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BETWEEN THE CLOUD AND THE PAGE: REPETITION AND TEXTUALITY IN POST-CONCEPUTUAL POETICS

by

MICHAEL KIRBY

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

Date	Matthew K. Gold Thesis Advisor
Date	Elizabeth Macaualy-Lewis Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Between the Cloud and the Page: Repetition and Textuality in Post-conceptual Poetics

by

Michael Kirby

Advisor: Matthew K. Gold

These three chapters take as their focus the emergent movement of post-conceptual poetry. The first chapter, "What is Post-conceptual Poetry?," attempts to delineate the varying definitions of post-conceptualism offered by four critics (Felix Bernstein, Diana Hamilton, Vanessa Place, and Robert Fitterman). Finding none of these to be satisfactory, I turn towards the delineation of my own definition of post-conceptualism in the second chapter, "Beckett *contra* Sade: Two Kinds of Repetition," which asserts that post-conceptualism may derive a sort of cohesive political agenda from its rejection of both Sadean and Beckettian repetition. "Between the Cloud and the Page," the third chapter, argues that we can approach post-conceptualism through the lens of textuality. I assert that the post-conceptual text lives in the expanse between immaterial ideas (what one can call the "cloud") and the physicality of words on the page. Therefore, the aesthetics of post-conceptualism can be said to be an agglomeration of tactics employed by what I believe to be the ideologically opposed movements of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and conceptual poetics.

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What is Post-conceptual Poetry?

Post-conceptual poetry suffers from a dearth of scholarship. Being a nascent movement, this is to be expected. However, one wonders whether this dearth is worsened by the absence of an agreed-upon meaning for the term "post-conceptual," as well as by the subsequent lack of consensus in regards to the kind of work to which this term should apply.[1] Thus the impetus for this chapter: finding existing definitions of post-conceptualism to be cursory in nature, I put forth my own definition, using repetition and textuality as the lenses through which I frame my argument. In order to better articulate my own position, it may be useful to outline the various ways in which critics have written about post-conceptualism in the recent scholarship on the subject.

Perhaps the first (and certainly most extensive) attempt to define post-conceptual poetry comes from Felix Bernstein, the son of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Charles Bernstein. In his *Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry*, he highlights the difficulties in establishing a poetic canon: "Canons are always created in those moments where it seems that this time the canon will be more justifiably produced than ever before. Many of us understand this and are happy to use this knowledge to support our Machiavellian…hedonism."[2] This is to say that canon formation, despite appeals to the contrary, will always be a site for power relationships, and thus, by its very definition, canon formation is always already exclusionary. Furthermore, any attempt to escape

[1] The post-conceptual movement has alternatively been referred to as "fictive" or "fictional" poetry. In a comparison between these two descriptors ("post-conceptual" and "fictive"), one notes that the former implies an engagement with (or reaction to) the conceptual poetry movement, while the later seems to imply an engagement with literary techniques that would usually be associated with works of fiction. What would cause such a discrepancy in emphasis? Could we, in fact, be dealing with two (or more) movements? I take up this issue in a later chapter.
[2] Felix Bernstein, *Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry* (Los Angeles: Insert Blanc Press, 2015), 58.

from the canon via a rejection of the canon as it is currently articulated is merely an escape into the confines of another (purportedly more "fair and equitable") canon. Such rejection seems to be justified, in part, by an appeal to "inclusivity" on the part of those who merely seek to replace the Western canon with an alternative (post-colonialists, queer scholars, other revisionists). However, these individuals ultimately ignore, as Bernstein notes, the will to power inherent in all attempts to put forth a "definitive" list of artists or writers.[3]

With these complications in mind, Bernstein opts to forge ahead, giving us what I think is the most extensive genealogy of what had formerly been a peripheral movement. First, he provides us with its historical lineage: "Post-conceptual poetry, by virtue of following conceptual poetry, can be seen as inaugurating a new tide in post-postmodernism…that came of age in the '90s and early '00s."[4] Post-postmodernism here refers to a plethora of movements (New Sincerity, New Narrative, the metamodernism of someone like Seth Abramson, conceptualism), which reject, at least in part, some of the aesthetic markers of post-modern literature: schizophrenic language, unreliable narrators, polyvocality—all of which have been associated by critics with "difficulty." Instead, these movements seem to return to a sort of simplicity in writing (whether it be the affective turn of something like New Sincerity, which depends upon simple language to convey a particular aesthetic, or the ultimate simplicity of conceptualism, whose practitioners bill their copying-cum-writing as something so simple that anyone could do it). One can think of post-conceptualism, at least according to Bernstein, as both a historical

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[3] This is not meant to deride postcolonial/queer reworkings of the canon, in which scholars and activists rightly address issues of representation. Should we be committed to inclusion? Of course, and I believe Bernstein would agree. But he seems to be interested in more theoretical questions: What does it mean to include underrepresented minorities? Include in what? And for what purpose?

[4] Ibid., 22.

ancestor of these movements, in the sense that it follows them chronologically, and as a movement that incorporates various elements—both stylistic and thematic—from these predecessors into its own ethos.

Bernstein then gives a summation of what he views as post-conceptualism's ethos: "Its practitioners…are part of a larger trend within post-postmodernism to bridge affect, queerness, ego, lyric, and self-conscious narcissism within the inherited procedural structures of the 'network' and the 'concept.'"[5] He even includes a working list of the movement's "practitioners," which, despite its brevity, may appear to be "definitive," in the sense that these writers, at first glance, seem to culturally and ideologically aligned.[6] They are all under the age of 30, work in large metropolitan areas, return to similar themes and ways of elaborating on these themes, seek to disrupt the already troubled distinction between high and low culture, and perhaps most importantly, share common conceptions of the role of the text in a post-L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, post-conceptual poetic landscape.

This is not to say that Bernstein does not go to great lengths to elucidate the differences between the people he has listed (while all the while maintaining that they form a unified group of writers) Some, according to him, are influenced by "Chris Kraus/Kathy Acker memoir," while others find their genesis in New York School poetry, etc., but this does not seem to fully satisfy one's questions, particularly about whether or not this group of people has a cohesive political (or even stylistic) program. Bernstein's willingness to admit his complacency with the system is certainly refreshing, but he may fall victim to the same inclusive ethos he critiques, putting forth

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[5] Ibid.

[6] The list in its entirety is as follows: "Sophia Le Fraga, Andrew Durbin, J. Gordon. Faylor, Trisha Low, Josef Kaplan, Kate Durbin, Joey Yearous-Algozin, Holly Melgard, Danny Snelson, Steve McLaughlin, and Steve Zultanski."

a list of writers with little justification.[7] Why these poets? And does placing so much emphasis on lists reduce canon formation to a kind of indexing? There must be an effort to articulate what unites these writers, an attempt to articulate a cohesive political and aesthetic agenda that says something beyond what a simple list can say.

Bernstein may answer that the writers he lists are united in their effort to "bridge affect…with inherited procedural structures," which, as he states, is a "part of a larger turn to queer structuralism that aligns the dry empty hierarchies of structuralism (to which post-postmodernism has unanimously returned) with the abjection that the term 'queer' allegedly refers to."[8] This is to say that post-conceptualism seemingly blends a concern with form (here referred to as "inherited procedural structures") with an equally felt concern for the content of the poem. This is not to say that post-conceptualism is reducible to yet another movement caught between form and content, but rather that it seems to be attempting to collapse these two aesthetic categories, making them act in total accordance with one another. In short, form becomes content, content becomes form.

However, can we really so easily compare Sophia Le Fraga, whose writings are often directly engaged with lesbian themes (and are thus explicitly "queer" in the real sense of that term), and Steve McLaughlin, whose work tends to skew towards computer generated compositions with little reference to disenfranchised minorities? In describing them both as "queer," or ascribing to them common political motivations, are we not diluting the efficacy of

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[7] This issue may ultimately be genre specific; *Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry* is by no means an "academic" work, nor is it advertised in such a way. But this just reinforces my main point, namely that post-conceptualism, as a movement, needs to researched thoroughly, and through an academic lens. I therefore do not disagree with Bernstein's main insights about post-conceptualism, and what it says about the poets who practice it. Rather it is his definition of post-conceptualism *itself* that I find needs to be expanded upon.
[8] Ibid., 22.

that term? And if such a cursory justification is to be the basis for our classification, then why not instead use one of many similarly cursory justifications, such as the already common way of organizing authors by their birthplace or city of residence (most of the authors we have been talking about are based in the so-called "art capitals" of New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles), or by an even more cursory judgement: classifying artists according to their reported shoe size.

The amount of attention paid to Bernstein in this chapter may mislead many readers, leading them to believe that he somehow has monopolized the term "post-conceptual." However, the poet and critic Diana Hamilton has formulated her own definition of post-conceptualism, beginning with an outright rejection of the one Bernstein articulated: "Felix Bernstein uses 'postconceptual' the most ridiculously; for him, it seems to offer an umbrella term for the small group of writers at whom he doesn't want to throw incomprehensible shade."[9] Despite this ad hominem attack, there does appear to be a point Hamilton wishes to make, namely that poetry written under the umbrella of post-conceptualism does, in fact, share a certain quality:

> Key to this sense of the "fictional" is a quality of *aboutness* that prevents overemphasis on form — and on the repetition of the forms that often characterizes the appearance of schools — and especially resists the belief that the shape a poem takes, rather than its "topic," is always the source of its politics / interestingness / literariness / purpose. Instead, the books I want to write about don't mind being about things: about love, about childbirth, about state violence, about war, about sex, about gossip."[10]

She contrasts this "aboutness" with other kinds of contemporary poetry:

> Other writing is *about* things, too. But a lot of contemporary poetry does not deal very directly with its "content;" or rather, it seems contentless. Most things that pass for poems today are list poems without knowing it: by trying to focus on the lyrical image's

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[9] Diana Hamilton, "On Fictional Poetry," *Harriet, a Poetry Blog*, The Poetry Foundation, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2016/06/on-fictional-poetry/ (Accessed April 3rd, 2017).
[10] Ibid.

> mediation of reference, they become mere collections of images that pride themselves on their irrelevance.[11]

We see that post-conceptualism, or "fictive" poetry, as Hamilton prefers to call it, is not as concerned with the form of the poem as it is with its content. Which is to say that post-conceptual poetry seems, for Hamilton, to be a mostly affective endeavor, in which the content of the poem is paramount; the poets associated with this movement are not afraid to make their poems "about" something—about love, about childbirth. This, one can gather, is not a total denial of formal concerns, as Hamilton writes that this quality of "aboutness" is what prevents an "overemphasis" on form. Rather, Hamilton would have us think that post-conceptual poetry is primarily defined by its emphasized relationship with form. This directly contradicts Bernstein's assertion that post-conceptual poetry is equally concerned with form and content and is attempting, in a way, to collapse these categories.

However, it seems as if Hamilton falls prey to a similar error as Bernstein—that is to say, she also cites writers who do not fall strictly into the rigid category she had constructed. She spends a significant portion of her essay discussing the poet Joseph Kaplan's *Democracy Is Not for the People* without once mentioning that a large part of Kaplan's artistic practice involves the collaging of found material, or how this appropriation would subsequently fit into her definition of "fictive" writing. It seems as if appropriation, which is certainly concerned with the content of what it appropriates, but also with its form, serves as an example of something that would problematize her definition of post-conceptualism as a movement concerned mostly with the content of a poem. The other writer Hamilton discusses at length, Monica McClure, is a much better fit for what she has outlined, but what does McClure, a poet who writes "traditional" lyric

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[11] Ibid.

poetry, have in common with Kaplan, a collagist? There needs to be more work done in order to convince us that these two writers share some sort of common aesthetic or political motivation.

Perhaps this motivation is best articulated by two critics whose writings on post-conceptualism we have yet to explore. In *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman discuss what they call "post-conceptual work":

> In hybrid or "impure" conceptualism or post-conceptualist writing, the points in between can accommodate a rebellion against, or critique of, the more stringent end-points. This has been articulated in post-conceptualist art.
>
> What is an "impure" conceptualism or post-conceptualism in writing? A post-conceptualism might invite more interventionist editing of appropriated source material and more direct treatment of the self in relation to the "object," as in post-conceptual visual art where the self- re-emerges, albeit alienated or distorted (see Paul McCarthy).[12]

In this we excerpt we see that post-conceptualism is identified with an impulse to challenge and rebel, which seems to imply that the movement is able to provide a prescient critique of contemporary life. However, Place and Fitterman seem to contradict this in an earlier passage in the work: "Note that in post-conceptual work, there is no distinction between manipulation and production, object and sign, contemplation and consumption. Interactivity has been proved as potentially banal as a Disney Cruise, active as a Pavlovian dinner bell."[13] In the first excerpt, Place and Fitterman afford post-conceptualism some sort of radicality, in that it can at least "critique" its "more stringent end-points." In the rather succinct dismissal contained within the second excerpt, it seems to rather be the case that Place and Fitterman see post-conceptualism as a completely apolitical movement. This, of course, disregards the interest in politics that Bernstein finds to be emblematic of post-conceptualism, such as its concern with queerness as a form of resistance, as presented in the work of Sophia Le Fraga, among others in

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[12] Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009), 22.
[13] Ibid., 18.

the movement. But perhaps we should engage with this definition of the "political" on the terms to which it is being presented to us.

This is supposedly apolitical form of writing is contrasted with conceptual writing, which is political in that it

> does not aim to critique the culture industry from afar, but to mirror it directly. To do so, it uses the materials of the culture industry directly. This is akin to how readymade artworks critique high culture and obliterate the museum-made boundary between Art and Life. The critique is in the reframing. The critique of the critique is in the echoing.[14]

If we are to go by this definition of politics—obliterating the boundary between Art and Life, critiquing the critique—then yes, one would have to admit that post-conceptual poetry is not political. However, one could just as easily say that this "critique of critique" supposedly present in conceptualism has become an apolitical gesture in itself; is it not the case that writers who are making this gesture remain within the comfort of the museum (or of the academic institution, in the case of some, but certainly not all, poets)? In expecting writers to subscribe to a politics in which their primary form of engagement is the outright dismissal of institutions, are we not going too far? This seems to be an unattainable goal for the majority of writers, who are ignored by institutions anyways. In this ready dismissal of post-conceptualism, perhaps Place and Fitterman are missing the ways post-conceptualism could potentially make us question our roles as political subjects, question the ways in which we identity as global(ized) citizens.

This question—why one set of criteria over another?—ultimately remains unanswered by all four writers, and thus the necessity of what I previously proposed becomes clear: it is only by asserting a foundational relationship between these disparate texts that we can come to understand post-conceptualism as more than just a buzzword denoting texts that are ultimately

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[14] Ibid., 20.

dissimilar in their poetic and political goals, but are nonetheless a part of a conceivable (and therefore definable) movement. We need to dig deeper in order to find what these texts have in common, outside of and beyond their surface-level similarities, and in doing so, we may glimpse what a post-L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, post-conceptual poetics aesthetic or political program may look like.

Beckett *contra* Sade: Two Kinds of Repetition

In this effort to provide a theoretical underpinning for post-conceptualism, as well as to better articulate the political criteria to which this movement subscribes, I turn now to a discussion of repetition in the work of two writers: Marquis de Sade and Samuel Beckett. I have chosen these writers because repetition features heavily in each of their work, and repetition, as I maintain later in this chapter, seems to be equally important for those writing under the banner of post-conceptualism. Thus one can say that these writers—Sade and Beckett, as well the various writers mentioned in the previous chapter, amongst others—share a certain affinity for repetition, an affinity that when articulated may possibly lead one to believe that these writers, despite their apparent differences in terms of the content of their writing, share common political goals. However, after defining repetition for each writer, it becomes clear that the repetition present within post-conceptual poetry points toward a different conception of politics than the ones provided by Sade and Beckett; thus, through this comparison, we can come to better understand post-conceptualism's position in the *long durée* of literature, that is to say, we can come to understand its position within literature beyond its relationship to its immediate literary predecessors (New Sincerity, New Narrative, metamodernism and Conceptual Poetry), while also answering a question I had proposed in the previous chapter: what does the politics of post-conceptualism look like?

In a letter to the poet Thomas MacGreevy, Beckett wrote that reading Sade filled him with a "kind of metaphysical ecstasy."[15] But what, then, are we to make of Beckett's decision to forgo a translation of *The 120 Days of Sodom* in the 1930s (even after he had already started on a

[15] Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1:1929-1940*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,2009), 223.

draft of the translation for Jack Kahane of the Obelisk Press)? Was it, as Shane Weller asserts, an "instance of [his] failing to hold to his own principles of artistic integrity"?[16] Or could it alternatively be read as a failure of sorts, in which Beckett, whose characters are often impotent to the point of excess, was himself unable to "live up" to the Sadean master-slave dichotomy? Epistolary material seems to support the former conclusion, but a sustained flirtation with the latter may prove generative. This chapter will argue that Beckett, despite taking various cues from Sade, is largely unable to work within Sade's sexual-political ideology. What follows is the neutering of the political potential of sexuality, as well the creation of a new ideology, one which finds its expression throughout the majority of Beckett's oeuvre. This is not to say that Sade held a disproportionate amount of influence over Beckett, but rather that Beckett seems to be "working through" the potentialities of Sade, much in the same way that Beckett can be said to be "working through" the potentialities of Joyce. Post-conceptualism, in turn, can be said to be working through the potentialities of *both* Sade and Beckett.

We know that Beckett first encountered Sade in 1931, well before he wrote *Watt*, a novel that seems indebted to Sadean notions of repetition.[17] Take, for example, the following, in which the titular protagonist's dress is described in all of its potential iterations:

> As for his feet, sometimes he wore on each a sock, or on the one a sock and on the other a stocking, or a boot, or a shoe, or a slipper, or a sock and a boot, or a sock and a shoe, or a sock and a slipper, or a stocking and boot, or a stocking and shoe, or a stocking and slipper, or nothing at all. And sometimes he wore on each a stocking, or on the one a stocking and on the other a boot, or a shoe, or a slipper, or a sock and a boot, or a sock and shoe, or a sock and slipper, or a stocking and boot, or a stocking and shoe, or a stocking and slipper, or nothing at all.[18]

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[16] Shane Weller, "The Anethics of Desire: Beckett, Racine, Sade," in *Beckett and Ethics*, ed. Russell Smith (New York: Continuum, 2011), 143.
[17] The evidence for such a claim can be found in Beckett's notes on Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (published in 1930), a study which included extensive excerpts of Sade's *Juliette* and *Justine*.
[18] Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 203.

Here we see that every possibility for how Watt can dress himself is explored in detail. One can also recall the sucking-stones in *Molloy*:

> I took advantage of being at the seaside to lay in a store of sucking-stones. They were pebbles but I call them stones. Yes, on this occasion I laid in a considerable store. I distributed them equally between my four pockets, and sucked them turn and turn about. This raised a problem which I first solved in the following way. I had say sixteen stones, four in each of my four pockets these being the two pockets of my trousers and the two pockets of my greatcoat. Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. Thus there were still four stones in each of my four pockets, but not quite the same stones. And when the desire to suck took hold of me again, I drew again on the right pocket of my greatcoat, certain of not taking the same stone as the last time. And while I sucked it I rearranged the other stones in the way I have just described. And so on. But this solution did not satisfy me fully.[19]

This so called "exhaustion of possibility," illustrated so blatantly above by Beckett, is also a staple of the Sadean text, although one must note that each writer differs in what they choose to take as their respective subject. (Sade seems to be engaged in a repetitive gesture that renders sexuality banal, while Beckett, at least in terms of repetition, skirts the question of sexuality, instead making banal the already banal: everyday attire, games of chess, walking. This can certainly be seen as one of the areas in which Beckett seems to distance himself from Sade, but one must admit that sexuality is in fact present in much of Beckett's work, albeit it in an impotent and less celebratory way.)[20] In the case of Sade, look no further than *The 120 Days of Sodom*, in which various "storytellers" are tasked with detailing their exploits as prostitutes and

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[19] Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), 311.

[20] A distorted sexuality is present in Beckett as early *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Beckett's first novel, although it remained unpublished throughout his life.

madams, with each of the stories being categorized according to its relative level of sexual intensity (ranging from "simple" pleasures to those that involve murder):

> The three storytellers, magnificently dressed as upper-class Parisian courtesans, were seated below the throne upon a couch, and Madame Duclos, the month's narrator, in very scanty and very elegant attire, well rouged and heavily bejeweled, having taken her place on the stage, thus began the story of what had occurred in her life, into which account she was, with all pertinent details, to insert the first one hundred and fifty passions by the title of simple passions…[21]

And again on the third day:

> The entire day having been spent preparing this program and chatting about it, and no one having been found at fault, all went uneventfully ahead, the strorytelling hour arrived; everyone took his place, the illustrious Duclos mounted the stage. She preceded in the wise…[22]

And again on the twenty-ninth day:

> Dinner was, as usual, followed by coffee…Messiers removed to the auditorium, where each father, by an arrangement which was encounter rather frequently, had his daughter on his couch beside him; breeches lowered, they listened to our talented storytellers' five tales.[23]

We are told of these events in gruesome and elaborate detail, but all the storytellers end with the explicit promise that the retelling of such exploits will continue for the foreseeable future, potentially even after those participating in the orgies leave the château they inhabit (or, alternatively, they are killed). This continual storytelling, itself imbedded in the equally repetitive act of gathering together for a nightly orgy, surely indicates that Sade, too, was interested in repetition as an exhaustive gesture.

To provide yet another example of exhaustive repetition, one may consider the following, excerpted from Felix Bernstein's "If Loving You Is Wrong":

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[21] Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, trans. Will McMorran and Thomas Wynn (New York: Penguin, 2015), 63.
[22] Ibid., 96.
[23] Ibid., 296.

If C.S. Giscombe (2,860 results) is a poet, I don't want to be a poet.
If Rob Fitterman (3,620 results) is a poet, I don't want to be a poet.
If Caroline Knox (4,120 results) is a poet, I don't want to be a poet.
If Claudia Keelen (4,280 results) is a poet, I don't want to be a poet.
If Tom Mandel (5,150 results) is a poet, I don't want to be a poet.
If Ed Roberson (6,100 results) is a poet, I don't want to be a poet.[24]

Taking a list of poets, Bernstein provides us with the amount of google results that they each have, all while maintaining the refrain of "I don't want to be a poet." This repetition, which maintains the structure of the sentence while only changing the names and the amount of results, aligns quite well with the repetition we have seen previously in both Sade and Beckett.

But what do we mean by "repetition"? In his book, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, Steven Connor draws upon Deleuze for a definition: "Deleuze distinguishes two different forms of repetition. Repetition which is humbly obedient to its original, which merely and simply reproduces it without any addition or distortion, Deleuze calls 'mechanical' or 'naked' repetition. Distinct from this is the 'clothed' or 'disguised' repetition which adds something to its original and seems to impart a difference to it."[25]

Despite their readily apparent differences, it can be said that Sade and Beckett, as well as post-conceptual poet Bernstein, employ a "disguised" repetition, in the sense that they all detail scenarios (whether they be sexual in nature or of the "everyday" variety or lists) in which the act is repeated with only slight variation. However, it is vital to note that it is not the specific act that is important per say, but rather the repetition itself, which one could argue provides each writer with a foundation from which they can come to better formulate their respective political ideologies. This is to say that these disparate writers begin with repetition, and that it is only

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[24] Felix Bernstein, *Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry* (Los Angeles: Insert Blanc Press, 2015), 115.
[25] Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 2007), 5-6.

through an examination of this repetition (and its particular application in each writer's work) that we can come to understand that it serves as the underpinning for each writer's (or ideology. The question then becomes the following: what are these ideologies?

But before we answer this question, we must return to Beckett's letter, from which we can come to better judge the extent of his familiarity with Sade's work. His most sustained interaction with Sade may have been when he was asked by Jack Kahane) to translate *The 120 Days of Sodom*. And although the translation was never published, in part because Beckett believed it would "spike" his writing career, it does suggest that he pursued, at one point or another, a more than superficial reading of *The 120 Days of Sodom*. The questions we must first answer are then, "What did he internalize from this experience?" and "what aspects of Sade's thought did he subsequently reject?" Beckett describes his experience as such:

> The obscenity of surface is indescribable. Nothing could be less pornographical. It fills me with a kind of metaphysical ecstasy. The composition is extraordinary, as rigorous as Dante's. If the dispassionate statement of 600 "passions" is Puritan and a complete absence of satire juvenalesque, then it is, as you say, puritanical and juvenalesque. You would loathe it whether or no.[26]

Although it is certainly laudatory, this is far from a definitive statement on what Sade "means" to (or for) Beckett; we understand that Beckett "likes" the writing, that it is both "puritanical" and "juvenaleqsue," but not else much is given in terms of evaluative content. Furthermore, Beckett barely mentions Sade after this highly enthusiastic letter, which would perhaps lead a scholar to believe that, despite his original interest, Sade's influence on Beckett was, in fact, minimal. This is only exacerbated by the lack of any critical writings on Sade on the part of Beckett (in comparison, essays were written about Dante and Joyce, and Proust received an entire book.) This highlights a major problem with the method at hand: sometimes there is just not enough

[26] Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1:1929-1940*, 223

material evidence to warrant the assertion that there exists a connection between writers, or that a writer is writing *in reaction to* another writer. However, in the interest of this chapter, we will be operating under the assumption that, no matter how brief it is, this mention of Sade in Beckett's letter to MacGreevey, along with the unpublished translation of *The 120 Days of Sodom*, is proof of a relationship between the two writers. Taking this as basic fact will allow us to begin a more interpretative analysis, through which we can come to more deeply explore the differences between their respective political ideologies. This will be accomplished, in part, by a close reading of some of Sade and Beckett's literary output, which will then provide us with a political spectrum from which we can come to various post-conceptualism.

Beginning with Sade, one notices that his characters can essentially be divided into two mutually exclusive categories: those who possess power and those who do not. This is the master-slave dichotomy that I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. We can clearly see that Sade subscribes to such a viewpoint in a footnote he provides in his *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, a portion of which I will provide here: "every individual born lacking the qualities to become useful someday to the republic, has no right to live, and the best thing for all concerned is to deprive him of life the moment he receives it."[27] However, not much is said in regards to what exactly these "qualities" are comprised of, or to who they are relegated.

Maurice Blanchot, in his essay "Sade," expands upon this observation: "Such then is Sade's world: a few people who have reached the pinnacle, and around them an infinite, nameless dust, an anonymous mass of creatures which has neither rights nor power."[28] But in

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[27] Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, in *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings* ed. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 335.
[28] Maurice Blanchot, "Sade," in *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*, ed. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 44.

what ways do these "masters" justify their claim to power? What is it that gives them the right to oppress, murder, and betray? Blanchot explains:

> …it consists in repudiating the social contract which according to Sade, is the safeguard of the weak and, theoretically, constitutes a grave menace for the powerful. In practice, however, the Powerful One knows full well how to utilize the law to consolidate his advantages. But if he does this, then he is powerful only through the law, and it is the law which, in principle, incarnates power.[29]

These libertines are aware of the singular law which, according to Sade, governs existence: there are no laws, and that any "manmade" law only serves to protect the weak. Which is to say that they recognize that their power derives from this law that is no law, and can therefore be said to subscribe to a sort of bastardized version of Darwin's concept of "survival of the fittest." Those who see that the world is divided into the powerful and powerless may join the ranks of the powerful if and only if they take, by force, this power. There is no regard for moral or ethical guidelines, or even religious maxims, and thus these libertines are slaves only to their own will to power. Comparisons can also be made to Nietzsche's Übermensch (later used by the Nazis to justify their crimes), a figure whose invention Sade predates by over 100 years.

Contrast this with the characters of Pozzo and Lucky, the wandering figures in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*:

> POZZO: He wants to impress me, so that I'll keep him.
> ESTRAGON: What?
> POZZO: Perhaps I haven't got it quite right. He wants to mollify me, so that I'll give up the idea of parting with him. No. that's not exactly it either.
> VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?
> POZZO: He wants to cod me, but he won't.
> VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?
> POZZO: He imagines that when I see how well he carries I'll be tempted to keep him on in that capacity.[30]

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[29] Ibid., 45.
[30] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 31.

And again, later on in the play when Vladimir asks Pozzo to force Lucky to perform:

> POZZO: …[*he jerks the rope*. LUCKY *looks at him*.] For I shall suffer, no doubt about that. [*He picks up the whip*.] What do you prefer? Shall we have him dance, or sing, or recite, or think, or –
> ESTRAGON: Who?
> POZZO: Who! You know how to think, you two?
> VLADIMIR: He thinks?
> POZZO: Certainly. Aloud. He even used to think very prettily once, I could listen to him for hours. Now…[*He shudders*.] So much the worse for me. Well, would you like him to think something for us?
> …
> ESTRAGON: He never refuses?
> POZZO: He refused once. [*Silence*.][31]

We see in these excerpts that the power dynamic between the two characters is ill defined. One could say that is it, of course, Pozzo who holds the power, as he leads Lucky by a rope and orders him to pick up and put down his bags. Or that it must be Pozzo who holds the power because at least he can speak, while Lucky remains almost completely silent throughout the play, only to open his mouth when ordered to do so. But how is one to explain excerpts like the one above? It surely does not seem as if Pozzo recognizes himself as possessing any sort of power, and it is even hinted that Pozzo is worried that Lucky will eventually leave him. Can a master worry about his slave in a way that so blatantly exposes his own fear of loss? If one were a true Sadean, this would be unthinkable, precisely because, for Sade, everyone who is not master is already a slave. And thus these slaves are easily replaceable, as they comprise the majority of people, and a "true" master would never worry about losing that which can be so easily replaced. This is to say that the Sadean ideology, as much as we can give it coherence here, is invested in a dichotomy that relegates people to one of either two categories. The positions we can occupy are delimited from the outset, although one is allowed, at least according to Sade, the hope that one

[31] Ibid., 39.

day he or she can earn, through force, their "right" to be a master. Thus, if we are to take this excerpt from *Waiting for Godot* at its face value, with all the ambiguity that is inherent to it, we can come to understand that Beckett is working under the assumption of a different ideology, and that subsequently we are at a great distance from Sade's definition of power.

A similar case can be made for Hamm and Clov, characters in Beckett's *Endgame.* We know that is Clove is Hamm's adopted son, but we are not clued into any sort of power dynamic that may exist between the two. Rather, we are provided with dialogue that seems to complicate the Sadean notion of power as that which the master exclusively possesses:

> HAMM: All right, be off.
> [*He leans back in his chair, remains motionless. Clov does not move, heaves a great groaning sigh. Hamm sits up.]*
> I thought I told you to be off.
> CLOV: I'm trying.
> [*He goes to door, halts.]*
> Ever since I was whelped.
> [*Exit Clov.*][32]

Hamm eventually calls Clov back, which seems to support Clov's earlier statement that he has been trying to leave since his birth (leave what? Hamm's home? Life? It is never clarified in the text), in the sense that "trying" implies an action that is never fully completed. And thus the reader is clued into the fact that Clov may have attempted to leave many times before, to no avail. And in this particular scene, Clov does indeed come back:

> HAMM: My kingdom for a nightman!
> [*He whistles. Enter Clov.*]
> Clear away this muck! Chuck it in the sea!
> [*Clov goes to bins, halts.*][33]

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[32] Samuel Beckett, *Endgame and Act Without Words* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 25.
[33] Ibid., 31.

What are we to take from this exchange? As we saw with Pozzo and Lucky, one could read it as a situation in which the conventional relationship between master and slave is subverted, which is not to suggest that Clov (the son) overthrows his father in some sort of fulfilment of an Oedipal prophecy. Rather, it seems as if Beckett is doing away with the distinction altogether, instead offering up an ideology in which a person is not interpolated as *either* master or slave, but is master a*nd* slave, simultaneously. This ideology could perhaps be better explained by making reference to the work of Michel Foucault, who offered a similar definition of power throughout his career as philosopher. This is not to suggest that Beckett used Foucault as a model for his novels and plays (an impossibility), or that Foucault used Beckett as a prompt for his historical examination of power, or even that Beckett is writing a novel in conversation with (and therefore dependent upon) historical fact. Rather, it is the case that the two share a foundational belief, namely that the old, Sadean model of power, in which the roles of master and slave are clearly defined, is perhaps no longer applicable to modern life.

Power, for Foucault, is synonymous with knowledge, which is to say that neither can exist without the other. By way of example, one can think of figure of the psychoanalyst (who is also an example of a "specific intellectual"); the analyst, in his discipline, has a specific knowledge of say, Freudian psychoanalysis, through which the patient must then articulate himself or herself. There is no "outside" to this knowledge, as the patient's articulation is tied to Freudian definitions, and Freudian analysis then becomes a site of power relations, in which it is not only the patient that is inherently dependent upon the analyst for his or her self-definition, but the analysist who, in turn, becomes dependent upon the analysand. This is to essentially say that power, in Foucauldian terms, is a closed system, in which there is no escape from the role of slave (analysand) into that of the master (analyst) because there is no difference between the two.

Instead, the choices presented to us are false choices, all the more enticing because they hide the fact that each role is equally bereft of power in the Sadean sense of that word. The belief that we have a choice in the role we are to play, or that these roles are atemporal and will exist continually throughout the rest of time, underpins the political ideologies of many contemporary political movements. This is especially true in so called "sex-positive" movements, in which the political subject is told to "identify" with various counter-cultural groups, such as the micro culture designated by the term "queer." The underlying irony, if we are to listen to Beckett, is that these are false distinctions, built to hide the fact that "queer," as a political phenomenon, is dependent upon the very normative gestures it derides, in the sense that without these gestures, queer would have nothing to oppose; what is a master without a slave?

Applying Foucault's analysis of power to Beckett seems all too easy a task: the numerous ways in which the characters are withheld from accessing any sort of transcendental joy, the ways in which they are trapped in relationships from which they have no respite, illustrate where exactly Beckett stands in relation to this question of power. Furthermore, one can easily imagination that categories such as "queer" would have no meaning in Beckett's universe, and would instead be presented as devoid of all content and reduced to an impotent gesture from which a coherent political agenda could not be deduced. Sade's political ideology, no matter how uncompromising in its violence and aberration, at least allows for the potentiality of escape. Beckett, on the other hand, provides an (a)sexual politics in which escape is impossible, in which the very idea is rendered as a laughable fantasy: "I must speak with this voice that is not mine, but can only be mine…it is I who speak, all alone, since I can't do otherwise. No, I am speechless."[34] Or from Molloy: "Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent

[34] Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels*, 301.

nothing, you think you are inventing, *you think you are escaping*, and all you do is stammer out your lesson…”[35] [my emphasis]. The “queer” subject seeks to invent an escape from the daily grind of heteronormative life, only to be met with the realization that his or her escape is an escape into yet another trap.

Allow us to quickly return to Sade: Remember that the master is a master in virtue of his declaring it so, by seizing the “right.” Thus one can agree with Jacques Lacan when he asserts that “the Sadean bedroom is of the same stature as those places from which the schools of ancient philosophy borrowed their names: Academy Lyceum, and Stoa.”[36] And that even further: “Sade represents here the first step of a subversion of which Kant, as piquant as this may seem in light of the coldness of the man himself, represents the turning point—something that has never been pointed out as such, to the best of my knowledge.”[37] What is this turning point Lacan describes? He writes: “The quest to feel good would thus be a dead end were it not reborn in the form of *das Gute*, the good that is the object of the moral law. Experiences tells us that we make ourselves hear commandments inside of ourselves, the imperative nature of which is presented as categorical, in other words, unconditional.”[38] In summary, both Kant and Sade see their respective political agenda as being an imperative, that is to say, they both argue that, in order for their political ideologies to function, they must be mandatory across the whole spectrum of people. In the case of Sade, anyone must be able to become the master, or to alternatively be lowered to the position of slave. However, the danger with categorical imperatives is that they are binding, that they do not allow for any wiggle room through which the subject can identify in

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[35] Ibid., 27.
[36] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 645.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 646.

ways that are not already explicitly mandated. And if we are to take Kant and Sade to their extremes, the most ethical solution to humanity's plights (as proposed by Kant and then subverted by Sade) would be to "deprive them of life the moment they receive it," in order to make sure that they never have to suffer at all. In light of this assertion, can one then say that Beckett is a more ethical writer, as his (a)political system at least does not, in a direct way, advocate for ending humanity all together?

Perhaps alluding to another of Beckett's texts will help to answer this question. The most direct confrontation between the two writer's ideologies occurs in the novel *How It Is*. In examining this point of confrontation, one hopes that the point at which their differing frameworks or ideologies will become most apparent. The novel, at first glance, has all the trappings of a Sadean torture scene:

> semi-side left right leg right arm push pull flat on face curse God bless him beseech him no sound with feet and hands scrabble in the mud what do I hope a tin lost where I have never been a tin half-emptied thrown away ahead that's all I hope
>
> where I have never been but others perhaps long before not long before it's one or the other or its both a procession what comfort in adversity what comfort
>
> those dragging on in front those dragging on behind whose lot has been whose lot will be what your lot is endless cortège of sacks burst in the interests of all
>
> or a celestial tin miraculous sardines sent down by God at the news of my mishap wherewith to spew him out another week
>
> semi-side right left leg left arm push pull flat on the face mute imprecations scrabble in the mud every half-yard eight times per chevron or three yards of headway clear a little less the hand dips clawing for the take instead of the familiar slime an arse two cries one mute end of part one before Pim that's how it was before Pim[39]

[39] Samuel Beckett, *How It Is* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 47-48.

The protagonist wallows in the Dante-esque mud, wriggling about, until he comes into contact with a person called Pim. If one were to expect a happy union between the characters, they would be incorrect, as the unnamed protagonist begins to "teach" Pim "lessons":

> first lesson theme song I dig my nails into his armpit right hand right pit he cries I withdraw them thump with fist on skull his face sinks in the mud his cries cease end of first lesson.
>
> second lesson same them nails in armpit cries thump on skull silence end of second lesson all that beyond my strength
>
> but this man is no fool he must say to himself I would if I were he what does he require of me or better still what is required of me that I am tormented thus and the answer…
>
> not that I should cry that is evident since when I do I am punished instanter
>
> sadism pure and simple no since I may not cry[40]

One can see that the last line is an ironic statement; it is the narrator himself that is being tormented, despite the fact that he is the one inflicting torture. In fact, Beckett seems to be suggesting that these roles are ultimately interchangeable; if the torturer is under just as much torture as the torture, then what is the ontological difference between the two? Beckett seems to be pointing not to some Sadean power dynamic in which there is always someone occupying the positions of master and slave, but rather seems to be reducing all human experience to that of one experience: master-slave, the two terms here being indistinguishable, caught up in a repetitive gesture that renders them meaningless.

One must recognize that what has been proposed in this chapter does not align with the views of those who see Beckett as a fundamentally ethical or moral writer. One well-known proponent of such a view is Badiou, who understands Beckett's work as being divided into two separate periods:

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[40] Ibid., 62-63.

> We can…identify two major periods within Beckett's work. After *Texts for Nothing* (composed between 1950 and 1953), the writer is overcome by a feeling of impasse and impotence. He comes out of this impasse with *How It Is* (1959-1960), a text that introduces a clean rupture in the themes as well as in the conduct of the prose.[41]

By stating that there is "rupture" in Beckett's work, one is led to believe that, although he may have begun his career as impotent and unable to provide alternatives, Beckett eventually offers an ethical solution to the worlds' problems. One could in fact argue the contrary: If all of Beckett's work can be said to be doing something, this something is definitively not providing alternatives. Instead, it may be the fact that he sees no alternatives to Sade's sexual-political ideology, and that he is not in the business of providing an ideological groundwork on which to stand. Which is to say that Beckett and Sade propose (politics as such and (a)politics) are themselves equally unfavorable. The former depends on an imperative, that when brought to its extreme, leaves little room for invention, while the other is too impotent to even offer an alternative.

Where does this leave post-conceptualism? Does it fall somewhere along the spectrum we have formulated above (Sadean politics and Beckettian (a)politics)? Or does it open up a new path, one that is irreducible to either of the two paths that we have outlined so far?

An answer may be provided by the post-conceptual poet Steve Zultanksi, whose collection of poems, *Agony*, seems to reject repetition in all of the forms in which it has been presented to us. Take, for example, the following excerpt from *Agony*, the first book in the writer's planned trilogy:

> Given that the average person breathes, on average, 16 times a minute, and that the average tidal volume, that is, the air displaced between inspiration and expiration, is 30.513 cubic inches, we can assume that when I breathe normally, that is, when I am not

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[41] Alain Badiou, "Tireless Desire," in *On Beckett*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Manchester, UK: Clinamen Press Ltd), 40-41.

> yawning in anyone's face continuously, which is nearly never, I move 703,109.52 cubic inches of air a day….
>
> Now. Considering that the average person who happens to be male, such as myself, for now, yawns ten times a day, and that each yawn forces 280.709 cubic inches of air out of the lungs following maximal inspiration, on average we can assume that, when I'm breathing normally, which is nearly never, I yawn in ten faces a day, or in one face ten times a day, and thus I force 2,807.09 cubic inches of air into their mouth or mouths, over the course of it…
>
> Given that I've been in love three times, say, and that, on average, my being in love has lasted a year, we can assume that I've spent three years yawning in their faces, knowing they know that I live here, at least for those moments immediately following maximal inspiration
>
> So they've only known that I live here for three hours and 2.5 minutes, if we assume that each yawn lasts merely a moment, and that a mere moment is measured in seconds, one.
>
> Two.[42]

Notice the representation of certain phrases ("on average," "that is," "which is nearly never"), all of which continue to appear throughout the entirety of the collection. One could say this text is certainly engaged in some form of repetition, whether it be of the Sadean or Beckettian variety. But which one? This repetition does not seem to be Sadean, in that is has no interest in glorying the dynamic between master and slave; there is no clearly defined subject positions to which we can point. Nor does it seem particularly Beckettian, seeing as that the characteristic Beckettian pair is absent (Hamm and Clov, Pozzo and Lucky); there is, at least our knowledge, only one speaker. It therefore seems as if we are dealing with a type of exhaustion that we did not see in either Sade or Beckett.

On a closer reading, one may find that this piece, despite appearing to be repetitive, is committed to a radical rejection of repetition. This is most forcibly illustrated by the presence of

[42] Steve Zultanski, *Agony* (Toronto: Bookthug, 2012), 9-10.

numbers throughout the text. One may notice that they are constantly changing; calculations producing a multiplicity of answers. It is certainly a type of exhaustion, in the sense that it the sheer amount of numbers presented are overwhelming, but a type of exhaustion that is not reducible to any pre-determined subject position, as was the case in Beckett or Sade. The language therefore acts as a kind of mask, hiding the math that is simultaneously taking place within the poem. By calling attention to this mask, it seems as if Zultanski is calling into question the ways in which language, especially in the case of poetic act, takes primacy over numbers and mathematics. This may seem intuitive (of course poetry is primarily concerned with language), but this limits our conception of poetry, taking it to be merely a language game, a conception that Zultanski wants further complicate. Perhaps language, in a newly forged relationship with mathematics, may give rise to new notions of poetry. Zultanski is therefore aligned, at least in this regard, with Badiou, because Badiou similarly calls for us to complicate the relationship between the "pure multiplicity" of mathematics and the "false" multiplicity of language.

A similar impulse to complicate, albeit one that is articulated in a different way, can be found in the work of Joseph Kaplan, or to be more specific, in his book length poem *Kill List*:

> Vito Acconci is a rich poet.
> Gilbert Adair is comfortable.
> Rachel Adams is comfortable.
> Etel Adnan is comfortable.
>
> Christ Alexander is comfortable.
> Elizabeth Alexander is a rich poet.
> Bruce Andrews is a rich poet.
> Maya Angelou is a rich poet.
>
> David Antin is a rich poet.
> Rae Armantrout is a rich poet.
> John Ashbery is a rich poet.

> Amiri Baraka is comfortable.[43]

The poem ends with following:

> Stephanie Young is comfortable.
> Matthew Zapruder is a rich poet.
> Mande Zecca is comfortable.
> Steven Zultanksi is comfortable.[44]

Here too we see the use of repetitive phases ("…is comfortable," "is a rich poet"). Yet, like Zultanksi, this repetition is misleading; the repetition exists in the poem, but only as a self-reflexive gesture in which a different sort of repetition comes to be questioned. The different form of repetition that seems to be his main focus is the repetition that leads to the following class divisions: rich and comfortable. The next question is the following: what is being left out of this repetitive gesture, or to put it alternatively, what does this repetitive gesture mask? What seems to be missing from the formulation "rich and comfortable" is the lower class of writers, the proletariat writers, those who are unable to be (re)presented within the bourgeois parlor room of poetry. Kaplan, through this process of subtraction, calls our attention to a group that would have otherwise gone unnoticed, thereby politicizing poetry (or art more generally speaking) in way that acknowledges that its production and dissemination is tied to a poet's class.

Post-conceptualism shares some fundamental qualities with what Badiou had called "ethical writing," that is to say, a writing that is attuned to a post-eventual notion of truth. Or as Badiou writes in his book on Saint Paul: "On the one hand, every truth procedure breaks with the axiomatic principle that governs the situation and organizes its repetitive series. A truth procedure interrupts repetition and can therefore not be supported by the abstract permanence

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[43] Joseph Kaplan, *Kill List* (Baltimore, MD: Cars Are Real, 2013), 1.
[44] Ibid., 68.

proper to a unity of the count."[45] Post-conceptualism is political because it rejects the false power dynamic between master and slave, instead finding its truth (here understood as a something that arises *after* repetition is interrupted, arises from this very interruption) in something that extends beyond the divisions that we see in someone like Sade. This it to say that it allows us to think beyond the master-slave dichotomy. It also overcomes the nihilism inherent in the writing of someone like Beckett; instead of subscribing to a Foucauldian definition of power, in which there is little hope that we can escape from the social or political categories into which we have been placed, post-conceptualism allows the reader (and writer, in the majority of instances), to not only to questions these categories, but to speculate beyond these categories as well.

Sade might have agreed with Beckett's statement that the "search for the means to put an end to things, and end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue."[46] He may in fact find pleasure in this endless pursuit, seeing the repetitive gesture of beginning again and again as the genesis of pleasure itself. And Beckett, for the most part, agrees (as signaled by his *comment c'est*, which means both "to begin" and "how is it," implying that we are in a perpetual state of beginning, that beginning is "how it is.") However, Beckett seems to be done with the orgy, with the festivities, with this never-ending beginning. He, with Baudrillard, asks "what is to be done after the orgy"? Sade answers that we should be happy with our lot, should rejoin the orgy with a renewed vigor. Seeing no alternative—incapable of providing an alternative—Beckett begrudgingly answers: "I can't go on. I'll go on."[47] The post-conceptual poet, in turn, may be the only one equipped to leave the orgy altogether.

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[45] Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 11.
[46] Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels*, 293.
[47] Ibid., 407.

Between the Cloud and the Page

In this chapter, I turn from repetition towards questions of textuality and its importance in defining post-conceptualism as a cohesive aesthetic movement. I assert that post-conceptual poetry makes an appeal to both metaphysical "concepts" and the materiality of the text, and can therefore be thought of as an atypical agglomeration of tactics employed by the ideologically opposed movements of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and conceptual poetics. This is not to suggest that there exists a dialectical process involving these aforementioned movements, through which post-conceptualism emerges as a synthetic product. Rather, it seems to be that the post-conceptual text lives in the expanse between immaterial ideas (what one can call the "cloud") and the physicality of words on the page.

Such a task is, in part, dependent upon the historicizing of post-conceptualism, and thus the need for me to now turn towards a further examination of two of post-conceptualism's direct poetic antecedents: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and conceptualism. I begin with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, which, despite the unity its name implies, is by no means a homogenous group of individuals. Nonetheless, one must note a certain affinity does in fact exist amongst most members of the group, which is summed up by Charles Bernstein in this concise statement: "the value of a poem's pitch is not in the words but in what the words allow for a reader."[48] This, what one could call a "reader-oriented" aesthetics, is the cornerstone of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, or language-centered, poetry. It places, above all else, the relationship the reader has with the work he or she is reading, and is therefore staunchly opposed to poetry that derives from the Romantic-tradition, in which the author acts as a "god" transmitting his or

[48] Charles Bernstein, *Pitch of Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), X.

her beliefs to the reader. Instead, it is the job of the reader to take an active role in bringing meaning to the text (as opposed to just passively receiving it from the author). But what, then, is the role of the text? What does this "reader-oriented" aesthetics say about the role these writers afford the actual words on a page?

There is already a wealth of scholarship on this subject, in part conceived by the practitioners of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetry. Most important to our current discussion is the following, taken from the introduction to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (the anthology of the magazine of the same name published in 1971): "our…project, if it can be summarized at all, has involved exploring the numerous ways that meanings and values can be (& are) realized—revealed—*produced in writing*" (my emphasis).[49] Essentially, the writers associated with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* emphasize the physical markings on the page and the resulting plethora of meanings they could have for a potential reader, who interprets these marking in any given way. This emphasis is what gives L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E its so-called "cohesive" aesthetics. But this is not to say that the text, and its inherent multiplicity of meaning, is dependent upon the reader for its actualization, but rather that it is in the interaction between the writer and the text that meaning, which can never be a meaning, comes to be disclosed; L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E privileges the interaction between the reader and a text by stressing that the poem is itself a construction of language; this is done through a variety of techniques, including the use of metonymy and synecdoche, both of which call attention to the "artificiality" of the text. Thus the role of the writer fades away in order to be replaced by a more intimate relationship between the reader and the text.

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[49] Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, "Repossessing the word," in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), IX.

A similar argument has been made by Marjorie Perloff, in her seminal essay "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo," in which she states that "[one] of the cardinal principles—perhaps *the* cardinal principle—of American Language poetics (as of the related current in England usually labeled "linguistically innovative poetries") has been the dismissal of "voice" as the foundational principle of lyric poetry."[50] "Voice" here refers to schools of poetry in which writers finds themselves within the "Romantic-tradition." That is to say, as we have previously discussed, these writers find themselves in a tradition in which the author "transmits" meaning through his or her "expert" choice of words. One can think of anything from Romanticism proper to the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath to more contemporary poets such as those associated with the Nyorican Poets Café on the Lower East Side; all of these individuals and movements can be defined as being within the "Romantic" tradition, and can thus be seen as being interested in issues pertaining to "voice" and "expression." L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, as a movement, seems to reject these concerns with authentic "voice" and "expression," which is to say that the poets operating under the banner of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry take Barthes at his word when he states that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author"; their view of the text, as a sort experiment in which meaning is produced through a reader's relationship with the work at hand, is thus very well aligned with Barthes notion of the "death of the author," and can said to more generally aligned with a postmodern notion of writing.

One, could, at first, view conceptual poetry in a similar light. It certainly does not stray away from an overt identification with its predecessor (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry), perhaps

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[50] Majorie Perloff, "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo," Electronic Poetry Center, http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/langpo.html (accessed December 20, 2016).

because in a world where pedigree is of the upmost importance, it is necessary to assert one's connection to a certain "untainted" lineage of avant-garde poetry. But also because the movement, too, seems interested in doing away with the common notion of the author as the "bringer of meaning." This is done through a conscious rejection of writing as one would normally define it; (pure, which is to say, fully) conceptual writers copy directly from source texts, hardly ever (if at all) adding or subtracting words. This becomes the defining characteristic of conceptualism, a movement that, although broad in the sense that writers are exposed to an almost unlimited source of material for their writing projects, is ultimately reducible to the single artistic practice of copying.

However, it is vital to remember that conceptual poetry differs from its predecessor in many regards. First, and perhaps most notably, the movement almost completely abandons the linguistic play of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. This is noted by Felix Bernstein in his own summary of the movement: "This type of dematerilization [that conceptualism represents] is really nothing more than a hyper-materialized, a resignifying, and a price boosting of the poetry book."[51] This dematerialization is opposed to the materialization of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, in which Marxist critics found a prescient critique of capitalism.[52] Which is to say that despite its calls to the contrary, conceptualism may reify the importance of the text, at least in an economic sense, much in the same way that Warhol may have called into question the status of the objet d'art, all while profiting off of said objet d'art.[53]

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[51] Bernstein, *Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry*, 54.
[52] For a further discussion of Marxism and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, see the work of critic George Hartley.
[53] This is not a jab at artist's who make money off of their work. Rather, it seems as if some conceptualist writers neglect to admit their own complicity with the capitalism. Yes, your practice calls into question the materiality of the text, but are you truly critiquing capitalist exploitation by partaking in it?

Bernstein continues: " [conceptualism] stands in stark contrast to the previously dominant condition of poetry making: the imaginative play that takes place outside the symbolic order, the play with signifiers of a certain stream of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry."[54] Claims like the one above seem to accuse L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E of its own form of authorial romanticism, which again puts it at odds with how L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E has come to be understood, as a sort of movement that eschews any sort of relation with authorship. This may be true, but it this does not change the face that we do not see the (purposeful) deployment of puns, double entendres, or acrobatic linguistic feats in conceptual poetry, and are instead treated to what are essentially inert texts copied directly from a source. That is to say, what we are given are more akin to conceptual objets d'art, such as in the case of Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day*, in which he copies, word for word, one day's edition of the *New York Times*:

E28 THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2000

MAKING CHOICES

FINAL WEEKS

THROUGH SEPTEMBER 26

Anatomically incorrect[55]

A similar use of inert text can be seen in Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts*, in which she gives to us unedited legal prosecution and defense documents, most of which come from cases involving brutal rapes and murders. The beginning of one such case is provided below:

> She had met appellant at her friend Ynez's house that September, meeting his twin brother Theo and his cousin Ritchie sometime in November. Danielle and appellant spoke on the phone regularly, and she'd spent some time with the co-defendants, including Friday night visits to their apartment. Before December 29th, Danielle did not

[54] Ibid.
[55] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (Buffalo, NY: BlazeVox, 2009), 1.

> have a romantic relationship with any of the co-defendants, and none of them had ever harmed or threatened her. She was not afraid of them. (RT 1:121-127, 1:130-131, 1:139, 1:184-187, 1:193- 194, 1:198-205, 2:298-299, 2:309-310, 2:333-335, 2:372, 2:382) Danielle knew appellant was in the SouthSide Chiques gang because he told her, and showed her his gang tattoo. She had also seen him throw up gang signs and yell the gang's name at another gang while driving. Danielle couldn't remember if Ritchie or Theo said anything about SouthSide Chiques, though Theo told Danielle he'd been jumped in the gang when he was younger. Appellant's nickname was Sneaky, Ritchie was Spanky, and Theo was Monstro, or "monster" in Spanish. (RT 1:127-132, 2:374, 2:383-384) [56]

The commonality between the two writers is that neither of them seek to manipulate their source text, and thus it may seem as if the author in conceptual poetry, much like the author in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, becomes inconsequential, a mere technical functionality without any real cultural significance.

But if the writer is meant to simply copy text, then has the author function (usually understood as) been reduced to the movements of a mindless, unthinking machine? What is writing if any of us can do it (as we are all capable of copying), and thus things like "expertise" or "tact" become inconsequential to the practice? Conceptualists seem to wholeheartedly welcome such a shift in the discourse surrounding literature and writing. Goldsmith says as such in this excerpt taken from his book of criticism, *Uncreative Writing*, where he discusses Marjorie Perloff's idea of the "unoriginal genius: "Her idea is that, because of changes brought on by technology and the Internet, our notion of genius…is outdated."[57] And therefore an "updated notion of genius would have to center around one's mastery of information and its dissemination. Perloff has coined a term, *moving information*, to signify both the act of pushing language around as well as the act of being emotionally moved by that process."[58] This brings up a vital

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[56] Vanessa Place, *Statement of Facts* (Los Angeles: Blanc Press, 2010), 347.
[57] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 1.
[58] Ibid.

difference between L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and conceptual poetry: while the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet writes in order to eventually disappear into the relationship he fosters between the reader and the text (although not to the extent of publishing work anonymously), the conceptual poet's authorship is brought into question precisely because he writes by "moving information," as opposed to writing in more traditional ways.

Therefore, authorship for the conceptual poet does not disappear in the same way as it did for L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. In fact, it may not disappear at all: while the conceptual poet may be interested in questioning what authorship is (or can be), the importance of the author function is, in effect, doubled. This is because without the intervention of the author, the copied text cannot be "moved" (and subsequently "restaged" as art.) And although it may be the case that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is only able to retreat from authorship after the text is disseminated, there is something exceedingly authorial abut conceptual poetry, in which the text does not become art until *after the writer has chosen the text*. In the case of conceptual poetry, what we may be experiencing is not the death of the author, but instead a sort of rebirth, in which the author takes on a new level of importance. As Goldsmith notes: "Mimesis and replication doesn't eradicate authorship, rather they simply place new demands on authors who must take these new conditions into account as part and parcel of the landscape when conceiving of a work of art."[59]

It is also the case that, for the most part, conceptualism abandons L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry's emphasis on the reader's interaction with the text. Which is to say that, as Place and Fitterman note, "conceptualism negates the need for reading in the traditional textual sense—one does not need to 'read' the work as much as think about the idea of the work. In this sense, pure

[59] Ibid., 10.

conceptualism's readymade properties capitulate to and mirror the easy consumption/generation of text and the devaluation of reading in the larger culture."[60] (One wonders whether or not we can take Fitterman and Place seriously; if reading in culture at large is on the "decline," and therefore literature "must" reflect this reality, would it not be more "truthful" to just stop writing? Why provide a text in the first place, other than to say that you are providing a text which reflects on futility of providing said text. This seems like it severely limits the function of writing, giving it the singular function of reflecting society's worst attributes). Essentially, what differs between L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and conceptual poetry is the ways in which they view textuality. One (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E) takes it as the central focus of its practice; it is the very thing that allows for their practice in the first place. The other (conceptualism) would rather do away with the text altogether, replacing it with a writing composed entirely of ideas. Or, as Place laconically writes in her essay "Poetry Is Dead, I Killed It, "what conceptualism does do is kill not the author, but the text."[61]

What exists after the death of the text? Fitterman and Place state the following: "Note that conceptualism maintains that only the concept (e.g. the idea) is (exists). Note that conceptualism maintains only the concept of "is" (e.g. materiality or other invocation) is permanent."[62] To return to the example of Goldsmith's *Day*, the physical text (a copy of *The New York Times*) is less important than the idea that provides the impetus for the act of copying. Thus the text is bypassed in favor of the "ideas" behind (or above) the text. I refer to this as a sort

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[60] Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2009), 25.
[61] Vanessa Place, "Poetry is Dead, I Killed It," *Harriet, a Poetry Blog*, The Poetry Foundation, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/author/kgoldsmith/ (accessed December 20, 2016).
[62] Fitterman and Place, *Notes on Conceptualisms*, 37.

of "cloudification"[63] of textuality, in which materiality is completely ignored in favor ideas or concepts, similar to when the materiality of the cloud is ignored in favor of a discussion of "the cloud," something that is, at least in public perception, a weightless concept with no grounding in physical reality. And thus we can see how L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and conceptual poetry are, in their treatment of textuality, diametrically opposed.

But in what ways does post-conceptual poetry relate to its antecedents? What features do the poets associated with this movement carry over from their literary ancestors? And which features do they reject? Where does post-conceptualism fit within this historical trajectory? (I must once again emphasize that I do not view post-conceptualism as being the product of a dialectical movement. This gives an air of inevitability to poetry movements, undercutting the agency that I believe these writers do, despite their placement within history, possess.) The answer may be that these movements limit post-conceptualism, or to clarify, perhaps it is the case that post-conceptualism is bounded by the two movements and their metastructural tendencies—the emphasis on the materiality of the text on one side, and the cloudiness of the idea on the other. What, then, is post-conceptual poetry? Simultaneously material *and* cloud? Can one type of poetry be both?

Bernstein gives us a hint: "However, the post-conceptual poet can do one new thing and declare the 'death of work,' which would mean "falling into the messy muck of libidinal flows (or the Internet or 'whatever') without leaving a trace of authorship and without giving into those dominant modes of leftist discourse…which require the artwork to pave the way for didactic redemption, and require that art be boxed into framings of queer theory or speculative realism or

[63] Thank you for the term Filipa!

poststructuralism."[64] Which is to say, once again quoting Bernstein, that "post-conceptual could make works that are not afforded privilege of 'example' in the seemingly endless war between 'neoliberal versus subversive' or "subjective/affective versus mechanical."[65] There is no reason to think that this "death of the work" does not also apply to the binary of "materiality/cloudiness" on which post-conceptual poetry relies. In fact, post-conceptual poetry may complicate the very distinction that separates L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E from conceptual poetry. This is what I meant at the beginning of this chapter when I said that post-conceptual lives in oscillation. Yes, it may be one thing to say that post-conceptual poetry is limited by these parameters from the outset. But it is quite another to say that in exposing these limitations as limitations, post-conceptualism is in fact subverting them, taking what appear to be these foundational limitations and exposing them as a fiction. I will elaborate on this by way of two examples, one a not so successful attempt at post-conceptual poetry, another very successful.

My first examples come from Andrew Durbin, whom Bernstein includes in his original list of poets aligned with post-conceptualism. Even more specifically, take the following excerpt from his work *Mature Themes*: "I went to my friend's house to watch a movie while her father was away on business in China. In her BBM to me she had proposed that we watch 'something like…Clueless.' She made popcorn and whiskey sours in her dad's kitchen while I stood there watching her, my attention on her hands."[66] We see a similar kind of structure ("we did this, we did that") in prior poetry movements, such as in New York School and New Narrative (in something like Frank O'Hara's poetry or Dennis Cooper's fiction, respectively). Missing from this text, however, is any sort of reference to a structure that limits said text. Instead, we seem to

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[64] Bernstein, Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry, Ibid., 25.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Andrew Durbin, *Mature Themes* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2014), 25.

be given what is essentially a normal, almost fictionalized account of the unnamed protagonist's day.

Compare Durban's piece with something like this excerpt from Trisha Low's *Compleat Purge*, in which the speaker ("Trisha") repeatedly rewrites her final will and testament:

> Article 1
> Preliminary Declarations
> …I'm 100% miserable. I HATE. I HATE how I'm so WEAK and SELFISH and I HATE there's no one I can tell I blacked out after the school concert and it sucked because the band played and I couldn't even celebrate. I hate myself. I'm cold in the middle of summer. Everything feels like it's falling out of my fingertips. I keep writing all the way up my forearm…[67]

And then compare this with the following, another final will and testament written at a time later in the speaker's life:

> Article 1
> Preliminary Declarations
> …But here's the thing. I don't belong here, but I don't belong anywhere else. I'm treated as if I don't exist, yet everything revolves around me. I'd say 'I don't know what to do anymore!' but I do. I know what to do. And it's a toxic, disgusting thing to do but I need to. It's the only way.
>
> So I guess this is a not-suicide suicide note. This is a just-in-case note, because I'm weak, and I'm young, and stuff, and mostly I'm scared.[68]

What Low gives us is a play of signifiers (the content of the Preliminary Declarations) regulated and determined in advance by a despotic sign (the form of the Preliminary Declarations), which is to say that the play present in isn't the schizophrenic play envisioned by some poststructuralists (or some L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets). It is rather a play that is always already delimited, thereby mirroring the reality of the post-postmodern condition: despite believing that we inhabit a post-authoritarian age, often marked by a naïve openness to non-

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[67] Trisha Low, *The Compleat Purge* (Berkeley, CA: Kenning Editions), 30.
[68] Ibid., 43.

canonical perspectives, endless self-criticism, and feelings of moral irreproachability, post-authoritarianism is in fact just another form of authoritarianism, this time under the guise of an unabashed inclusivity that merely reinforces the logic of the neoliberal market: anything goes, as long as it sells.

The Compleat Purge acknowledges and rejects these claims to both authenticity and inclusivity, instead offering up a sort of hybrid of Alt Lit, New Sincerity and conceptualism, irreducible to its constituent parts. Dissatisfied with all of the preceding schools, and, by extension, their varying metastructural tendencies (primal irony in the case of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, dewy-eyed sincerity in the case of Alt Lit), Low has taken them, grinded them up, and given them back to us as indistinguishable globs in a vomit.

Are we not in danger of saying that post-conceptual poetry is somehow exceptionally unique? Is it not the case that *all* poetry (all literature even) exits in the space between the "cloud" (or realm of ideas) and the physical markings on the page? There is a degree of play in say, Goethe's *Faust*, but that same text also seems to be concerned with so-called "ideas" (morality, the possibility of a utopian society, etc.) How are we to distinguish between a "normal" text and a post-conceptual text? I will say this: post-conceptual poets set themselves apart by drawing attention to the structures that delimit their expression. It is through calling attention to these structures that they become separated from "normal" poets. (This is not to say "normal" poets do not engage structures of various kinds, merely that post-conceptualism has elevated this engagement to *the* primary concern).

Thus one can say that the aesthetic to which post-conceptual poetry subscribes is one of a recognition of limitations and then the rejection of these same limitations. This suggests that the aesthetic principles act in accordance with the political as we have described them in the second

chapter; like content and form of post-conceptualism, which Felix Bernstein sees as collapsing into each other, one can likewise say that the aesthetic of post-conceptualism is inseparable from its political goals. An example of such writer who places this inseparability at the forefront of her work is Mónica de la Torre. The structure or limitation in this case is multiculturalism, here understood as a well-intentioned but ultimately impotent political stance; its doctrine is given to us in "Positions Available," the opening poem of de la Torre's *The Happy End / All Welcome*: "We have a place for everyone, everyone in their place! / Anyone thinking of their future belongs in our midst! / Anyone thinking of their future, their place is with us!"[69]

However, it has become apparent that capitalism has co-opted the multicultural, seeing as that corporations are now more than happy to gesture towards a radical acceptance of difference, as long as this gesture remains tied to their particular notion of futurity (read: you're welcome in our country *as long as you don't threaten our bottom line*). This serves a twofold purpose: it appeases those whose politics is solely concerned with matters of representation—that is to say, it appeases those who believe a Muslim CEO is peak radicalism—while also stymying the creation of a truly global anti-capitalist movement.

But what of individuals without a future, those who, unable to live up to Western standards of success, are prohibited from enjoying the "benefits" of a free market? Surely there remains a group "outside" of the capitalist order, against which that order is then defined? This is the question de la Torre foregrounds in *The Happy End / All Welcome*, a collection that dedicates the majority of its content to illustrating the globalized job market's almost infinite capacity for

[69] Monica de la Torre, The Happy End / All Welcome (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2017), 9.

difference, foregrounding yet another question: in order to affect material change, must the Left abandon multiculturalism?

The Happy End / All Welcome is set in the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, a job fair that appeared in Kafka's unfinished novel *Amerika* and which was later, as the introductory note to the collection states, referenced by Martin Kippenberger in his installation "The Happy End of Franz Kafka's Amerika." A theatre is a fitting location; plays are, after all, a medium exceedingly attuned to the spatial. One could, in fact, read *The Happy End / All Welcome* as an elaborate stage piece in which the farcical characters of late capitalism are paraded about (here we have the assistant manager, here the assistant to the assistant manager). We, the spectators, are tasked with determining which characters are absented from the space of the theater.

It isn't clear who is unable to enter. Women aren't denied access, as the poem "Ad Copy" provides us with a substantial list of women who are said to appear throughout the collection: "pinup secretaries, gamines, vamps, aspiring starlets, celebrity lookalikes, fashion hounds, compulsive eyebrow pluckers, shoe fetishists, thrift-store junkies, post-hippie hobos, and even ladies-who-lunch."[70]

Nor does it seem as if one's race or national origin precludes them from participation; a woman is hired despite (or rather because) she speaks in accented English ("My English is…no English").[71] The recruiter in charge of hiring "remembers the orientation sessions in which talent scouts were told to employ, at the drop of a hat, anyone whose use of language might increase activity in the audience's corrugator muscles or do the opposite, prompting zygomatic tension."[72] (The corrugator muscles are used when frowning, the zygomatic when smiling. Recall that the

[70] Ibid., 21.
[71] Ibid., 16.
[72] Ibid., 17.

recruiter is supposed to base his or her decisions on an imagined audience's reaction. This further extends the metaphor of the theater, casting the recruiter in the role of director and the women seeking a job in the role of actor. But who, then, is the audience? We previously suggested that it was the reader, but perhaps the *true* audience may be the indifferent flows of capital, which aren't concerned with whether we smile or frown, only that the show go on.)

We can continue this process of subtraction, hoping that we might eventually discover a group that lies outside of capitalism—a prelapsarian people—but I believe the point has been made: no such group exists. We are clearly working with(in) a universal system. Thus the connection to Kafka's *Amerika* becomes evident: the truth of capitalism is that it has so completely incorporated difference into its structure that multiculturalism, a brand of politics built on the explicit assumption that difference is desirable, can no longer function as a check to its impulse. It may even be the case that multiculturalism lends capitalism a utopic veneer, in the sense that it promises representation for all within the system: "We have a place for everyone, everyone in his place."

What can we do to resist a system that's weaponized difference, turned it into a reactionary ideology? De la Torre may provide an answer in "Available Positions":

> Sitting erect, pelvis curved out, cross-legged or with legs parallel.
>
> Slumping, pelvis turned in.
>
> Sitting erect, slightly leaning forward, resting elbows and arms on desk.
>
> Reclining on chair, propping up feet on desk.[73]

[73] Ibid., 11.

Here we see that jobs are reduced to the affects they have on various bodies. And one must admit that inhabiting a body is an experience shared by all people, and that furthermore, this shared experience is determined in advance by capital: "Each rehearses a persona, offering a tenderly sardonic look at the art of fashioning oneself." This is sardonic because this "fashioning of oneself" is rendered apolitical by a system which readily accepts difference, and through this acceptance, neuters the radical potential difference might have originally possessed.

It seems as if de la Torre is using the body to cut across sociological categories such as race and gender, to cut across the very difference that underlies these categories. This is by no means a denial of the importance of race or gender, both of which are tied to the ways in which we view bodies; these phenomena have political import and should be considered when engaging in any sort of critical discussion. Rather, de la Torre seems to be suggesting, along with neo-Marxists like Alain Badiou, that we must return to form of political engagement that is based in and on universal truths—the truth that we all inhabit a body, the truth that we are all subjected to the whims of capitalism. In short, a universal system of oppression must be met with a universal project of emancipation.

Hence *The Happy End / All Welcome* also represents a turn away from certain theorists whose work questions the efficacy of a politics based on an appeal to futurity (Jack Halberstam, Lee Edelman, among others). These theorists, who view capitalism as the system most concerned with futurity, and who subsequently advocate for a politics that rejects futurity outright, miss that capitalism doesn't promise a future to anyone, except, of course, in a limited sense (global oligarchs, the 1%). Their response ("no future") is nothing but a nihilist's acceptance of this fact.

De la Torre, however, is concerned with the future, and to be more precise, a particular future, one in which resistance is still possible. This future requires a commitment to something

beyond the false radicalism of capitalist multiculturalism, something that perhaps finds inspiration in Saint Paul's famous maxim: "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision." Or as Badiou puts it in his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*:

> We posit a general human subject, such that whatever evil befalls him is universally identifiable (even of this universality often goes by the altogether paradoxical name of 'public opinion'), such that this subject is both, on the one hand, a passive, pathetic [pathétique], or reflexive subject – he who suffers – he who, in identifying suffering, knows that it must be stopped by all available means.[74]

Or in his book on Saint Paul: "…neither can a truth procedure take root in the element of identity. For if it is true that every truth erupts as singular, its singularity is immediately universalizable. Universalizable singularity necessarily breaks with identitarian singularlity."[75] De la Torre, like many others writers writing under the banner of post-conceptualism, recognize the precarity of these various structures, calling into question their supposed permanence.

I am aware that limiting my definition has potential ramifications for the list Bernstein has provided for us. Which is to say, many of the names on the list no longer fit my criteria for post-conceptual writing: text that lives in the expanse between immaterial ideas (what I call the "cloud") and the material words on the page, while also rejecting the notion of politics provide by both Sade and Beckett. [76] Thus it can be said that in my (re)defining of the term post-conceptual, we begin to see who is actually committed what I called a post-conceptual conception of poetics.

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[74] Alain Badiou, *Ethics*: *An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2013), 9.
[75] Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 11.
[76] A revised list, for argument's sake however, may look something like this: Sophia Le Fraga, Mónica de la Torre, J. Gordon. Faylor, Trisha Low, Josef Kaplan, Danny Snelson, Steve McLaughlin, and Steve Zultanski." A slightly more manageable number of writers.

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