polemical affection for waste, which animates not just camp in its queer subcultural matrix but also in its migrations beyond subcultural boundaries—to mass culture (which tries to capture the dynamics of camp consumption in television, for instance, in programs like *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, or in VH-1’s “Pop-up videos,” or in fake-anachronistic sitcoms like “That ’70’s Show”) and to the literary culture of small-press poetry.⁴

Mass-cultural camp invites us all to be clever; post-Language poetic camp, I hope to show, invites us to take up a polemical affection for what's obsolete, misguided, or trivial, and to risk the embarrassment of trying it out.

So how do post-Language poets do this? How do they perform a relationship to the experience of a materiality that is both desubstantialized and supersaturating, subject to both lightning-swift consolidations and dispersals and to humiliating, vegetally slow decay? A first text for consideration:

What gets *me* is
 the robots are doing
my job, but I don't get
 the *money*,
 some extrapolated node
 of expansion-contraction gets
 my money, which *I* need
 for *time travel*.⁵

What gets *me* is how compactly this terrific little poem toys with, or speaks through, an affect that has transformed North American poetry in the last decade. At first, this poem by Kevin Davies seems to be just the swift dodge of a tedious sort of lecturing, political poetry. Yes, the speaker is complaining about the theft of his wages, but he does it science-fictionally, and by way of a dated science fiction, at that: there is no Matrix here, just "robots" and "*time travel*." But the campiness of the obsolete sci-fi conceit has something to play off against, namely, the description of the system that steals the speaker's wages, the "extrapolated node / of expansion-contraction"—itself amusing in its succinctness but not quite the same as the clanking of the worker-robots. If the poem is a dodge, then, it's not quite dodging politics with humor: the truth of the poem lies elsewhere, in its rueful awareness of the obsolescence of its conceit. This awareness is not simply reflexive—not simply a modernist recognition of obsolescence—because the poem also performs the knowledge that even its obsolescence is obsolete. This performance—I think of it as a kind of stance—is designed to make the poem's last, emphatic phrase—"time travel"—escape, for a moment, its camp value and reveal an extravagant demand: that the speaker get his money *and* his history back, that he be freed to burrow back behind the process that made even the expropriating robots obsolete—or, perhaps, to lurch forward to a time

when obsolescence will reveal itself to have been an unfinished piece of a story about the rescue of human vulnerability from the merciless abstraction of “expansion” and “contraction.”⁶

Read this way, Davies’s poem is not far from the canonical modern articulation of a redemptive historiography—that is, from Benjamin’s remarks in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”:

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l’ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day.⁷

This scenario echoes not only the short poem by Davies but also a whole variety of post-Language writing, like this poem in Lisa Robertson’s *Debbie: An Epic* (1997):

maybe
even
this
dress
shall
some
day be
a joy
to
repair⁸

And here, Davies again, from *Comp.*’s “Karnal Bunt”:

Every junked
vehicle a
proposition
waiting for
the right rustic
welder
after the war that
never happened
here.
(C, 61)

And Rod Smith, from *The Good House* (2001):

Each reasonable house
 & each waking motion
 are votive, based on
 the wiley insurgence
 of awaiting worlds—⁹

Each of these poems (they are actually all stanzas or sections from longer poems) finds in its material at hand—a dress, “junked” cars, the “reasonable house” and “waking motion”—a mute expectation of “repair” or recuperation.

The character of this expectation is slightly different in each case. In the context of *Debbie*, it becomes clear that Robertson is implicitly imagining herself in the scene of repair; Davies understands the instances of his “junked vehicle” logically, as “propositions,” but he complicates past logic the temporality of their being welded since their future is contingent on what “never happened / here”; and Smith places not only his “house” but also a human figure, with “waking motion,” in the way of expectation. The language in each poem is also differently political—only whisperingly so in Robertson (though, again, elsewhere she will show her cards), but frankly combative in Davies, with his hard-to-locate “war,” and slyly, ambiantly resistant in Smith’s “wiley insurgence / of awaiting worlds.”

I realize that in offering a preliminary account of these poems my focus on modernist and midcentury points of comparison—camp modes of attachment and critique, and Frankfurtian tactics of rereading history—raises the question, What about postmodernity? It is true, of course, that the two “schools” of poetry to whom the post-Language poets are most indebted—the Language poetry of the 1980s and the New York school of the 1960s and 1970s—are both understood in American literary history as signally “postmodern.” Are the post-Language poets postmodern?

This is a hard question. It is true that poets like Davies, Robertson, and Smith make use of the signal strategies of literary postmodernism as we’ve come to recognize it, especially its engagement with mass culture and a decoupling of signs from their referents. And it’s true that these poets have also grown up with the peculiarly postmodern admixture of identity-based liberation movements and poststructural critiques of identity. But their poems seem to be written out of

some set of conditions we are still struggling to name, conditions not quite matching the major accounts of the postmodern (hence, with my apologies, “late-late capitalism”). At the very least, these younger poets are motivated by a different sense of historical situation—specifically, a different sense of the unfolding of a totalizing political and economic system—than was felt by either the New York school or the Language poets.

Although vastly different, of course, both Language and New York writing developed in successive stages of the expansion of mass culture, and both drew energy from critiques of authenticity bound up in mass culture’s unfolding. At midcentury, in poems like Frank O’Hara’s “Having a Coke with You” and John Ashbery’s “Daffy Duck in Hollywood,” New York school poets made friends with popular and mass culture, deliberately braving the possibility of obsolescence or eventual inscrutability. Such risk-taking was meant to dislodge the idea of poetry from the formalist antimodernisms of “official verse culture,” which presumed that poems were autonomous linguistic artifacts whose aim was to rise above their immediate surroundings and stake a claim to cultural permanence.¹⁰

Language school poets later developed a critique concerned not with the poet’s cultural isolation as much as with the authenticity of lyric utterance—and, ultimately, of language itself—as a transparently truthful medium. Language poets, like the poets of the New York school, were interested in the relationship between mass culture and poetry, but rather than mining mass culture as a referential and affective resource, they tended to focus on its capacity to obscure social truths, especially the truth of the commodification of language. Deliberately fracturing syntax and troubling reference, Language poets developed a relationship between the poetic and the political not so much by striking the implicitly political posture of insouciance toward an official culture as by tearing away at its lies. If the relevant political backdrop for the New York school poets was the Cold War, for the Language poets, it was Vietnam.¹¹

What kind of poetics the post-Language poets articulate, meanwhile, is a question understood so far primarily in terms of their relationship to Language writing rather than to the New York school, perhaps because the Language poets developed a large body of critical writing (and because they are the more immediate precursors). While I can’t devote much space here to a comparison between Lan-

guage and post-Language writing, I think it is important at least to mention some of the major arguments in the Language poets' critical writing in order to highlight what seems different now about the post-Language poets, especially in their understanding of linguistic materiality.

Language poets' contribution to the development of a postmodern poetics can be understood as an argument on behalf of three inter-related arguments about participatory readership, language and the commodity form, and the decentering of the postmodern political subject. These contributions have been widely discussed and analyzed; in brief, I think it's fair to say that the notion of active readership lies at the center of the Language poets' collective self-understanding.¹² Active readership points to a belief that difficult, unconventional texts, rather than being closed to readers, are actually more open than traditional literary texts because they don't smother or direct readers with too many genre cues, overdetermined tropes, clichés, or heavily rehearsed rhetorical movements—forms of what Language poets like Lyn Hejinian and Bruce Andrews refer to as "closure."¹³ This "rejection of closure," as Hejinian calls it, implies a scene of reader-writer collaboration meant to rescue language not only from cliché but also from commodification, from becoming a unidirectional, informatic, PowerPoint-y medium for social control. The argument for referentially disjunct, nonclosural texts as the appropriate scene for a collaborative decommodification of language has been made most forcefully by the Language poet and critic Ron Silliman; this argument is linked, in the poetry and critical writing of Bruce Andrews, to a theory of collaboration between reader and writer that produces a mobile, protean, political subject along the lines of the "schizo" envisioned in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*.¹⁴ As Andrews puts it:

[Language poetics] doesn't call for a reading that rejects or
negates the referential, or even the baldly representational
forces of language,

but one that resists letting those forces be confined and
recuperated & territorialized.

It would join in the adventure of keeping them active at the micro
level, as singular & literal events—

constantly varying, skidding, interpenetrating, mutually
transforming, out in the open, on the surface

.

Works are responses, and the praxis of the reader reconstructs
this responsiveness

.
Here we're not looking for mastery, but passionate or even
dizzying embrace—of an *implicated* social body.¹⁵

These concerns with active readership, the decommmodification of language, and the production of a new, political subject, fully enfolded ("*implicated*") in a mobile social body, are formally present in many Language poems. One canonical example is Hejinian's *My Life*, which in its first edition contained thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven sentences each, one section-sentence for each year of Hejinian's life (the second edition, written eight years after the first, adds eight sentences to the thirty-seven original sections, and eight new sections: guess why). These playfully arbitrary formal conceits allow Hejinian to foreground the variety of means she deploys to establish connectivity among her sentences:

Back and backward, why, wide and wider. Such that art is
inseparable from the search for reality. The continent is greater
than the content. A river nets the peninsula

.
The Spanish make a little question frame. In the case, propped on
a stand so as to beckon, was the hairy finger of St. Cecilia,
covered with rings

.
An extremely pleasant and often comic satisfaction comes from
conjunction, the fit, say, of comprehension in a reader's mind to
content in a writer's work. But not bitter.¹⁶

Hejinian moves from one sentence to the next according to different principles in different instances, and it is this connective variety that gives the poem life. Sometimes the sentences move with a gesture toward logic. The second sentence in this section, for instance, begins, "Such that." Or the sentences might represent two phrasings of the "same" idea: "The continent is greater than the content" is followed by "A river nets the peninsula," which allows Hejinian to begin to isolate the difference particular figures make when called into the service of the same concept—in this case, the concept of content surrounding, rather than being encased by, form.

It is this last concept, really an argument, that seems typical of the

attitude toward linguistic materiality expressed in Language writing. While it is true enough to say that Language writers are concerned with linguistic materiality (since they are poets, it is nearly tautological to notice this), what's distinctive is their relation to the aspectual character of this materiality. Language writing argues for understanding the medium of language as a kind of perpetually mobile surround, which Hejinian typically calls "context":¹⁷ placement, situation, conjunction, animating constraint—the "net" and the "frame"—all serve to establish a scene that invites the reader to experience the toggle between material and referential aspects of language as curious, as "a little question frame" that "nets" content but lets it go. Poems like Hejinian's articulate linguistic materiality in terms much like those of a monist Deleuzian plenitude, where differences are not metaphysical or categorical but "*implicated*"; they are folds. The relationship between form and content in Language poetry takes on the character of a materio-linguistic snapshot, where what is form one minute might be content the next. It is a poetics of fluidity, and if we listen for it, I think we can hear in it the echo of the post-1968 hope for a new, more fluid politics.

This set of beliefs and practices around the materiality of language is significantly different from the testamentary, expectation-laden materiality in the work of the post-Language poets who most interest me. The historical reasons for this difference are of course complex, and they are still being debated. Hejinian has recently suggested, controversially, that the new generation of poets has not been politicized as the Language poets were by the singular, defining experience of the war in Vietnam.¹⁸ While this doesn't amount to the now-familiar Baby Boomer charge that Generation X is "apathetic" or "de-politicized" (which Silliman has suggested), it does raise the question of how different political moments breed different structures of political and poetic feeling. This is of course a complicated question; we might take a first attempt at answering it by way of the very largest abstractions to hand and try to understand the political affects of the two generations and the formal strategies that animate their work as expressing emphatically different moments in the unfolding of a late-capitalist totality:

As for the current situation, . . . [we can see] how the very mood and methodology of the analyses varied across the great internal polarity of voluntarism and fatalism (or determinism) according to

the changes in the objective situation, and its great cyclical rhythms that alternate from situations of great promise and change . . . to those of a locked social geology so massive that no visions of modification seem possible. . . .¹⁹

Fredric Jameson wrote this passage at the beginning of the 1990s, as part of an explanation of why he felt Adorno's work might, after what he felt were the poststructuralist highs of the 1970s and 1980s, be freshly relevant for political thinking. In 1990, at least, Jameson believed that Adorno, because of his willingness to work in isolation from an identifiable political movement, was a good model for the way critical thinking and political solitude might have to go together in a new postmodern dispensation that had done away with the types of cultural and historical memory that mass movements need. More than ten years later, Jameson seems to have been both right—there is undeniably a revival, in the English-language academy, of interest in Adorno—and wrong: late capitalism, perhaps in the emergent form of empire, is being written about as though it were all the more legible—and therefore more vulnerable to opposition—to a new generation of “anti-globalization” activists.²⁰

The post-Language poets to whom I now want to turn, however, exhibit neither a postrevolutionary political apathy nor a specific set of anti-globalist affiliations. They are not “movement” poets. But they do write with an acute knowledge of the susceptibility of their materials to historical change. What I would like to suggest in the rest of this essay is that the recent affective and strategic shift in American poetry can be described as a shift in attitudes toward the character of late-capitalist totality. We might say that where the Language poets discovered a reserve of uncanceled materiality in the lively, “aspectual” character of language—so that the open-endedness of texts might outpace their superscription by languages of power—the post-Language poets, battered by another generation's-worth of the encroachments of capital, are not so ready to rely on those aspectual reserves. They can discern them in language, of course, and in material objects, but it's not their focus; instead, as I'll try to show, they expend their considerable talents on making articulate the ways in which, as they look around, they see *waiting*.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with a poem from Joshua Clover's manuscript *The Totality for Kids*. Since 1996, when he published his first book, *Madonna Anno Domini*, Clover has been trying to develop

a new poetry of the city, with Paris as his model—a kind of post-Benjaminian, post-Situationist city, whose moods and contours are revealed by way of a perpetual and unstable movement between concretion and abstraction. Like Ashbery's poems, Clover's foreground the pathos of conceptualization—how recursive it is, how helpless, even in its glories; but unlike Ashbery, Clover develops a quietly messianic sense that the city, and the aesthetic experience it fosters, awaits redemption. In this view, he follows Benjamin, for whom even ephemera—especially ephemera—could whisper to listening ears the story of how a mute material existence, completely overwritten by capital, might still one day become a tool for breaking it apart. As Clover puts it in the last poem in *The Totality for Kids*, “What’s American about American Poetry?”:

They basically grow it out of sand.
 This is a big help because it was getting pretty enigmatic.
 Welcome to the desert of the real,
 I am an ephemeral and not too discontented citizen.
 I do not think the revolution is finished.²¹

The Baudrillardian “desert of the real,” now more familiar to us from *The Matrix*, is—after all—a biblical desert of unredeemed wandering. Baudrillard's famous essay “The Precession of Simulacra” opens with a simulacral “quotation” from Ecclesiastes and begins as a meditation on the death of God. But Clover has none of Baudrillard's enraged despair with the Left. Although “the revolution” that Clover counterposes to “the desert of the real” is happening in a suspended grammar, detached from an object, that suspension may occur just because “the revolution” has a temporality hard for him to see. Even the poem's fainting last line—“I drift, mainly I drift”—recalls the situationist *dérive*, the deliberately unregulatable “drift” that is meant to restore life to a too-regular city.

“Cériserie,” Clover's first poem in *The Totality for Kids*, meditates hungrily on where such life might hide:

Music: the unless of a certain series.
 Mathematics: Everyone rolling dice and flinging Fibonacci, going
 to the opera, counting everything.
 Fire: The number between four and five.
 Gold leaf: Wedding dress of the verb *to have*, it reminds you of of.

There is a tiny messianic message, let me start by saying, even in the “unless of a certain series”: that music can withhold exact certainty from the “certain series,” or that there can be no truth unless there is music—not the rushed cacophony of everyone “going to the opera, counting everything,” but the music of “fire,” of what’s *between* the numbers, unaccountable. “Fire” is the poem’s first foray into another materiality, the *serie-serie* of the “Ceriserie,” the series-series that both rests humbly in the interstices of the tossed dice of items in series and also promises to overthrow them by lighting up as pun and performance: “Fire” is the tissue binding “four” and “five”—the tissue that, un-knotted and bright red, turns items into relationships, and numbers into words.

Not so “Gold leaf,” which a few lines before the ones I’ve quoted is associated with Enguerrand Quarton, the fifteenth-century painter who applied it so heavily. Unlike “Fire,” the “Gold leaf” represents, like the “robots” in Davies’s poem, a sweet, bemusing anachronism, an artistic attempt revealed in retrospect as literal-minded; as a nice try; as trumped by subsequent history; as an object, that is, of camp affection. Clover puts it this way later in the poem: “Enguerrand Quarton: In your dream gold leaf was the sun, salve on the visible world.” Quarton’s “salve,” with which he suffused paintings like the *Coronation of the Virgin* (1454), is meant to supervene and redeem mere painterly reference, “the kingdom of the visible”; to give “the verb *to have*” a “wedding dress”; to transform the genitive into the betrothed. But Quarton, endearingly, is a bit of a mess—“swathed,” earlier in the poem, “in gold paint” and “whispering come with me under the shadow of this gold leaf.” He cannot see, that is, the tightening noose of a modernity that will foreclose on any historical alchemy promising to make of possession a relation, a wedding, and that will turn “Gold leaf,” instead, into the chill “red rock” of *The Waste Land*.

Robertson doesn’t necessarily see this as a problem. In *Debbie*, she writes:

I do not limit myself: I imitate
many fancy things such as the dull red
cloth of literature, its mumbled griefs. (*D*, 609–61)

Although she shares with Clover a commitment to the recuperation of forms of material waste, Robertson has a different sense of what the candidates for recuperation might be, and by what means the

recuperation might take place. Indeed, though she says she does not “limit” herself, she is interested in ornament, and its uselessness, and she is everywhere an erotic poet, collaging from both modernity and classical tradition new configurations of old figures for pleasure. Her project, in books like *The Weather* and *XEclogue* as well as in *Debbie*, has been to articulate something like a cyborg pastoral. Writing as one of “Virgil’s Bastard Daughters,” she highlights at every turn the arbitrary and ideological nature of what she calls “filiation,” imagining in “Argument” that history is simply a “library,” which might lend momentary legitimacy to a whole variety of recuperative claims: “To narrate origin as lapidary, as irrevocable, is only to have chosen with a styled authority from the ranked aisles of thought.” Or elsewhere in the poem: “filius/flunks.”

Though Robertson puckishly calls *Debbie* “An Epic,” it is really something like a prismatic pastoral, composed of “episodes,” “parts,” and unpaginated interludes, all gorgeously and adventuresomely typeset in varying text sizes and shades of gray, so that not even the physical matter of the text eludes what Robertson calls “decoration.” There is no plot, although there is an astonishing array of poses and also a wide variety of background characters. Though only Debbie speaks in the poem, it is filled with “nurses,” “majorettes,” “scholars,” and “shepherdesses” who loll and stroll and set themselves in the thickly textual landscapes Robertson paints. In a signal passage from an early section called “Party Scene,” the speaker asks:

Do you remember the day we wanted
to describe everything? We saw a
euphoria of trees. This was the middle
ground. Some women lounged on the clipped
grass, shadows and intelligence moving
lightly over their skin, compelled by
the trenchant discussion of sovereignty.
Others, in the background, rolled their pale
Trousers to wade in the intimate sea:
Their crisp gasps matched the waves. Freed scholars
Strolled slowly in pairs along gravel
Paths, reading from books the rhetoric
Of perfidy. Succinct flowers thrust gauche
Grammars into the air. In the upper
Left corner improbable clouds grouped

And regrouped the syntax of polit
 Esse: The feminist sky split open. (*D*, 25–41)

Few poets these days brave this kind of utopian description. Robertson manages it, I think, because of how she foregrounds the “improbable”—not just the “improbable clouds,” moving as if in conversation, and not just the “gauche” grammaticality of flowers, as if their principles of growth were at last a language, but also the willful match between the crispnesses of waves and the gasps of the waders who step into them. It is, in short, a willful utopia, which overwrites the “party scene” with an aspect of fulfillment that, it is hinted, cannot be found there. The “euphoria of trees” in the “middle ground,” which gets listed first, seems indeed to ground the fanciful projections that follow and preserve, even in the pastoral, a narrative of the liberation required to get there—the “sovereignty” won for women and “freed scholars” by “perfidy,” by foregoing claims to legitimacy in favor of claims to ungrounded “intelligence,” which moves lightly, like weather, and opens up history: “The feminist sky split open.”

It is perhaps a failure of my own imagination to want to probe such utopian passages for traces of conflict. But Robertson, too, seems to feel that the argument from “decoration”—that it is simply, gloriously, extra; that it is a supplement, and requires no ethical or political justification, no proper “origin”—can’t by itself address the problem of the entanglement of decoration in an unredeemed world. In a section of *Debbie* called “As If the World’s a Punctured Chit,” she writes:

The bridge and the river are
 not landscape—nor is this forest with its
 archival plenitude and entanglement.
 The clerical earth just exudes itself.
 —and the carved ruckus of milky bark
 spells a long diary of placation
 repeating ad infinitum We want
 to love. We want to love.
 Or the heart’s cheap
 Dipthong snaps. Black ink trickles through my arms
 And it has written landscapes. The trees still
 pose embittered questions. Do
 bright thrones yield civil shade? Some day I shall
 laugh at even this obedience, wake

in the middling shade of the library
wander freely, calling out a name I hope (*D*, 316–31)

This is a world not only overcome by a tyranny of exchange-value—made a “chit”—but used, “punctured,” done with. It is still a richly textual scene—the forests’ knotted plenty is “archival,” and the trees are transcriptions of a “clerical earth” that is still, even deflated, writing itself—but the archive doesn’t yield “euphoria” here so much as a lonely, sad demand: “We want to love,” repeated in each mute material thrust of life up from earth, and bleeding out of every love-tattoo cut into “milky bark.” Even “the heart” breaks down into *he-art*, just what the thundering “feminist sky” should have rinsed clear.

The lines after the “heart’s cheap / Dipthong” seem crucial. Here and elsewhere in *Debbie*, Robertson equates ink with blood, writing with the body, and the poem with the landscape; but the embodied, erotic writing she vaunts is written, we can see, not only as a monologue: “The trees still / pose embittered questions.” What they want to know, it turns out, is something about what the women in the earlier pastoral were discussing, that is, something about sovereignty: “Do / bright thrones yield civil shade?” It’s a way of asking, you might say, whether mercy is a quality of Enlightenment: unanswerable question. And it obliges Robertson to turn, once more, to a dialectical “Some day” that will not only shed but also recuperate the pain of mute embittered questioning: “Some day I shall / laugh at even this obedience.” It is more persuasive, in its way, than the full-blown pastoral of “Party Scene,” since it foregrounds not the fancy of pure correspondences (between gasps and waves, clouds and syntax) but a not-quite posthistorical humanity where mediation, where language, has survived: one “wakes” from the nightmare of history into the tree-like “shade” of a library, no less, where there is world and time now for a future-anterior repair, and for the enjoyment of yearning: “calling out a name.”

Rod Smith approaches the problem of a damaged materiality not so much by setting the scene for the pronunciation of a name as by meditating on the allegorical character of objects. And he finds, in his astonishing book *The Good House*, a moving inadequacy in their materiality:

The good house feels bad about
The territory
—the house seems
to be a verb though it dislikes

the term 'housing'—the house
 seems to be a bad dog & a
 live wire—the house is bored
 until people come over—the house
 is anxious to please guests—
 it is stupid & so thinks cordon
 means love—it is wise & so
 chooses—

This "house" is, yes, anthropomorphized, and allegorized, given attributes and placed in relationships, but part of the achievement of *The Good House* is that the "house" is never left lying in a single rhetorical register or allowed to become only allegory, only anthropomorphic figure. It moves instead among modes of abstraction and concretion so ceaselessly that, reading the book, we are finally obliged to understand it as a kind of perpetually collapsing second-order allegory that performs and figures the vicissitudes of materiality—its dissatisfaction with itself *as material*—before our eyes, and for our ears.

This sounds essentially de Manian, I know—and Smith's writing is extraordinary in obliging readers to confront the movement between the figural and the performative that de Man argued was the very character of the materiality of language.²² But for Smith, the character of materiality, even at its most mute, its most formal, is historical—that is, it acts out and compasses its inadequacy as material. As Smith puts it: "There are 8 houses in the heart, / there should be 9." Even the figural, these lines suggest, is not free from what it ought to be but isn't. There is no reason the "8 houses in the heart" shouldn't—or couldn't, for a more satisfied poet—complete the strophe; but the figure of the "8 houses in the heart" cannot be unhitched, for Smith, from what should be there. It is a historical and material condition of "the house" to fail to be self-sufficient:

the good house—it is heavy
 the good house—it exercises
 hope in the inhuman, is transformed
 by it—
 becomes blatant in its strength
 & is destroyed, the good
 house must be rebuilt
 carefully. The good house

is in conflict
 ordinary houses complete
 the smart bombs and are
 buoyant—victorious,
 brainwaves of shunt commotion,
 bestial then or not house

The “inhuman” and the “bestial,” here, are meant as a critique of “blatant strength” as the “buoyant” self-congratulation that forgets, in the midst of linguistic play, the *ought* at the heart of materiality—that it could be otherwise, that it could be, as Adorno might say, more humane: “there should be 9.”

For Davies, meanwhile, the material world is overwhelming, and not in a nice way. As he puts it in “Karnal Bunt”:

There’s nothing superficial about the way all that stuff burrows
 into any available crack
 in the sidewalk, growing back, covering, by logical extension if
 not in fact, *everything*. (C, 61)

“All that stuff,” in Davies’s poems, is the frightening array of material that has become commodified in late capitalism—not just the recognizably thing-like widgets on sale at the hardware store but also the “node[s] / of expansion-contraction” whose materiality lies as much in their enmeshing network of objects as in the objects themselves. In the lines above, that network congeals momentarily, as it does in the untitled robot poem, around italicized speech, around the “*everything*” that is meant at once as the moment of collating divergent objects in the “expansion-contraction” but also as the moment where the attempt to collate fails, and falls back on emphasis.

Elsewhere in “Karnal Bunt,” those italics are replaced with the comedy of pretending to have a lived attachment to incommensurably abstract, and complexly nested, nominalizations:

I love to be an international unit in the measure of the loading of
 the fissures in the communal membrane into silos on a prairie
 in a basement by a government of souls in trouble at a party for
 a long time (C, 54)

This nesting of abstract objects, and the pointed political irony of pretending that we can “love” them, are part of an argument in Davies

about the character of materiality in late capitalism. Like Smith, Davies sees the stuff of the world as wrong in its very quiddity. Where Marx, in the famous lines from "Theses on Feuerbach," italicizes the word "change"—"The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it"—Davies writes, in one of the first poems in *Comp.*: "The point, however, is to change *it*" (C, 19). As with Smith, materiality for Davies is not something worked on by historical conditions but actually produced by them: to change the world will have to be to change *it*, the stuff of the world, no aspect of which is simply "pure" material, unhistorical; or, as Davies puts it a few lines later in the same poem: "Class violence at the level of the seedling." Polemical, yes; but not, in *Comp.*, ungrounded. The book's central poem, "Karnal Bunt," names a fungal disease affecting wheat—wheat that the United States, affected by Karnal bunt in the late 1990s, managed to convince its trade partners not to scrutinize too closely.²³

What I like so much about Davies's poems is the unembarrassed glee with which he asks to be read polemically; indeed, at least one version of his argument about the saturation of the world with appalling materializations of ever-tighter webs of capitalist relation is that we should not, at this point, even be arguing about whether or not such a web exists. And, again, the polemic is italic: "*You* know, the fact that we're ruled by the money that owns the people who have the money that rules itself— . . ." (C, 53).

I hope I've managed to show that the "votive" or propositional modes of expectation to which these poems gravitate implicitly distinguish them from the "dark art" of the modernism we know best, in the academy, and from the blankness and euphoria Jameson suggests belong to the art of the postmodern. It is impossible to say, reading poems like these, whether we have therefore gone backward or forward—whether, for instance, these poems return us to the type of expectation Siegfried Kracauer attributed, in the Weimar period, to "those who wait" while history horribly, unpredictably, seems to rouse itself into the form of a capital "H."²⁴ Certainly the comparison is tempting, though our conditions are different. What most chastens me on the edge of historical comparison, however, is the presence in these poems of types of materiality so gossamer, so nearly abstract—so nearly nonexistent—that they feel as if they could come to us only from the fragile singularity of the history of the present.

And the types of expectation by which Clover and Robertson, Smith and Davies animate such material feel similarly fragile, partly because they seem to reside neither in the form nor the content of the poems but somehow in their stance, in what Adorno would have called their “comportment.” “Great works wait,” he writes, and their waiting is one way to think about the relation of their form to their content, of their politics to their aesthetics: it is unfulfilled.²⁵ This is especially true of a poetry that recognizes that even its awareness of the obsolescence of its materials, as a literary strategy, is obsolete. It is in this sense that the poems I’ve been reading in this essay feel more like models than just instances—models of an aesthetics, at once enacted and theorized, groping for the future in the suffering of its materials.

I’d like to say a bit, in closing, about what I imagine are some of the questions left hanging by my discussion of these poems. First, I have foregrounded my own enthusiasm for them rather than subjecting them to critique; and second, I have focused, in reading them, on something like their content rather than their form. I have highlighted their preoccupations, that is, more than their techniques. What are the dangers for contemporary reading practice of a sympathetic, content-focused aesthetics? What might be its promise?

I think the most obvious risks run by the critical practice I’ve been testing here are a failure of critical distance and a literal-mindedness about content—so that a descriptive, advocating criticism is endangered by the possibility of becoming nothing more than an accompaniment to its object: packaging. Fair enough. Sympathy, and advocacy on the basis of content, runs counter to some of the most powerful and positive developments in late-twentieth-century literary studies—such as theory’s claim to have extricated itself from pseudoneutral assessments of value, or the attempts in feminism, queer theory, and U.S. ethnic and postcolonial studies to reveal pseudo-innocent content as a component of historical form.

These projects make up the center of my own training, and I hold them dear. But I think we’re at an impasse in literary studies, on the way to which we have sacrificed the critical potential of appreciation and advocacy in favor of what has become a rote “problematization” of texts, and a sadly narrow practice of appreciation that is only able to find subversiveness to admire. But what if the texts we admire, even the politically engaged ones, turn out to be not subversive? What if their political efficacy has been evacuated or is pending? Ascrib-

ing performative success to these objects—to pick one of our favorite strategies of the last decade—and equating that capacity for performance with agency doesn't seem to do justice to the theoretical power of the idea of performativity, which I take to lie not in our applauding the aesthetic object's performance but in our being unable to pin down when the performance is finished. Crucial to the sympathetic reading practice I want to advocate is an understanding that critical acts are not discrete. To dismiss appreciative or content-driven readings of texts on the grounds that they are insufficiently politicized, insufficiently counterhegemonic, is to mistake the work of countering hegemony (if that's what we're doing) as individual work. When I read a text that interests me, especially for its political-affective comportment, my impulse, my *critical* impulse, is: pass it on. Highlight it as best you can, read against the grain, or with it where you can, and make sure others take a look. This is as true for texts that I find repulsive as for those I admire: I don't imagine myself, as a critic, judging *by myself*.

This sense of critical reading as a self-insufficient act has historiographical implications for the dynamic of form and content. In particular, I think it is a living link both to camp and Left-messianic traditions of interpretation, for if both traditions insist that waste and trivia are potentially recuperable, they also imply that we might not be the final judges of what, in the object, was form, and what content. For instance, in reading some post-Language poems here, I have foregone looking at their (very interesting) line breaks and habits of syntax—not because these don't strike me as important but because those features of the poems are not what is most vividly emergent in them when they are grouped together. On the other hand, though I have been trying to foreground what I've called the preoccupations of these poems, those preoccupations don't quite amount to content either. I have been trying to articulate a stance or relation to a cultural problem that the poems are grappling with, which is the problem of how to have a live relationship to a material world whose temporal-spatial character is unreadable: an obsolescence on top of an obsolescence. The polemical affections of these poems for a "good house," or a "feminist sky," or for the lavish misguided-ness of an Enguerrand Quarton, are, yes, a kind of content; but they are also a relation to content—in other words, a kind of form.

It is the polemical character of this poetic stance that interests me

most right now, since it is something we might imitate in our emerging critical practices. And what seems freshly polemical about some of my favorite post-Language writing—what I think we might treat as a model—is its sense that polemic is the element of the negative in affection, or in judgment. A critical or artistic attachment is polemical, dangerous even, not because of which protagonist it has chosen but because it models what it's like not to know the whole story of its object. The dream of a redeemed matter, that is, doesn't entail a positive vision of what that redemption will look like so much as a resistance to the idea that it will look like any one thing we know.

This seems to me the provoking thing about post-Language poetry's polemical affection, or its camp messianism: it is a new and interesting way of writing from within the presumption of totality. This is a large part of why I like these poems so much. And if we were to pick up on these cues and risk writing to our peers about what we admire or revile (without neutralizing our opinions in advance by assuring our colleagues that yes, we too wish for the overthrow of hegemonic systems), I don't think we'd be giving ourselves over to a depoliticized humanism, or to mere impressionistic whimsy, so much as fostering a refreshed, and refreshing, negativity. Kevin Davies:

These cheesy little hypertexts
are going to get better.
I don't know
how *much* better, but *we'll see*. (C, 67)

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Notes

- 1 See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1996); Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001).
- 2 See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1991).
- 3 In the vast lay literature on the post-World War II financial system and its vulnerabilities, see David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (Bloomfield, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 1995); Nicholas Guyatt, *Another*

- American Century? The United States and the World after 2000* (New York: St. Martin's, 2001); Randy Martin, *The Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2002); and Harry Shutt, *The Trouble with Capitalism: An Enquiry into the Causes of Global Economic Failure* (London: Zed Books, 1998).
- 4 Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject; A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1999), 320. First published in the *Yale Journal of Criticism* (fall 1988): 1–24.
 - 5 Kevin Davies, untitled frontispiece, *Comp.* (Washington, D.C.: Edge Books, 2000). Further references to *Comp.* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *C.*
 - 6 In a very helpful essay called "Globalit, Inc.; Or, the Cultural Logic of Global Literary Studies," Ian Baucom makes use of the figures of expansion and contraction to characterize the current mode of capitalism (*PMLA* [January 2001]: 158–72). He deploys these terms to invest the rhetoric of globalization with a cautionary note: the "expansion" of capital, he insists, means also its "contraction," that is, its concentration in fewer hands. Baucom offers this cautionary coinage in order to work against what he sees as a potentially romanticizing tendency to model literary studies on a new global situation that is, in fact, an uneven global marketplace. I take Baucom's caution seriously; it is one reason I will rely here on the Frankfurtnian diction of a *totality*, whatever its problems, rather than on the word *globalization*.
 - 7 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 254.
 - 8 Lisa Robertson, *Debbie: An Epic* (London: Reality Street Editions, 1997). *Debbie* has no page numbers; further references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *D*, using line numbers.
 - 9 Rod Smith, *The Good House* (New York: Spectacular Books, 2001), n.p.
 - 10 For a discussion of the character of "official verse culture" (which is Charles Bernstein's phrase, coined long after the 1950s in reference to poetry of the 1980s), see James E. B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945–1965* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983).
 - 11 For one consideration of the political background of Language poetry, especially in terms of its relation to the new social movements, see Eleana Kim, "Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Makings of a Movement," in Gary Sullivan's online journal *readme* (spring–summer 2001), home.jps.net/~nada/language2.htm. Both Kim and Barrett Watten identify the emergence of Language poetry as a politicized avant-garde with the practice of criticism (see Watten, "The Turn to Language and the 1960s," *Critical Inquiry* [autumn 2002]: 139–84). For Kim, this means that

the Language poets, in preserving a small-press “outsider” status into the 1980s, actually ended up setting the stage for their (relative) canonization in university-based literary culture. For Watten, the “turn to language” is articulated in a critical response to the failures of “radical” poets like Denise Levertov to grasp the “insufficiency of language to history” (182). For the Language poets of Watten’s generation, this critique led to an exploration of the obduracy, even the opacity, of the relationship between politics and the linguistic sign.

- 12 The active-reader theory has received a good deal of attention from both post-Language poets and literary critics; see, for example, Alan Gilbert, “re: Reading the Active Reader Theory,” *Tripwire* 6 (fall 2002): 118–24; and Charles Altieri, “Some Problems about Agency in the Theories of Radical Poetics,” in *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (University Park: Penn State Univ. Press, 1998), 166–94.
- 13 For a key articulation of this theory, see Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2000), 40–58.
- 14 Ron Silliman makes his case for understanding reader-writer collaboration as a decommodification of language in the essays collected as *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1995).
- 15 These lines are from “The Poetics of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,” an essay by Bruce Andrews; see ubuWeb, www.ubu.com/papers/andrews.html (15 April 2004).
- 16 Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1987), 84–85.
- 17 See Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2000).
- 18 For excerpts from Hejinian’s and Silliman’s remarks on this topic, and for responses to them by younger writers, see “Forum: The Blank Generation?” *Newsletter of the St. Mark’s Poetry Project* (February–March 2003), 9–14.
- 19 Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 1990), 251.
- 20 For a recent example of this rhetoric of the emergent legibility of empire—American empire, here—see Arundhati Roy, “Mesopotamia. Babylon. The Tigris and Euphrates,” *UK Guardian*, 2 April 2003, guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,927712,00.html. Roy describes the Bush administration’s international posture as “tactless imprudence.”
- 21 Joshua Clover, “What’s American about American Poetry?” *The Totality for Kids*, unpaginated manuscript.
- 22 See, for instance, Paul de Man, “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrej Warminski (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996), 70–90. There is a subtle and exceptionally elegant notion of the historicity of the materiality of writing in de Man, of course,

a notion of history as the “occurrence” of the transfer, in writing, between its “cognitive” and “performative” aspects—a notion of history as “the emergence of a language of power out of a language of cognition” (“Kant and Schiller,” in *Aesthetic Ideology*, 133). I cannot, here, compare the cognitivism of, say, Adorno and de Man—another and more daunting project—but I can say, à propos of the two ways of understanding historicity and cognition, that where de Man rejects the idea of a dialectic in the materiality of language, Adorno sees the dialectic as the very form of that materiality—and sees the materiality of thought, furthermore, not as “occurrence,” but as what he calls “the need in thinking,” which is motivated not by the inadequacy of language to materiality but by its inadequacy to history—by the fact that our material productivity has not yet made of earth a paradise; see Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983), 408; and *Aesthetic Theory*, 33.

- 23 For a brief history of Karnal bunt, see “Karnal Bunt of Wheat,” by R. L. Foster and B. J. Goates, www.uidaho.edu/ag/plantdisease/kbwheat.htm (15 April 2004).
- 24 See Siegfried Kracauer, “Those Who Wait,” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Levin (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995), 137.
- 25 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 40.