

THE GROUNDS OF TRUST IN WILLIAM FULLER'S *WATCHWORD*

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William Fuller delights in poetry's utility in fracturing the knowledge claim from experience, and yet envisions a horizon to oppose the roles offered to subjectivities forged under capital. The grounds for this protest take place in the soporific bedazzlement of instructional, legal and financial language, and its abstract and concrete labors which are rich with etymologies of trust, faith, and service. Fuller's primary historical inspirations include the Levellers, Diggers, and other pamphleteers who invented the argument for individual autonomy, philosophers of the English and Italian Renaissance, and a wide collection of hermetic and neo-Platonic writings. No contemporary body of work better shows the critical vitality of mysticism, or better shows the sympathy between aesthetic fragmentation, negative capability, and negative theology. To the point of this essay, a handful of poems in *Watchword* reveal Fuller's drive to re-imagine the 17th Century English revolutionary argument for self-rule (rights) by re-activating etymologies of trust in the landscape of contemporary American experience.

I would define "wit" for contemporary poetry as the ability to uncover the role of language in fitting together concepts and forms of subjectivity that are profoundly "silo-ed" by discrete spatial, economic, and cultural relations. It is my belief that the significant political form of the time is how capitalism and consumer culture robs words of their histories, and flattens the language into concepts that have only one dimension. By hiding the history of languages, capitalism hides its procedures, thereby bulldozing the grounds for protest. Poets sensitive to this procedure may richly mine the field of apprehended language to redress that loss. In *Watchword*, we find a field of experience wildly conjectured from the collapsed distinctions between the financial and the ontological, the mystical and the surreal, and the banal and the beautiful. Fuller's protest is launched against the coherence of the contemporary *episteme*—in other words, his poems rewire the nexus of assumptions, practices, ideological underpinnings, and desires upon which the social imagination emerges under capitalism.

Over the course of several of his books, Fuller has demonstrated an interest in the 17th Century English revolts against unjust government, a period in English history that saw inconceivable volatility in the contract of government. The writings of Digger pamphleteer Gerrard Winstanley emerge as particularly important for Fuller. At a 2006 public reading in Chicago, Fuller described this theme in *Watchword* as an "interest in 17th Century Agriculture"¹—a reference to the future of the Digger project that challenged no less than the law of property itself. Fuller draws from these writers to historicize the belief that individual autonomy is the license for all registers of truth: this autonomy is both the authority that licenses the consent of the governed and the

reader's agency to conjecture meaning and judge. In this Fuller follows from Milton, if his practice is uniquely served by an often radically paratactical form. Syntax is often freed from the sentence, and if quotation is marked by italic fonts, and citation is omitted, the reader cannot rely on historical markers to frame the meaning of the language act. Whatever other debates we have about fractured lyric subjectivity, we must not lose site of the dimension that Fuller discovers. In the most fundamental sense, the fracturing of the coherent subject resists the collaboration between authorial intent and an extrinsic directive power that complies with our sense of order. Resisting this allows readers to freely reinterpret the products² of a broken time.

The Renaissance habit of "relating everything to everything else" roves through Fuller's poetry, framing the discovery of truths that are infinitely small portions of a political real.³ In *Watchword's* "The Chapter of the Sheep," reason is deployed to the field of experience in order to dig a new ground for truth. Yet this is a project that starts with great thrust and confidence that becomes successively more attenuated. "The Chapter of the Sheep" begins:

The application of a particular religious view together with benefits conferred by terrene wisdom appear to be responsible for the repealing of certain ordinary kinds of human behavior; this unavoidable inconvenience follows: force (which we call equity) runs back among adjoining shadows to issue a certificate, according to the pattern we observe when ice retires and the truth is resheathed in a variety of interests. (Fuller, *Watchword* 21)

Religious / earthly "wisdom," (or "doctrine") constrains "ordinary" behavior, and allows political force to license behavior ("issue a certificate"), a process we can watch in clear moments brought about by change ("when the ice retires") that reveal the contests for the name of "truth." Fuller's use of the term "equity" for "force" contains its historic use as "justice" and "fairness," but strikes also the more widely deployed contemporary tone of "value" or "stockholder interest." The dominance of the monetary use of the term "equity" is unquestioned. But the poem sets us up to recognize how one interest has sheathed the term. There is but one flow of force as we deliver all tropes to the terms of capital. "Benefits conferred" signals the contractual nature of this arrangement.

"The Chapter of the Sheep" makes a broader claim—namely, that reason may transcend the condition that reason has produced. As the poem proceeds, we sense the certainty of the original position begin to slip:

Neither can we rest secure after having renounced everything except what intrudes on first principles, reshaping them at the base of the baobab tree...No compulsion can be valid against daylight ominously shuffling darkness into acute self-consciousness—some forty persons have petitioned so far and I myself have made my voice heard in ideas close to theirs, uncongealed at the center; then they took out a cord and tied my hands... (Fuller, *Watchword* 21)

"The Chapter of the Sheep" disrupts the flow of the terms of capital, which motives typically trigger an arrest.

Fuller's work engages a prophetic history contingent with critique, yet is determinedly anti-vatic. This creates some room for slapstick, or, at least, an enactment of Sir Thomas Browne's plaintive cry of "*O Altitudo*."⁴ The cry *O Altitudo* is a restorative appeal to the unknown, an admission that the limits of knowledge have been reached. For purposes of this argument, I cite Browne's plaint as an example of an anti-epis-

temological knowledge claim, an “anti-episteme” that challenges the positive role of reason and opens the creative potential of uncertainty, a move that rests at the basis of Fuller’s argument around trust and authority.

This anti-episteme turns reason against itself while generating hope for the reappraisal of the cosmos through vision. This final turn is, at times, given a freer license in Fuller’s work than is found in “The Chapter of the Sheep,” but those seeking in Fuller a “straight” version of the theophanic visionary would find conflict between the ecstasy of the vision and the bathos of the materials in the poems. If we try to determine this work as *either* prophetic or nihilistic, we would be forced to conclude that Fuller’s intention is to satirize the vatic impulse, the poet a picture of a distracted mystagogue found at work with his tie caught in the drawer.⁵ But such a view of Fuller’s work promotes an existing poverty in discussions on the “political” (read, *critical*) component of irony. Irony is a tool not only for deriding truth, but also for engaging a horizon for truth. The dazzling complexity of the way that language governs experience is brought into sense by the poems, and subsequently, the possibility of ascension from such governance has been opened. Fuller’s vision reveals the implied collusion between culture, language and experience, and we come to realize that conventional coherence is folly, a blind trust in governance. Free from the logic of coherence, we are freed from its *telos* just as we are free to re-imagine, and perhaps, to alter the relations of the present.

Fundamental to Fuller’s poetics, and to my argument about the collaboration between coherence and governance, is how he understands the term “elliptical.”⁶ In Fuller’s 1998 collection *Aether* he shows how ellipsis became a symptom of a larger condition. In “Harmonious Verification,” Fuller starts with a description of the meaning of ellipsis by George Puttenham (d.1590):

In rhetoric the ellipsis designates the omission of an element that, as Puttenham says, ‘may be supplied by ordinary understanding’; it is the figure of defect. In traditional poetry this figure represents the compression of syntax for the sake of meter. To extend this narrow technical sense to a more general principal of artistic design comprising ‘defect’ as a thematic structuring element (wherein what is insufficient or flawed is conscious of its insufficiency, articulating its exemption from the compensations ‘supplied by ordinary understanding’), we view ellipsis in conjunction with related figures, such as enigma and noema. Of the latter Puttenham observes, ‘The obscurity of sense lieth not in a single word, but in an entire speech, whereof we do not so easily conceive the meaning, but as it were by conjecture’...Whereas Puttenham’s ellipsis readily presupposes a remedy for its defect, and its meaning already contains a reflection on that fundamentally implied remedy, the defects in *noematic* texts are remediless...*they signify an irreversible dissolution whose depiction and decipherment have now become the task of artistic understanding.* [Fuller, *Aether*, 25-26. Emphasis added.]

The ellipsis omits from the poem what is presumably supplied by vernacular understanding. The reader fills in the missing meaning by interpreting the text based on their experiences, unaided by editorial commentary from the poet, dilating the lasso by which the reader’s imagination stretches to constrain the poem into unity. Arguing for Fuller now, it seems that the *means by which things are commonly understood* must be resisted if we are to re-imagine governance; it is the knowledge that is supplied by common understanding that reifies control.

Fuller’s only published essay on poetics is “Restatement of Trysts.” There, Fuller quotes another 17th Century English pamphlet, *A Remonstrance of Many Thousand*

Citizens (William Walwyn and Richard Overton). This is a central essay of the Leveller movement. Walwyn and Overton sought to undermine Cromwell by reminding him that government rests on "...a Power of Trust, which is ever revokable, and cannot be otherwise, and is to be employed to no other end, than our owne well-being" (Fuller, "Restatement" 243). Fuller elaborates:

A trust exists when one has authorized someone else to act on one's best interest...One of the most fundamental duties, if not the most fundamental, is the duty of loyalty owed to the beneficiary of the trust. By this duty, a trustee must place the interest of the beneficiary first and foremost, and must put aside the trustee's own self-interest: to ignore this duty is to be in breach of trust. In the context of [Walwyn's work] those pursuing their own self-interest at the expense of the nation's best interest have committed a profound breach, falling prey to the conflicts of interest of the most devastating kind. (Fuller, "Restatement," 242-243)

The paper continues to establish that a *breach of the trust* exposes a necessary insight: trusts, from that of government to that of reason, are an unlikely business, indeed. All trusts are "blind," according to the condition of history, and it is unlikely that someone or something really stands as our surety. For Fuller, the usefulness of the breach is "to expose as false the presumption that confidence has been well-placed. When the break occurs the conventions hitherto governing the relationship start to fail, the entire apparatus becomes subject to question, and liable to collapse" (243). Although Fuller wrote this passage in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, he does not name this event as inspiration for his excursus through the legal role of fiduciary in property law (above), or in his general support of Walwyn's protest. Nevertheless, it is hard to not see the connection.

Is this protest seen in Walwyn, Overton, and Winstanley, a secularization of the autonomous basis of the soul translated to material conditions, that suddenly redrew subjectivity in ways not since altered? As these questions imply, Fuller forges a relationship between the production of art and the production of truth. Poetic texts that begin at the breach of trust, where meaning lies "all in pieces," offer a break of coherence as a kind of relief from dogma. With coherence fragmented, the broken text provides a restorative place of interpretation. In "Restatement of Trysts," Fuller writes:

In such a time [as the contemporary] it may be difficult to restate and reaffirm a trust, particularly through works of art that see themselves as products of a loss of trust, and appear to take great pains to embody the resulting alienation...These difficult texts appear to be left on their own to form new networks, and new relationships; they rise from the broken landscapes they inhabit to seek out trusts with those who will take them up and respond to them, assess their truth... Through the breach the broken world is brokenly visible, the mirror scattered in pieces and yet capable of fragmentary, noncontiguous forms and images which challenge the intellect to construe in fulfillment of the trust implicitly imposed. If the ordering impulse can never fully counteract the multitude of breaches the text records or bears, yet it drives one's immersion into its networks, to conjecture thereby a space where intelligence can recover itself. (Fuller, "Restatement" 243-244)

In "Harmonious Verification," Fuller writes that "decipherment has become the primary task of artistic understanding" of the elliptical text. "Restatement of Trysts," shows how that decipherment operates. The texts "seek out trusts with those who will take them up and respond to them, assess their truth" (243). So, the texts that are "products of the loss of trust" may be a mildly painful read, as we must build our

own structure to take from them; nevertheless, they afford the opportunity to think beyond what we already know.

James Noggle argues that 17th Century England is the period of the “skeptical sublime,” in which the loss of cultural certainty, which was witnessed in the regicide and ensuing parliamentary struggles, was turned into an aesthetic asset. I find this view broadly useful to recognize the creative principle of doubt: it promotes a view of the autonomy of individuals to freely judge reason from unreason. Therefore, the individual subject has sovereignty over truth. I turn to a narrative related by Milton to illustrate this. As with Walwyn and Overton, we can witness the moment where the argument for individual sovereignty, which began as an issue of divine justice, bleeds into the secular.

Dionysius Alexandrinus was about the year 240, a person of great name in the Church for piety and learning, who had went to avail himself much against hereticks by being conversant in their Books; untill a certain Presbyter laid it scrupulously to his conscience, how he durst venture himselfe among those defiling volumes. The worthy man, loath to give offence, fell into a new debate with himself what was to be thought; when suddenly a vision sent from God (it is his own epistle that so avers it) confirmed him in these words: READ ANY BOOKS WHATEVER COME TO THY HANDS, FOR THOU ART SUFFICIENT BOTH TO JUDGE ARIGHT AND TO EXAMINE EACH MATTER. To this revelation he assented the sooner, as he confesses, because it was answerable to that of the Apostle to the Thessalonians, PROVE ALL THINGS, HOLD FAST THAT WHICH IS GOOD. (Milton)

Milton’s narrative serves the thesis in the *Aeropagitica* that censorship fails to recognize in each individual the best judge of truth, as god will provide. For Fuller, the act of interpretation may be the sole ontological agency of the self.

But all that I have written doesn’t account for the elegiac notes in *Watchword*, which recognize the loss and the degree of difference between the volatile period of the English Civil Wars and this moment in the Western capitalist empire. When Fuller redeploys the work of the Levellers, Agitators, Ranters, True Levellers (Diggers), he is also measuring the distance whereby the current social tense has *lost* instability to certainty, as the episteme grows more inarguable.

“Parson Platt” shows some of this distance from the hope of a vulgar revolutionary capacity. The “real” Parson Platt of 17th Century England has become Fuller’s figure for the violence by which governance will restore itself to disputes of its authority. In 1650, Winstanley and the Diggers had begun a commune of some “six or seven houses” and crops at Cobham Manor on lands owned by John Platt (Parson). To a certain extent the Digger movement was enabled by the indulgence of Lord Fairfax (a General of Cromwell’s army) who had decided not to demolish an earlier settlement at St George Hill, and did not persecute the Cobham settlement. Parson Platt lobbied Fairfax to demolish the commune, and when that did not happen, Platt took it upon himself (and with hired goons) to attack the Diggers. Perhaps the most tragic moment in the brief history of the Diggers experiment is found in this story. According to Winstanley, he directly petitioned Platt to leave off the attacks, and the Parson responded by saying that if Winstanley could “prove his case for the commune by the scriptures,” he would trouble them no more, but, in fact, join their commune. Sadly, it is clear that Winstanley believed Platt’s offer sincere. Winstanley wrote up the proofs and presented them to Platt, who promised to read them. Henchmen showed up within the week to pull down the Diggers’ houses, effectively ending their movement (Winstanley 433).⁷

Looking back from the many finer knits of the laws and language of contemporary capital, we recognize that the disruption of governance in the Digger movement was to breach the laws of property, which “Neo-Conservative” icon Richard Pipes⁸ has argued is the foundational pillar of capitalism, and indeed, political freedoms as such. After the trial and execution of King Charles I and the subsequent civil wars, Winstanley proposed that all class inequality was a form of the Kingly, a synonym for corruption. For Winstanley, *all governance is Kingly power*, as illegitimate as King Charles I himself had been. From that premise, Winstanley argued for equal relations not just in terms of political subjectivity, but of property. Claiming the “public wastes” as land for his communitarian movement, the Diggers broke from the rule of law, and lived apart before their hopes were broken. In “Parson Platt,” Fuller modulates the arc:

Parson Platt
 theft, cheat, wrong or iniquity
 dance with joy displacing
 emphasis viewed fully in these
 shapes that find their broadest
 dreams roaming throughout
 leafy mazes or pressing on
 from the arbor in spasms
 toward three starved cows—
 at the beginning it was not so
 handmade goods for all
 during times of roasted meats
 clustered in the woods like a navel
 in trance and out of trance
 a former friend of mine
 was afraid to approach
 without distinctions
 imprinted on my face
 we sat together limpid and cool

The “three starved cows” echo the years of famine in the Pharaoh’s dream,⁹ as well as the summation of the material failure of the Digger project of communitarian agriculture. When Platt’s brawlers broke into their camps, they found the equivalent of three starved cows: failed crops, no stores, and an emaciated populace. Fuller’s poem, “Parson Platt,” modulates this narrative. While “history” tells us that the utopian projects which implode governance will collapse as power intrudes to restore governance, Fuller’s poem ends by restoring the early, tenuous ease of the first moments of the project (“we sat together limpid and cool”). We remain in that moment of the uncertain, before it collapses and governance reinstates itself.

I would like to provide a final example of the way that the coherence presented by governance is challenged in Fuller’s work. “Ode at Work,” from *Watchword*, is a *tour de force* that busts the definition of tropes as merely financial, corporate, poetic, secular, or religious. The voice of the address to a “*Pamphilus*” hints at a conceptual environs so broad it cannot be grasped. As gaps open in our ability to interpret what is expressly ironic and what is prophetic, “Ode at Work” elaborates a field of experience painfully stuffed with the abuse of logic to hide violence within “trust.”

This experience is restorative in the sense that it feels good to listen to the blues. “For covetousness is all,” the final sentence in “Ode at Work,” suggests Winstanley’s complaint that humanity will only know how to abuse itself if it is not acting on the basis

of equality. For Fuller, this is the last word to the environs. He combines the language that inhabits the office/ corporate sphere (“Consult my small plastic head—she’s about to explode. *Pamphilus*, you work in *this big office?*”); offers bursts of renaissance archaism (“Tell me whether seeing consists of opening and turning the eyes”); and includes dramatic appearances of the surreal and the banal (“Hotter and hotter, the door began to melt, revealing a small causeway over the investments in continuity and tenure”). All these rhetorics train through an impossibly small portal called the “Ode at Work.” Fuller provides the castigatory summa to condemn the inability of people to overcome self-interest.¹⁰ We feel that there is no sphere of relating that remains untouched by this failure.¹¹

I have argued that Fuller’s vision for contemporary poetry is that the breaking of “coherence” is the first step by which we may recover our agency as interpreters of experience, and that the description of truth in *Watchword* reveals that the ordering sense to experience is not only a fiction, but a damaging fiction, created in order to convince us of its inescapability.

Some trusts keep us blind. Fuller indicates this in his use of the Christian Dives and Lazarus parable. It is a parable about the reversal of material injustice through divine justice. Beggar Lazarus, who was all his life denied alms by rich Dives, sups at God’s table after death, while rich Dives, in Hell, is made to see Lazarus in Heaven. Even after death, Dives is blind to the injustice he serves, and asks Abraham to send Lazarus down with a cup of water for his thirst, as if, even in death, Lazarus was his servant. Abraham denies him. Fuller’s poem is not so straightforward.

Dives and Lazarus

There are two articles called Article Ninth
in them would still
be
holding and effective all the
provisions not negated by them
and these giving rise
to vexations
I could not have guessed at
but not even a hint of this falls to earth
deaf as ever
I made my way through the transformation unit
past thinning crowds raised in ditches
and I felt his presence
carefully cut to fit the frame
and out of this flies a kind of bat
on a perfectly level flight path
towards all kinds of people, apparently silent,
what is their common characteristic
with some exceptions many of them
have considerable accumulations
or bear witness to pure mysterious gold
in an effort to sustain themselves

The Christian parable about role reversals seems like a rich warning against over interpreting the world on the basis of human justice. The obfuscating language of the binding contract is not “what falls to earth” where the subject is seen laboring through the “transformation unit” (what we might take as “life”) “deaf as ever,” insensible to some other order, like Dives persisting in his blindness. The “I” feels

around for another presence: “and I felt his presence / carefully cut to fit the frame,” hint at the awareness of the immaterial concept or code most familiar for god (“*I felt his presence*”). But the situation is distracted by an ejected bat, an image we can only guess at, but to this reader a kind of comic sign for abandonment or emptiness (think attics). The bat is a trajectory out of the earlier situations that pulls social conditions into view—a people perhaps truly or perhaps falsely consumed with sustaining themselves. For Fuller, the vision of self-interested accumulation would not be served by commentary. It speaks volumes.

In “Restatement of Trysts,” we hear Fuller closely modeling an idea for the responsibility of art in his summation of Browne: “For Browne the book of Nature is a trust; he has maintained and held that trust by observing and making connections. This is both vigilance and commitment to the ever-growing object. For Browne, the alert, resourceful reader of the continuous text of nature and art, completes the circuit by ‘recreating’ it in his own text” (251).

In “Restatement of Trysts,” we hear Fuller closely modeling an idea for the responsibility of art in his summation of Browne: “For Browne the book of Nature is a trust; he has maintained and held that trust by observing and making connections. This is both vigilance and commitment to the ever-growing object. For Browne, the alert, resourceful reader of the continuous text of nature and art, completes the circuit by ‘recreating’ it in his own text” (251). Thus the duty to nature (Being) is to conjecture its meaning, testing for the holes within our theories that enable governance to replicate particularly dubious licenses of power. The immediate violence toward conventional expectation from the embrace of “fragmentary, noncontiguous forms and images” (Fuller’s terms from “The Restatement of Trysts”) releases the reader to “a space where intelligence can recover itself”; that is, where one might step through the door into St. Paul’s sanctuary, both relieved to have hit the limits of coherence and relieved that the troubling need for coherence can and should be relinquished. Embracing the defect in the model, we look at the field of experience not braced by the longing for a vanished unity but as an array of complexity itself infinite yet incomplete, within which we may claim empathy for each other. While we can’t begin to understand the horror of the condition to which humanity delivers itself throughout history, we may nevertheless recognize the obligation to serve that recognition with our human capital.

Notes

¹ After reading “Plat” and “Ode at Work,” Fuller said, “And that is the portion of this reading devoted to my interest in 17th Century Agriculture.”

² Here I am echoing Fuller’s essay, “Restatement of Trysts.”

³ If the *O Altitudo* is this, it is also a generative moment wherein *mercy* is felt. Humility produces the love/awe of the god and empathy between his creations for their shared condition.

⁴ Browne is quoting Paul’s *Romans*. Paul is essentially thanking god that he (Paul) doesn’t need to know all that God knows. Browne later refers to this phrase as “St. Paul’s sanctuary.” This phrase handed itself down then to history as an invocation of relief as the intelligence is released from the search of Truth.

⁵ The image here is Fuller’s own, from correspondence with the author.

⁶The meaning of this term has become increasingly difficult to pin down in recent years. Stephen Burt and Steve Evans, for example, take the term to different ends. Burt tried to establish the term as a tactic for elliptically capturing the self as a multiplicity of voices (which may have overstated the contemporaneity of this phenomenon), while Evans sought to peg the term to a poetry that takes for granted the fractured nature of experience and mindless replication of this state. As I continue, I hope to show that this term is being examined in both philosophical and formal dimensions by Fuller.

⁷This account draws from “*An Humble Request to the Ministers of Both Universities and to all the Lawyers in Every Inns-a-Court,*” Gerrard Winstanley.

⁸C.f. Richard Pipes, *Freedom and Property*. Harvard Professor Pipes is primarily remembered for his devoted hatred of communism, which as a matter of political philosophy was highly influential to the young Donald Rumsfeld and others behind the “New American Century” policy statement of 1998, that clarion call of the “Neo-Conservative” movement in America.

⁹C.f., Genesis 41.

¹⁰From the Pauline Letters: “For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:10). Covetousness, Aquinas wrote, as the root of all evil, is also the root of all sin. Therefore it may be said to be “all” for the condition of us born in the material of Original Sin for Winstanley.

¹¹I might note that the text produced in the breach of truth is also potentially less fixed in its receivership under the general social dispensation of culture. At the 2006 public reading I mentioned above there were many co-workers from Fuller’s bank in the crowd. The audience had physically separated itself almost perfectly between this audience and the PhD crowds. I notice that for several poems from *Watchword*, Fuller seemed to address the work crowd as the “inside” audience, and, from their reactions, it seemed like they recognized the intention of the work in a more direct way than the academic crowd I sat with, nodding, straining forward, showing that the impact of “Ode at Work” was speaking to an experience they could recognize.

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