

OPEN LETTER TO A COSMETIC(S) RE-/MEMBERING ME/-MBRANES IN THE WORK OF ROB HALPERN

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Split the Lark - and
you'll find the music -

Emily Dickinson

...these
Accidents produce me
-mbranes peeling off in-

Ternal selves skins...

(Disaster Suites 31)

Dear Rob,

Besides lyric poems, I wonder what other kinds of membranes are "me/-mbranes"?

I've been thinking about the cosmetic, reading Oppen's "The Mind's Own Place" — the weirdly cosmetic poem of Levertov's he cites in that essay as exemplary ("Matins") even after deriding "the art of the masseur and the perfumist" (SP 30). His working through Levertov's formulation in that poem of "the real": "the new-laid / egg whose speckled shell / the poet fondles and must break / if he will be nourished" — & earlier in the poem (him pointing out the fact of) "breaking the handle of my hairbrush" (SP 32).

All of which is returning me to "This one wants to be the one to break / the story" (DS 27). Am reminded, too, of Duncan's "A Song from the Structures of Rime Ringing as the Poet Paul Celan Sings," where the "wreckt" world "is totally untranslatable" (though he still tries) (GW1 8). Your cosmetic Monica Viti poem: line breaks &/as "me/-mbranes" (DS 31) — "as if all this were really breaking" (DS 27).

If the tropes of 'brokenness' and 'witness' have been central to a mythology of the lyric, your work is a kind of visitation on that mythology, disfiguring it in the interest of rereading the history of lyric poems as a history of "me/-mbranes," of fallout that doesn't exactly document a world or a disaster, but that is in some way shaped on it — *a cosmetics*.

“soot’s / What remains when I can’t re- / Member the words for what re- / Mains”
(DS 28).

Re-/membering me/-mbranes: the momentum is not in fact towards “break[ing] the story.” As a cosmetics, lyric material is a residue of ‘voice.’ It comes to resemble ‘me’ / ‘I’/person only inasmuch as it takes its shape & features from the person-al experience of disaster on which it is modeled. It’s constructed of soot, rubble—“which informs the intimacy of the I’s relation to the world *as if beyond all this fallout, no personal life*” (DS 81). As if the lark’s already split—& cosmetic ‘music’ re-/members that disaster. “Whenever I try to com- / Muncate love dis- / Appears” (DS 31)—debris of that split.

The heavy enjambment & hyphenation of the Monica Viti poem turns reading, too, into a re-/membering, so that the last line, “—*don’t do it for my experience*” (DS 32), prohibits the tendency to read in a lyric poem the document of a personal history. Not that ‘witness’ is worthless here, but precisely the opposite: that it can so easily be turned into *coin*, poems “whose measures can be // —*traded*” (DS 21). The directive, it seems, directs us elsewhere if we’re looking for the why and the *what* of reading disaster. Echoing Oppen, the answers aren’t to be found in “the poet’s self among things” (SP 32).

“this one // —*can’t be tested*” (DS 69).

In developing his claim for poetry as a “test of truth,” Oppen sizes up Levertov’s “Matins” thus: “These are, as poetry intends, clear pictures of the world in verse, which means only to be clear, to be honest, to produce the realization of reality and to construct a form out of no desire for the trick of gracefulness, but in order to make it possible to grasp, to hold the insight which is the content of the poem” (SP 32). Your work frequently problematizes this formulation:

With no
Arms I
Can’t be

Yr model
Of reach
To reach

For things
Not here
To break

The grid
The real
Event like

Love this
One can’t

—be tested.

(DS 69)

In the suite prior to this one, such an effort to *grasp* is ominously figured as a “dreamy mix of arms and aid” (DS 65). And still earlier, Oppen is (it would seem) directly refuted: “It’s nothing but doctrine poetry distorts / The things we live among” (DS 60). However, that these lines permit multiple interpretations of what they declare—that “doctrine” doubles as both the object of the verb “distorts” and as a dismissal of Oppen’s call for clarity—suggests that the working out of an argument isn’t central to the work being done here. Poetry is capable of both erecting and critiquing doctrine; the claims are stacked one on top of the other. To see in these poems nothing more than a politics of critique would be to ‘split the lark,’ even though the media’s “invidiously racialized” reports “pitting black ‘looters’ against white ‘finders’” in Katrina coverage (DS 79)—an extreme example of profanely mediated ‘reality’—serve as catalyst for this book. Neither do I find here a poetics dismissive of Oppen’s desire for “transparence,” but one deeply and critically engaged with it.

Passages like these where the language is stacked or thickened often serve to further entangle your concerns with his. I want to see this as a cosmetic fact—a layering, a covering over—& a distortion, but as much of the idea of unmediated ‘Truth’ as of the “realer subjects” of critique (DS 60). Here I would argue, the lyric puts on a cosmetics as it attempts to overburden mattering-as-exchange. That in your poems, cosmetic thickening is offered as one among a handful of lyric strategies for approaching the problem of touch “With no / Arms,” as it were.

My discussion of “thick language” is indebted of course to Sianne Ngai’s development of the concept of “stuplimity” in her book, *Ugly Feelings*. It might be a stretch to call “stuplimity” a product or effect of the lyric—even, necessarily, of the cosmetic. However, I do think that a “doubling over of language that actively interferes with the temporal organization dictated by conventional syntax” (UF 261) is deployed in your work as a strategy for confronting “disaster’s own conditions of visibility” (DS 81)—particularly where punctuation and line breaks are concerned in *Disaster Suites*, and in the augmented signage of *Weak Link*. Often in DS, the sentence and the line seem directly at odds with one another. The bracketed dash (“[—]”) that shows up throughout WL operates, further, as an active interference in lineation, sentencings, and voice—all part of the “conventional syntax” of the lyric.

Interestingly, this last also performs a kind of exegetical intervention (brackets being how one signifies, within a quotation, that text has been added or changed). Here and elsewhere, the poems read themselves, in the process disrupting, distracting, & diverting the line(s) of thought. This is where Ngai’s work is particularly applicable—these poems argue for a new *ear* for lyricism: as against the “ears whose hearing’s hulking mass / Can’t hear the excess of our industry” (DS 49). To cannibalize the old guard of the senses, of ‘lyric sensibility,’ what makes sense as lyric: “we can / Eat these grids of recognition mangle / Things count what counting can’t have // Been inducted into” (DS 49).

The priapic, the repulsive, the interruptive, the self-exegetical—each “Missing in the count now counts as one” (DS 49) among the many faces of the lyric. I love that this includes embracing & exploring distraction as an inroad to lyric work (DS 79-80)—which it increasingly seems to me is as valuable as attention & contemplation in the production & reception of that work—and that cosmetic thickening is here as generative as transparence.

So disaster is at the heart of legibility, as a condition of the lyric that piles up countenances for the lyric, most of which legibility then distorts by a rigorous exclusion. Your poems attempt to sing “what the world can’t say” (DS 48) because unsanctioned as permissible speech. “Their homes being thick descriptions solid waste” (DS 43), they read disaster by “becoming unmoored” (DS 83) from reading.

Re: thick language & inter-textuality: your work at times stages readings of the lyric (unmoorings from the lyric) through Robert Duncan’s formulations of it. So that a line like “Ruins more than ever the realm I am” (DS 59) overlays his “Something has wreckt the world I am in” (GW1 8), or somehow puts it on in order to trouble the question of what “I am.” Duncan’s “A Song from the Structures of Rime Ringing as the Poet Paul Celan Sings” seems to me to be at the back of much of your own working through of this question. It may be that it is precisely the “song” in Duncan—the notion that song is the best of what ‘I’ do, an ideal of lyric ‘voice’—that is problematized in your poems:

I’m a zero-degree in global production
 Whose real event’s what no one hears
 A structure of value as it decays in time
 (DS 19)

...singing
 Of old salt seas & the boutique water
 In our private language means nothing

Public like *use* I mean what matters
 Goes on exchanging

—wasting organs work unsold.
 (DS 59)

That “I mean what matters” is one problem of song being so persistently tied to the lyric as a quality of voice, music having been deemed (by Zukofsky & before him a whole tradition of lyric workers) an “upper limit” in the measurement of a poem’s import: the danger of ‘I sing, I *am* what matters.’ (Not, certainly, that this is Duncan’s presumption, or Zukofsky’s.) In your work, the ‘I’ is not above acting as a force of value, but is also figured as material (not necessarily personal, but linguistic) & thus subject to decay: “A structure of value as it decays in time.” Your work doesn’t dismiss song, but disfigures it, severs its ties to ‘person’: in the first poem of *Disaster Suites*, the poem is an “accumulation of waste” (DS 9). In *Weak Link*, “what you hear is erosion / [—] of sound, this decay of tone” (WL 10).

So that the line thickens: “I mean what matters” can also read as a definition of the cosmetic ‘I.’ As against matter-as-exchange, the cosmetic ‘I’ is ‘what does the mattering’—what *shapes* the materials of the poem—what *organizes* the “accumulation of waste.” All the while, “what matters / Goes on exchanging.” I think the primary question of cosmetics is how to matter, how to approach mattering what matters, how to proceed. This must be where “there must be some bad faith” (DS 82).

Here are the last stanzas of Duncan’s poem:

It is nothing that has
wreckt the world I am in so that it is
beautiful, Nothing in me

being
beyond the world I am in
something
in the world longs for

nothing there.

(GW1 8)

What I think your work most shares with this poem of Duncan's is the concern for complicity, the sense that the lyric 'I' is a me/-mbrane, a cover-up and not a revelation. The first lines of *Snow Sensitive Skin* (in an echo of the music of Duncan's "Veil, Turbine, Cord, and Bird") seem to confess as much:

having voiced this under cover
veiling turbines overhead
by hundreds humming wave-
fronts punch beats measure
time sounds as no sound sounds

(SSS, "Canopy")

In the fourth (& most priapic, even Whitmanesque) suite of *Disaster Suites*, the personism of a song-centered lyric tradition is neatly summed up as a "slum hum / -Anity" (DS 40). This priapic 'I' repulses: "A strong man erect I could hug them all // —their ungrievable bodies caked with my shit" (DS 43). And *Weak Link* points up "So many erroneous self-images [—] skins" (WL 7).

Unlike a plaster cast in forensics, a cosmetic address shaped on a world/disaster crumbles into so much rubble when abstracted from it, so can't really be examined as evidence of 'person.' I'm reminded here of Cindy Sherman's photos, particularly the striking similarity between pictures of trash or even biological waste—like *Untitled #s 168, 170, 236, and 244*—and images that would otherwise appear to be portraits. Both types of images come to mind in reading her note brainstorming how to proceed "when I want to stop using myself and don't want 'other people' in the photos":

Dummys
Photos of other people ^in the photo
parts of the body (no face)
shadows
empty (no people at all) scenes
wear masks
blur the face

(CSR 163)

Sherman's list could easily double as a list of strategies for confronting problems of person & persona in the lyric. Her work offers a useful model for cosmetics as a kind of drag focused not on persona but on residue, on fallout, on the materials. Thus what I want to call cosmetics is I think what you mean when you refer to "lyric [...] as a spell to break this spell of resemblance" (DS 81). Like Sherman's waste photos, your work isn't openly forensic in its approach, though the materials are close enough to trick the eye.

At the end of Duncan's poem, "something / in the world longs for // nothing there" (GW1 8). Is this the "something in the world" that breaks our things? That permits threats to approach unnoticed, that takes our skins (the threat of "white phosphorus" in DS 70)? This seems right to me, at least in part. But in Duncan's poem "Nothing in me // [is] / beyond the world I am in" (GW1 8). *This is the nothing-in-me of the cosmetic 'I'*—so that "something / in the world long[ing] for // nothing there" is a twin desire to "want[ing] to be the one to break / the story." "Something in the world longs" to tear open the me/-mbrane. And yet it is "in me."

The documentary impulse is an inheritance of American lyric work from Whitman, which in your poems materializes (somewhat threateningly) as an "Intercepted message" (DS 58). (If there's a war here, one wonders on what side we'd find the "lower limit" eavesdropping of Zukofsky or W.C. Williams.) But what to do with an intercepted message when "what you hear is erosion / [–] of sound" (WL 10)? One answer might be to locate the plea in the intercept: "ple [...] a [...] us [...] out" (DS 58). Somehow, though, this seems like too easy an answer, one that trusts too greatly in the intentions of whatever force does the locating.

I'm compelled to circle back to the question: working from the linguistic detritus of a "wreckt" world, how organize the debris in a way that makes any kind of sense? Or if not sense, if we are to abandon sense (if we have that option), how else to make it matter?

In a kind of many-mirrored nod to Whitman's Civil War poem "Vigil Strange," one section from the fifth suite in DS (a voice, I think, from out of the "Chorus" that's "dying to sing" "what the world can't say") performs just such an interception. Whitman's is an 'account' of nursing a dying soldier to his death. Your poem seems to question Whitman's propensity to make sense of the death, as well as his inclination to write about it in a poem:

Ejaculating in terror, he wears my uniform and talks
Real big about our transcendental subject
A corpse in Gaza, another Suprematist painting

My aeroplan of purity and shame where I find myself
Wanting realer things, sewage sweet to help our dead
Boys realize better options, peace and aid

— *the mind to languish fully in its shadow.*

(DS 54)

It's as if in the first two lines, the poem wants to embody a persona—to give voice to Whitman's "boy of responding kisses" (WPP 439)—but is then drawn back out of that gesture (because too presumptuous?) & into the present by "A corpse in Gaza." As if performing an intercepted message is a kind of false start, or that, further, writing a poem to the disaster (of a death, of Whitman's poem, etc) is a shameful urge to begin with, coming as it does *too late*: "There's shame in simply being here" (IP, "The Pathos of Distance, Being a Thing Inside You Once I Felt").

It strikes me too that, as abandoned persona, the first two lines also gloss the traumatic turn in Whitman's poem from a second person address to a third person report, where "My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well his form" (WPP 439). If Whitman's lines can be construed as a paradigm of poetic image-making as the enveloping of forms / the laying of corpses to rest (a truly *strange* vigil for Whitman), then your poem seems to call out the performative and appropriative sides of this undertaking: "he wears my uniform." But even here the line doubles over, reading as both a call to Whitman (to take it off, to give it back) and as an immensely productive queering of the lyric (as always already a performance). Whatever the nature of the trauma, neither poem operates to 'reveal' it.

As in Duncan, "It is totally untranslatable" (GW1 8), whatever it is. To attempt to locate the *translatable* would be to 'split the lark,' which reminds me too that Dickinson's never far off here. Both in DS's attention to *ecological* disaster and in offering the competing interpretations of images of Katrina survivors as a kind of explanation-as-profanation, your poems question whether readers should in the first place trust (much less desire) an 'I' who claims to have truly broken a story. Your poems urge us after something otherwise than explanation.

While your work finds company with a tradition of investigations into the lyric, it stages its own intervention in startlingly contemporary terms:

Wetlands and marshes slow.
But my poems, like *phynance*
—this accumulation of waste—

I mean *this*, you and 'the cranes
Like ships,' they're relentless
—targeting flows, pipelines—

Thru which the silence, too,
Has slowed, tho it's still refining
—me, I'm down to prewar levels.

(DS 9)

If the cosmetic 'I' is "A structure of value as it decays in time," then it shares this important physical characteristic with both the eroding "wetlands and marshes" & with "Democracy's myth about itself" (DS 79). Here, in the very first poem of DS, "silence, too, / Has slowed" through the pipelines—what a fucking perplexing motion. It makes sense that silence would be drowned out by the sound of "the excess of our industry," but the fact that silence is *embodied* as a substance (even a commodity, to be

transported through pipelines) suggests that there's more at stake here.

It seems to me that these lines indict a tradition that so faithfully upholds the marriage of person and lyric. This tradition is consubstantial with big oil & gas in its attempts to successfully commodify 'self' by offering such a narrow view as to what makes sense in lyric work: "it's still refining / —me." This similarity is much more than incidental, more than simply a metaphor: the oil and gas industries have exerted a tremendous force on the official calculation of the dollar value of a human life in cost-benefit analyses. In 2008, this figure (then \$6.8 million) had already dropped by \$1 million from just a few years prior, facilitating (among other things) a relaxed standard for the construction of pipelines in populated areas.¹ The fallout from Hurricane Katrina would no doubt have been lessened were it not for the value of human life having become so profanely calculable in the terms of late capitalism.

That it would be *silence* that's "still refining / —me" (still shaping the traditional lyric 'I'—and with the force of an industrial lobby) is an appropriate critique of how impossibly tangled person and lyric have become. As an ideal quality of lyric 'voice,' silence remains extremely problematic—and when the purported goal of such a voice is epiphany, 'silence' is nothing short of fallacy. But then again, the alternative to epiphanic lyric has been posited as another kind of silence in Oppen's "Clarity in the sense of silence" (NCP 175)—& how else to understand a resistance to explanation? As much as its disappearance might be mourned amid the din of industry's excess, silence seems always to carry with it a potential threat.

Near the end of *Disaster Suites*, a figure appears that names this threat, that puts a face on it:

This morning feels what lingers falls
—whose bodies clot the white remove
Lying wedged embedded pools
Lustrum hides our naked stark—

We're touting sky's all-purpose pack
—stiffing up the friction lubes
And opens nothing's pink patois—
Mouthing punks the war with want

To touch my longing eons come and
Goes touch want in longing songs
—our organs dreaming products sink

Guns our silent blocks for broke—
Failing under inquiry stress
Thru which the words

—*white phosphorus*.

(DS 70)

This is perhaps the most sustained engagement with the work of Emily Dickinson in your recent books. If "it's still refining / —me" was a Dickinsonian turn (the dash that doesn't behave, that misleads a reading), the metrics and final slant rhyme in

"This morning feels what lingers falls" are nothing short of your best Dickinson drag, a cosmetics shaped on her concerns. Your "white phosphorus" reads like a torqued, contemporary rendering of her "White Exploit," "the *White Heat*," "that White Sustenance," and, finally, most directly, the "Vesuvian Face."

"White phosphorus" is a cosmetics on the "Vesuvian Face" of our current disasters. The idea of 'bodies' in the lyric being so contested, "white phosphorus" attempts a redirection of lyric work so that it can be seen as a question of grave concern for our daily bodies, "as if these bodies counted, as if they really mattered" (DS 82). If cosmetics thicken (in) a contested space, if "all contested spaces sort / The rules of place enclosing units" (DS 62), then here is lyric as a matter not of person, but of organs, meats, and skins.

The figure of "white phosphorus" sounds the depth of the danger posed when silence is offered as among the best alternatives to what Oppen referred to as "political generalization" (SP 32). In its military use, white phosphorus is a smoke-screen munition used to mask movement—but it also functions as an incendiary device. So it's both a mask & a weapon that produces fatally deep chemical burns on the bodies of those exposed—both a cover and a means of eating down through a cover. The threat of the refining force of the pipeline is clearly replicated in this figure—it conceals an ominous movement, imperils us (by "refining / —me") without our knowing in the first place to be on the lookout.

—bombs come to mind as selves // Sleeves clusters" (DS 53).

A split lark is what happens when one "opens nothing's pink patois" (DS 70). The nightmare "I / Dreamt a conquistador & his top ground meat cruising aisle / Eight singing I want this one skinless" (DS 62). Cosmetic me/-mbranes re-/member a wreck of literal skins & meats. The lyric, then, is figured as a non-site where inter-textuality can operate as a form of interception, eavesdropping, even informing (there is a war here), as against Oppen's transparent or silent "clarity." The cosmetic as where 'I meet this trouble of "disaster [having] already made the world all repellent surface, allowing for no traction" (DS 79-80).

If *Weak Link* is any indication, neither the poems of *Disaster Suites*, nor "the conditions that make them readable" (DS 79) have disappeared, though new strategies for confronting those conditions have taken shape. In *Weak Link* the cosmetic me/-mbrane seems finally to threaten to unleash its own disaster, allowing itself a kind of monstrous birth: "[...] residual subject // [—] ≠ an unstoppable irruption, my tailbone, poking thru environment, a skin // [—] ≠ undoing what the war forces /// —weakening the links" (WL 5).

Could this be the crowning of the cosmetic 'T'? A hopeful, if terrifying, birth—"to which one might be permitted an unreliable witnessing" (SSS, "Time of Command," 16)...

What better way to name the permission I've sought (& taken) here.

—C.J. Martin, Lockhart, TX, 07/01/09

Notes

¹ Seth Borenstein. "AP IMPACT: An American life worth less today." *San Francisco*

Chronicle: Thursday, July 10, 2008. <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2008/07/10/national/a110546D37.DTL>>

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