

From Jerome J. McGann, *The Point Is to Change It: Poetry and Criticism in the Continuing Present* (U of Alabama Press, 2007)

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The Evidence of Things Not Seen

A Play

Scene 1

STUDENT: I wonder, is the professor embarrassed by that essay of his from 1987—“Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes”?¹

PROFESSOR: Should I be?

STUDENT: Well, it seems pretty dated, no? And dare I suggest that it also seems *wrong*.

PROFESSOR: Why?

STUDENT: It sets up a distinction between experimental writing and, well, everything else. That’s bad (let’s say, *loose*) enough. It also buys into Barrett Watten’s idea about how to “test for a ‘politics of poetry.’” Worst of all, it decides that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing, that exemplary experimentalism, has passed the test.

ANGEL: It did pass the test.

STUDENT: Really?

ANGEL: No, surreally. According to Watten, “The test of a ‘politics of poetry’ is in the entry of poetry into the world in a political way.” Poetic action is successfully political when it executes “a self-conscious method.” For Watten, surrealism exemplifies such a method.

STUDENT: You’re joking.

ANGEL: Just trying to be literal. Surrealism succeeded, Watten succeeded, the project of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing has clearly succeeded. The professor himself succeeded.

PROFESSOR: I did?

STUDENT: How?

ANGEL: The professor succeeded in showing that Watten possessed the “self-conscious method” that he called for. This wasn’t the surrealist method he made the exemplary type of a “politics of poetry.” It was something better still . . .

PRINTER’S DEVIL:

something better still, so surreal,
That the sweet model must have been the same.

STUDENT: Huh? What’s he saying?

PROFESSOR: He’s quoting Byron—to be precise, misquoting.

ANGEL (frowning and then resuming his remarks): . . . a meta-method for identifying any occurrence of self-conscious method. And the professor also succeeded in showing how the experimental work of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing passed Watten’s “test” with, as they say, flying colors.

PRINTER’S DEVIL: Flying to or from the field?

STUDENT (to the Devil): Huh? (to the Angel): Go on.

ANGEL: Didn’t the professor succeed in showing the “self-conscious method” of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing?

STUDENT: So what? The whole point of the showing was to argue something else: that a self-conscious poetic practice could intervene in the world in a practical, revolutionary way. This is what the professor argued: “[Ron] Silliman calls poetry “the *philosophy of practice in language*” because it . . . represents the ‘social function of the language arts’ as a liberating rather than a repressive structure: ‘to carry the class struggle for consciousness to the level of consciousness’” (“If by ‘Writing’ We Mean Literature” 131). Because “*all meaning is a construct*” (“Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World” 168); however, this self-transparency of the word is not an idea or a priori form that the poem tries to accommodate. Self-transparency, like social justice, is a practical matter—a form of accomplishment rather than a form of truth. It has to be carried out.

ANGEL: Right.

PROFESSOR: Right.

STUDENT: Wake up, get *real*. Since 1989, when the Soviet Empire broke apart and the United States assumed a position of unrivaled military power, all this theoretical talk looks like, well,

theoretical talk. The politics of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing reads very differently now. A poem like *The Alphabet*, no less than Pound's *Cantos*, has become "a poem including history"—the history of a capitalist imperialism grown in wisdom, age, and grace.

ANGEL: Oh dear. Not grace, I think.

PRINTER'S DEVIL: My text reads "disgrace."

STUDENT: So where's all that critical self-consciousness got to? The "transgressive" writing of the literary academy? I'm changing my major. Even the prose has gone bad.

PRINTER'S DEVIL: Myself, I'll take the cold eye of your X-Generation. A plague on all your houses. Kathy Acker's the girl for me. Did you see her picture in those *New Yorker* ads?

PROFESSOR: But was my essay successful then?

STUDENT: Meaning *when* or meaning *in fact*?

ANGEL: Indeed it was.

PRINTER'S DEVIL: I *loved* it.

STUDENT: *Ceci ne pas une pipe.*

ANGEL: That's a horse of a different color, and I don't have anything to do with them. I don't even think they exist, or could exist.

PRINTER'S DEVIL: Or should exist?

ANGEL: They go against natural law, it's true. And I don't know anything about unnatural law. I don't even approve of unnatural law. It's completely immoral. Like unnatural acts.

PROFESSOR: But was I *right*?

Scene 2

DAWN INGMENS: It's not important, Professor. And don't pay attention to all that silly talk; they're just trying to confuse things. I found your essay very interesting, especially the part where you discussed how Silliman and John Hollander use the device of a Fibonacci number sequence to organize an important poem that each had written.

In *Tjanting* . . . Silliman deployed a numerically based rule for generating his materials, which clearly held something more than a procedural interest for him. The work, he has

said, grew out of a problem he had been pondering “for at least five years: what would class struggle look like, viewed as a form. Would such a form be usable in writing?” The answer was that it would look like the Fibonacci number series—that is to say, the series in which each term is the sum of the preceding two.

What initially attracted me to the series were three things: (1) it is the mathematical sequence most often found in nature, (2) each succeeding term is larger, and (3) the quantitative difference between terms is immediately perceptible, even when the quantities are of syllables or paragraphs.

Such a sequence came to embody for Silliman an *objectively based* dialectical process:

The most important aspect of the Fibonacci series turned out not to be those gorgeous internal relationships, but the fact that it begins with two ones. That not only permitted the parallel articulation of two sequences of paragraphs, but also determined that their development would be uneven, punning back to the general theory of class struggle.

But what must be noted is that *Tjanting* does not tell the/a “story” of “class struggle.” It does not reflect the operation of “the general theory of class struggle” in a projected “fiction” (first person or otherwise). Rather *Tjanting* is a localized instance of class struggle itself: not merely Silliman’s personal act of struggle, but his deployment of an artistic occasion within which such struggle may take place. In the end, as [Charles] Bernstein observed [in a discussion of the poem], it is the reader in the poem who “counts.”

But what might a reader today note in the accumulating Fibonacci numbers? A figure of Marxian dialectics? Or a figure of capitalist accumulation? What if a reader were to demonstrate that *Tjanting* exemplifies a kind of linguistic or poetical pyramid scheme?

PROFESSOR: Yes, you could do that. But why would you want to? It's not reading in the same spirit that the author writ, I think.

DAWN INGMENS: No, but it still might be interesting, or even important. Anyhow, let's leave that aside for a minute and think about the politics of this kind of "procedural writing." Here's something else you wrote that I find interesting.

Of *Ketjak* Bernstein has acutely noted that "the narrative rules are not taken to be of intrinsic interest." Indeed, these are not "narrative rules" at all, but generative ones. Furthermore, they do not occupy the reader's attention as such; they provide the framework within which acts of attention are carried out. Therefore Bernstein observes, in a brilliant turn of critical wit, that "definition is a posteriori" in Silliman's work, "arising from a poetic practice in which the reader is acknowledged as present and counting." What "counts" are the multiple perspectives processed through the text along with the reader who takes part in that processing. This is why Bernstein says that a Silliman poem is "not reductive to a single world view" but is "participatory, multiple."

But if the writing makes "a poem including history," it includes a lot of readers who won't read in the same spirit that the author writ, won't it?

PROFESSOR: That would be wrong. You can't make words mean anything you like (or don't like). *Tjanting* was published by the distinguished imprint of late twentieth-century experimental and political writing, The Figures. No one would read a book published by The Figures in the way you imagine.

DAWN INGMENS: But *Tjanting's* figures, like all poetical figurations, like all of the books published by The Figures, may be subjected to a Humpty Dumpty reading. "The question is, who is to be master, that's all."

PRINTER'S DEVIL: And does anyone doubt who the economic and political masters of public discourse in 2005 *are*?

STUDENT: And as Bernstein says, it's the reader in the poem who *counts*.

DAWN INGMENS: But there's a lot more interesting stuff in your essay, Professor.

PROFESSOR: Good. Tell me about it.

DAWN INGMENS: Well, how about this passage:

The special character of Silliman's nonnarrative texts is nicely dramatized if we set a work like *Tjanting* beside an academic text like John Hollander's *Reflections on Espionage* (1976). This may seem an odd comparison, but it is in fact quite apposite. In the first place, both poems are fully conscious of their placement within the sociohistorical field of cold war America. Correlatively, both imagine and reflect upon the function of poetry within such social circumstances. Finally, both resort—in an extraordinarily odd conjunction of purposes—to the Fibonacci number sequence as an important procedural device within which their poems' meanings are carried out.

Reflections on Espionage is a narrativized text made up of a series of code messages sent by the spy Cupcake to various other persons in his espionage network. The poem tells the story of Cupcake's increasing psychic disaffection—partly concealed even from himself—with his work as a spy. Eventually Cupcake comes under the surveillance of his own organization's internal security apparatus, and at the end—his reliability as a spy hopelessly compromised—the organization calls for his “termination.”

The story involves an elaborately executed allegory in which “spying” is equated with “being a poet,” and vice versa. The text is full of coded references to American poets and writers, mostly Hollander's contemporaries. Its distant progenitor—Robert Browning's “How It Strikes a Contemporary”—underscores, by contrast, the special character of *Reflections*, for Hollander's story—like his hero—is dominated by nostalgia and a pervasive sense of ineffectuality. The poem's world is graphed along an axis of “them” and “us” that reflects both the political situation of the cold war and the typical antagonisms and divi-

sions between “schools” or groups of poets. All this would merely be amusing were it not that Hollander’s hero continually reflects upon the social function of poetry. From these reflections he draws the most mordant and disheartening conclusions. In fact, *Reflections* argues—or rather demonstrates—that poetry under the social circumstances “reflected” in this poem has, like spying under the same circumstances, only an alienating effect. This poetry of “reflection” preserves, and ultimately reifies, the world-as-alienation, and it does so by failing to imagine that poetry might struggle with, rather than merely reflect (upon), its world.

Cupcake’s meditations on his work as spy/poet lead him to a sharp sense of his own isolation. In his loneliness he calls into question the whole enterprise to which he has given himself:

What kind of work is this
For which if we were to touch in the darkness
It would be without feeling the other there?
It might help to know if Steampump’s dying
Was part of the work or not. I shall not be
Told, I know.

—R, 3-4

Cupcake’s question is rhetorical and will not—cannot, in his imagination of the world—be answered. This social alienation mirrors a correspondent crisis of the personality:

Names like ours leave no traces in
Nature. Yet what of the names they encode, names
One’s face comes in time to rhyme with, John or James?
The secret coded poem of one’s whole life rhymes
Entirely with that face, a maddening
Canzona, every line of which sings in the
Breaths we take and give, ending with the same sound.
As with the life, so ridiculously, with

The work. But, after all, which of them is the
 Enciphered version of the other one, and
 Are we, after all, even supposed to know?

—*R*, p. 28

In the end Hollander's "master spy" will watch the system he has served send out a broadcast order for his execution. His final coded transmission is a frightening poem constructed partly on the use of the Fibonacci number series. Its principal message, secreted away in the poem's initial and terminal syllables, is revealed by using the Fibonacci number sequence as an index to those syllables. It is a plea for death, and it is answered in the poem's final line—a generation of Xs that, decoded, translate: TERMINATE CUPCAKE.

Silliman's imagination, as we have seen, thought to discover in the Fibonacci numbers an image of class struggle and social dialectics. In 1981 the numbers confirm his search for signs and modes of social dynamism. But when Cupcake uses the Fibonacci series in his final transmission, he interprets his own usage in these terrible terms:

and I have sat watching
 Key numbers in their serial dance growing
 Further apart, outdistancing their touching,
 Outstretched arms.

—*R*, p. 71

Hollander's alter ego "editor" of Cupcake's story supplies a gloss to Cupcake's final transmission. The exegesis remarks on the desperation of the passage but can only replicate the master spy's own sense of helplessness: "This disturbing and disturbed transmission seems to be a kind of cry for help. But to whom?" (*R*, p. 75). The interpretation here is congruent with the poem's self-conception. Hollander characterizes cold war America and its poetry as a world of desperate (rather than rich) ambiguities. It is a poetic world whose own highest value—close interpersonal relations—is contradicted by the social struc-

tures and practices it takes for granted. To Hollander, the march of the Fibonacci numbers is the apocalypse of such a world, the prophecy of its desperation and its even more fragmented future.

PROFESSOR: I really got going there, didn't I.

DAWN INGMENS: You sure did. And what I find interesting is the way you make Hollander's academic exercise read like a work of sharp political critique. Your comment recalls a passage from Silliman that you quoted earlier in your essay: "Repression does not, fortunately, abolish the existence of the repressed element which continues as a contradiction, often invisible, in the social fact. As such, it continues to wage the class struggle of consciousness" (126).

STUDENT: It's the reader who's present and counting, as usual. In this case, the professor who also, in this case, isn't reading in the same spirit that Hollander writ.

Hollander's poem imagines what it knows (or thinks it knows) about poetry and society alike. Such an imagination, however, can mount no effective resistance against its own terrible revelations: vacancy in luxurious words, dismemberment in the way we live now. It is all mirror and meditation, a story and a set of reflections on the story. In this respect the contrast with writers like Bernstein and Silliman is striking and unmistakable. In them antinarrative and nonnarrative continually work against and move beyond the enchantments of what has been given and what is taken to be "real." They are the true inheritors of Blake's early attempts to dismantle the prisons of imaginary beauties: social and personal life in its cruel apparitions, and art as what reflects upon such things. Hollander's poem is a work of decadence in that it refuses to press the charges called for by its own investigation. Pleading "no contest," it is properly found guilty. *Reflections on Espionage* is far from a trivial poem. Its analogues are, for example, besides various works by Tennyson and Browning, Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyat* and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life*, and all those works which deliver us over to

luxurious and unlivable things. The highest form of such poetry is reached in the work of artists like Baudelaire, the mayor of the City of Pain over whose gates is written the legend “Anywhere Out of the World.”

So what is it, professor? A good poem or a bad poem? Calling it “a work of decadence” and “far from a trivial poem” just slips past the issue, doesn’t it?

PROFESSOR: It’s a good poem. A very, very good poem.

STUDENT: Why didn’t you say so in the first place?

Scene 3

PRINTER’S DEVIL: He didn’t say so because he was being good, professionally speaking. There were two roads diverging in his yellow wood—those “Alternate Routes” he mapped out in the first place. With their alternate roots.

STUDENT: Jesus.

PRINTER’S DEVIL: I don’t think he’s got anything to do with it.

ANGEL: Oh no? How about “he who is not with me is against me”?

PRINTER’S DEVIL: Right. And the professor was working along the left road. So he did the right thing and stayed to the left.

. . . [The exchange continues in dumb-show at a level that can be heard but not understood.]

Scene 4

DAWN INGMENS: They can go on like that for hours, professor. Let’s try something else. What if I say this: that the artist and writer—you too, professor, and me—are always complicit and must be so.

PROFESSOR: Well, it’s true that if you survey the history of poetry you very quickly realize that the most important figures are often the least “oppositional”: Homer, Aeschylus, the biblical authors, Virgil, Shakespeare, Austen, Proust, etc. And the figures of opposition—Dante, say, or Milton, Blake, Byron, Swinburne—are only oppositional in highly equivocal ways. Or P. B. Shelley, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude

Stein. That exemplary critic of our administered age, Harold Bloom, has always pointed this out, as have many others from Arnold to the present.

DAWN INGMENS: I've no doubt you're right; you've been around the poetical block, that's for sure.

PROFESSOR: "Much have I traveled in the realms of gold / And many goodly states and kingdoms seen."

DAWN INGMENS: Whatever. I was trying to make a different point. You do have a lot a poetry stuffed in your head.

PROFESSOR: Too true.

DAWN INGMENS: It's ok, I like it, I like to hear it. Anyhow, last night at home I was reading an essay by Stephen Spender where he remarks that "the basic contradiction of life of every contemporary is that he is involved in the guilt of the society in which he lives." He wrote that to explain the error of what he calls "escapist" art.

PROFESSOR: Some would say that all art is disengaged from politics and ideology. That it *must* be. Famous people. Kant, for instance. Marx himself said that art wasn't among the ideologies.

DAWN INGMENS: Because "ideology" for him meant "false consciousness," right? And he thought art escaped that condition.

PROFESSOR: Yes.

DAWN INGMENS: But that's not what I'm trying to say. I'm thinking that this escaped condition would be politically engaged through its escapism.

PRINTER'S DEVIL: Brave new girl!

DAWN INGMENS: . . . and that it would have the privilege of its ideological backwardness.

ANGEL: Am I hearing correctly? The artist sinks into complicity—decadence, escapism, whatever!—and comes out smelling like a rose.

PRINTER'S DEVIL: A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

STUDENT: Why not? What is it some poet or other said once upon a time: "Of its own beauty is the mind diseased, / And fevers into false creation."

PRINTER'S DEVIL: That was in another country. And besides, the guy is dead.

STUDENT: Well, as Bernstein says, don't be Saussure. Criticism too gets infected with its moral commitments. How could it be

otherwise? Writer and reader both work from within, sympathizing with the contradictions and complexities they half perceive and half create.

PROFESSOR: Remember plate 21 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where Blake separates the sheep of philosophy and criticism from the goats of art and poetry?

STUDENT (to DAWN INGMENS): Is he kidding?

PRINTER'S DEVIL: And where he takes his stand with the devils cast out by angelic characters like that prig Plato: "Morality [is] not Poetry but Philosophy the Poet is independent and Wicked the Philosopher is Dependent & Good!"

DAWNINGMENS: Not "independent", *complicit*. Maybe we should stop trying to be devils, or pretending to be angels.

STUDENT: Or the other way round.

PROFESSOR: So was I *right*?

STUDENT: Let's say you left things out. Let's say you were trying to write in the same spirit that the authors writ. Let's say you forgot that other readers were counting too.

DAWN INGMENS: We're all working from inside. "After all, the world is around me, not in front of me." Only the "wisdom professions" imagine otherwise, cherishing their fantasies of perfection.

ANGEL: Set a thief to catch a thief. Those fantasies are part of an economy of grace.

PRINTER'S DEVIL: Rubbish. In a looking glass world, which is where we are, friends, who are the thieves, who the police? And who decides? What is truth here anyhow?

DAWN INGMENS: Could Wordsworth tell the truth that Byron knew? To him it wasn't truth at all. So he told the truth as he imagined he knew it—just like Silliman did, and Hollander, and you too professor. "In a dark time the eye begins to see."

STUDENT: To see *what*? The eye or the I?

ANGEL: Say, rather, to see *how*! To see and think beautifully, ineffectually, angelically. To see like this:

Writing in inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink
this pidgin script. I sing with nihilistic witticism,
disciplining signs with trifling gimmicks—impish

hijinks which highlight stick sigils? Isn't it glib?
Isn't it chic? I fit childish insights within rigid limits,
writing shtick which might instill priggish misgiv-
ings in critics blind with hindsight.

—Bök, 50

DAWN INGMENS: So “which blind spirit is whining in this whistling din? Is it . . . with ill will in its mind, victimizing kids timid with fright?” (Bök 54)

STUDENT: “If it is—which blind witch is midwifing its misbirth?” (54)

DAWN INGMENS: “Is it this thin, sickish girl, twitching in fits, whilst writing things in spirit-writing?” (54)

STUDENT: “If it isn't—it is I; it is I . . .” (54)

PROFESSOR: “Christ, this ship is sinking.” (53)

ANGEL: “I find bliss in this primitivism. Might I mimic it in print?” (52)

PRINTER'S DEVIL: “The business of Art as I tried to explain in Composition as Explanation is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present.” (Stein, *Lectures in America* 104–5)

DAWN INGMENS:

Diving in, I swim, fighting this frigid swirl, kicking, kicking, swimming in it till I sight high cliffs, rising, indistinct in thick mists, lit with lightning. (53)

Scene 5

ANGEL: She's a sweet girl, but really—what an *idea*!

PRINTER'S DEVIL: *Which* girl do you mean?

ANGEL: Both of them of course. Or all four.

PRINTER'S DEVIL: I think there are only three, not four. One is just imaginary, the other is both real and imaginary. So that makes three, not two or four.

ANGEL: Alright then, three saints in four acts.

PRINTER'S DEVIL: Don't you think it's time to stop playing and start playing?

ANGEL: What an idea? What do you mean?

PRINTER'S DEVIL: The philosophers have only tried to interpret the world. The point is to change it. So here's a riddle: "The business of Art . . . is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present."

ANGEL: I thought that was a statement. Pontifical and impossible.

PRINTER'S DEVIL: No, it's a riddle and its problem is this: How could you do that?

ANGEL: As I said, it's impossible. It might even be a contradiction. Or a couple of contradictions.

PROFESSOR: Actually it's just a trick question.

STUDENT: Why is it impossible?

DAWN INGMENS: Why is it a trick question?

ANGEL: It's impossible because nobody could do it.

STUDENT: Maybe not, but everybody does.

PROFESSOR: That's the trick. You'd be doing it if everybody was doing it. Otherwise you wouldn't be.

Scene 6, The Continuing Present

HOLYGHOST: But you are, because everybody is. Only it's hard to see because it looks as if somebody else has already done it. But they haven't; we're all living in the complete actual present in order to completely express its beginning again and again.

SAINT ALICE: You need a looking glass to help you see what's being seen.

ANGEL: A mirror up to life?

PRINTER'S DEVIL: Nothing's up to that.

ALL: Nonsense.

The Bible of Hell

Maldoror.

Pataphysics

SAINT TERESA: None of that patriarchal poetry. I want a hero.

PRINTER'S DEVIL:

an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one.

SAINT TERESA: . . . a hero in eclipse, a noble rider rescuing the sound of the words. Like Ivanhoe.

WALTER SCOTT: Not *my* Ivanhoe!

THE BLESSED VIRGIN: Of course not. The point is to change it. *My* IVANHOE.

HOLYGHOST: Once upon a time there was a Printing House in Hell whose business plan was to print only works that were "dictated from Eternity." Imitating God and Gutenberg, it announced its first publication to be "The Bible of Hell." Because this book could not be found in the Goblin Markets that flourished in those days gone by, a legend grew that it was never made.

IVANHOE: And of course it never was.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN: Correct. This book is also called "The Book that Never Was."

ALL: Why?

THE BLESSED VIRGIN: Because it never was.

IVANHOE: A book.

ALL: A wonderful book.

SAINT TERESA: But a difficult work, written in strange codes. What does it mean?

IVANHOE:

Have you practiced so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?
Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the
origin of all poems

HOLY GHOST: A book to be read to be read to be read to be read to be.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN: A device for reading again and again, a textual composition of human characters.

GERTRUDE STEIN: Typeset?

DAWN INGMENS: Autopoietic.

ALL: Does it have a name?

THE BLESSED VIRGIN:

In the world unknown
 Sleeps a voice unspoken,
By thy step alone
 Can its rest be broken,
 Child of Ocean!

DAWN INGMENS: Here lies one whose name is writ in Java.

IVANHOE: Once upon a time its name is Legion. Before the
many bibles were, I VAN.