

# DISLOCATION ORCHESTRATION IN THE WORK OF ROSMARIE WALDROP

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*i. an un-natural history*

*No ideas but in numbers.*  
Jacques Roubaud<sup>1</sup>

I am surprised that Rosmarie Waldrop consents to the term “prose poems” for her many books of what might be better described as “investigations in paragraph-based forms,” or “experiments in pronoun-initiated meditations,” or taking “the temperature of a body of philosophy,” as she calls it in “As Were,” a set of extraordinary improvisations on the language and preoccupations of writers ranging from Leonardo to Louis Zukofsky.

Generally, I am resistant to prose poems. I miss the rush of radical compression; don’t much like the quasi-narrative pace. In poetry I prefer work that exploits the visual opportunities of the page-space. And I particularly like the poetics of the blank—from the minute synaptic space hovering at the end of even the most heavily-enjambed line to the phantom footprints of the “un-written” that haunt the interstices of Susan Howe’s “exploded” texts.

So when it comes to the work of Rosmarie Waldrop, I find I first want to remove it from the genre and assert that it has less to do with the history of the prose poem than with the quantitative formalism of many Language Poets. Emerging from a primarily constructivist, rather than expressionist sensibility, her writing participates in the renaissance of the former and the reform of the latter—both being major activities of poetry today. In fact, Waldrop’s essays contain some of the best articulations of this movement away from neo-romantic notions of “organic form.”<sup>2</sup> “It is the form that generates the content,” she writes, overturning the Olson/Creeley dictum “Form is never more than an extension of content,”<sup>3</sup> but she does so without overstating the case, adding that the poems “were still about my mother.”

A typical Waldrop work is a serial poem in sections, each constructed of a set number of paragraphs, and each paragraph containing approximately the same “amount” of text, if not exactly the same number of sentences. In addition, each series has a distinctive rhythmic pulse, as well as more or less of an atmosphere of digression, analysis, or riding the waves of language. As an exploration of “writing in sentences” that ignores the category distinctions of poetry and prose, the work is nonetheless

marked by an unresolved longing for the more explicit spaces, gaps, and suspensions that line breaks and other visual techniques of page-composition make possible. In many ways, Waldrop's work is about finding alternative means for bringing such discontinuities into play.

In order to trace the development of some of these alternatives, I tried to assemble a kind of evolutionary typology of the Rosmarie Waldrop sentence sequence, starting with this early example:

If I were a mother I would naturally possess the pure crystalline logic which is the prerequisite and found in most well-appointed duals. Only, it is hard not to slip on the ice because there is no friction.

In this passage from *Reproduction of Profiles*, the first book of Waldrop's well-known trilogy (which was recently published in a single volume by New Directions), relatively normal grammar and syntax combine with an unexpected proximity of frames of reference once considered decidedly unproximate: "motherhood" and "logic" (or, more broadly, philosophy). This is an example of what Waldrop calls "semantic sliding" and also of her characteristic feminist gesture. The movement from "crystalline" in the sense of "purity" to "ice" points to the slipperiness inherent in preconceived notions of both motherhood and logic, as well as the risks of both, if deemed, or when desired to be, "pure." Finally, Waldrop conflates the biological (reproduction) with the intellectual (logic), by emphasizing the dual meaning of "dual" as 1) "duality" and 2) the dual/duel/duo of a relationship that may lead to parenthood—even as she rejects the "duel of duality," stating that there is, in actuality, "no friction" if the "body" is re-attached to mind, soul, cultural tradition.

The next passage is from *Lawn of Excluded Middle*, published nine years later, in 1993:

My love was deep and therefore lasted only the space of one second, unable to expand in more than one dimension at a time. The same way deeper meaning may constrict a sentence right out of the language into an uneasiness with lakes and ponds.

Here, apparently logical sentences turn out to inhabit several logics or "dis-logics," with time/space dimensions allowed to overlap with and call into question figurative language such as "my love was deep." The equation of physical depth and emotional profundity is cast aside in favor of an alternative "dimension" that might have, if not "depth," at least other means of expansion. Her concern seems to be that language such as "deeper meaning" may actually "constrict" rather than enlarge language/thought, and lead to an uneasiness in proximity to those features of the world that actually do have "profundity," such as lakes and streams (features that might, in fact, benefit by a more literal and less metaphorical attentiveness on the part of the language-bearing species).

In the next example, from the 1998 *Split Infinites*, shorter sentence-units lend speed and acceleration, something increasingly evident in Waldrop's later works:

To understand the full clearing as the young animal turns human. Coupling curiosity with upright for speed. Hands become intelligent, economics, incorporated into body temperature. Not necessarily for the best.

As the sentences become more phrase-like, the paragraphs (none of which are quoted in their entirety here) acquire more urgency and power. In their capacity to contain

and conflate language from many arenas, even within very brief passages, they manage to be both authoritative and deft, avoiding the occasional longueurs of the earlier trilogy.

In a final example, from the more recent *Love, Like Pronouns*, punctuation, especially the period, reinforces rhythmic and syntactic units, and adds to the impression of speed, even while introducing new species of gaps and discontinuities:

Forlorn visceral stucco. Begin frozen. Had I not skated under water? Serious other knee. Poor. Transparency already less sweat. Descends upon great junk onrush.

It is through this ability to assemble ever more disparate sentence-like fragments into paragraphs with a compelling forward propulsion, while also creating larger formal structures by extensive use of repetition-with-variation (which will be discussed in more detail below), that Waldrop begins to achieve some of the “orchestral” qualities that she describes in her essay “The Ground is the Only Figure”:

When eye and mind are interrupted in their travel, a vertical dimension opens out from the horizontal lines. Suddenly we’re reading an orchestral score as it were. No longer one single voice. A multiple meaning.

*ii. gap-gardening and dislocation-orchestration*

By Waldrop’s own account, what appealed to her in giving up the line break and other spatial strategies of discontinuity in favor of a paragraph-based poetics was a desire “for complex sentences, for the possibility of digression.”<sup>4</sup> In practice, she explains, the breaks moved from the right margin to inside and between sentences:

I must try to move the vacancy and the mismatch from the margin inward...  
I must cultivate the cuts, discontinuities, cracks, fissures...*inside* the semantic dimension. *Inside* the sentence.<sup>5</sup>

Note the verb “cultivate.” In the same essay, she calls this “gap-gardening,” a term that successfully evokes the “fruitfulness” of such strategies, not only for Waldrop, but for many poets experimenting with radical means of language-innovation in recent decades.

Why this exuberance emerging from a strategy of disruption, if not, at times, destruction? We write, Waldrop says, echoing Mallarmé, with “a whiff of the destruction that is the Beatrice of creation.”<sup>6</sup> And maybe it is after all the “Throw of the Dice,” with its embrace of the contingent and famously elusive referents, that has continued to lead the way, standing as it does as the ur-text of a kind of writing that defies collapse into interpretation (the destruction of closure), that acknowledges that language writes itself as much as being written (the destruction of the notion of originality), and that embraces the page as a field for textual composition (the destruction of the left-margin-aligned stanza).

Waldrop’s language of cultivation, fullness, and gardening amid the gaps reflects this “constructive deconstructive” trend and its larger project of a liberating “dis-enchantment” of poetry:

For a fraction of a moment, this void stops everything. It suspends the assurance of statement to reintroduce uncertainty . . . According to Friedrich Hölderlin, the gap of the caesura, metrical poetry's additional locus of disjunction, blocks the hypnotic enchantment of rhythm and images.<sup>7</sup>

This is the rejection of the enchantment by which poetry participates in a fundamentally conservative role of consolation and repetition, of re-enactment and ceremonial enforcement. For many contemporary poets, this means a skeptical employment of metaphor, with its tendencies toward escapist transcendence, and a preference for metonymy, which serves as an anchor, through proximity, to the world and the "depths" of its lakes and streams.

But what does Waldrop mean by this "void," this "emptiness," to which she so continuously and strenuously alludes?

Some possibilities:

1. An emptiness that is nonetheless a place of writing, related to the Italian *stanza*—an abode, a place to stand. ("Four walls, like four lines, transform pure potential extension into a space, an empty space. The walls to lean on . . . as you face the emptiness within."<sup>8</sup>)
2. The space between languages. That which cannot be entirely filled or even bridged by translation. (Waldrop is a translator of the work of Edmond Jabès and Friederike Mayröcker, among others.)
3. The Freudian "oceanic." ("It is not true that I have no oceanic feeling. I have this kind of feeling about language."<sup>9</sup>) Or maybe just *the* ocean, the successfully-crossed "space" of the Atlantic. (Waldrop is German by birth, American by marriage to poet Keith Waldrop and by contribution to the cultural landscape.)
4. Not a "contained" space. Not a space with a core. A space of surfaces. (Waldrop quotes Merleau-Ponty: Not "the space *in which*, but the *means through which*."<sup>10</sup>)
5. The space "between voices," the gap that marks all communication, even if love is present. (Much of Waldrop's work is written as implied or explicit dialog between a "she" and "he," or is addressed to a "you.")
6. The relational space of Olson's "no longer things, but what happens BETWEEN things."<sup>11</sup>
7. The void, the emptiness, that is a pointing toward God (which Waldrop entertains, but rejects: "[W]e must close our eyes to conceive of heaven."<sup>12</sup>).
8. The slightly different negative space with a pleasant Buddhist chime that makes an appearance in a certain line of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American poetry. (Not especially pertinent in this instance, except as it connects to John Cage.)
9. The "nothing to say" of Cage's "Poetry is having nothing to say and saying it"—which, abbreviated, becomes the title of one of Waldrop's essays. (To which I would add his "Activity, not communication," "No split between spirit and matter," "Giving up ownership, substituting use," and also, "America has a climate for experimentation."<sup>13</sup>)

10. The womb, the empty womb, the womb as emptiness. (Yet even the “empty womb” can be figured as plenitude and possibility, as freedom—from norms, from a life devoted to sustaining others, from financial hardship—a loosening up of female space and time.)

11. The synaptic gap between nerve and nerve, across which occurs the “leap” of signal, switch, pulse. (“Thought is thought a way of capturing particulars the way nerves ferry impulses to the brain.”<sup>14</sup>)

I would argue that Waldrop’s work takes place in the space, gap, fruitful tension *between* all of these, in the coexistence of both “empty” and “full” gaps. Another way to say it might be that Waldrop’s work takes place in the “space” of the hypothetical, of the subjunctive—inside the “mood” of a verb that is perpetually “full” of movement, so that even in its references to emptiness the work multiplies the facets of that emptiness.

This is a fertility that is also a kind of negative capability, a being in uncertainty that logic might not “allow,” but where much of life and language happens—in her own words, this is the “lawn of excluded middle,” the space between supposed opposites where growth occurs.

Note, however, that there is no true abyss in this list. Waldrop’s void is a fairly decorous one. It lacks what Calvin Bedient calls the “*terra abjecta* of the negative. Nothingness, variously called negation, lack, absence, abjection, zero, inessence, and why not add Yeats’ terrible phrase ‘the desolation of reality.’”<sup>15,16</sup>

In fact, for all her insistence on “tangible emptiness,”<sup>17</sup> I find Waldrop’s statement that “the blank page is not blank”<sup>18</sup> in many ways more pertinent to the actual writing, which is collagist in its genesis—her sources often being fragments from the work of other writers and philosophers—and which exults in a kind of happy plenitude of interaction. “No text has one single author. . . We always write on top of a palimpsest,” she says.<sup>19</sup> Or, “Poets work on the language, and language thinks for us.”<sup>20</sup>

Or, as I once heard David Antin say in one of his “talk pieces” — “Every word has hands all over it.”<sup>21</sup>

*iii. the ripe apples of emptiness*

*Between obedience and knowledge any child will choose the apple.  
“Blackwards”*

“Sad, so sad, apples in Autumn,” begins one of the sections of “Blackwards,” a serial poem in *Love, Like Pronouns*, published by Omnidawn in 2003. In this case, the layers of the palimpsest are pulled back to reveal fruit previously handled by Keats, Milton, Newton, and, of course, Eve.

The epigraph reads “she speaks blackwards/no image will remain,”<sup>22</sup> the strange word “blackwards” bringing to mind “backwards” or “black words.” Are these words that absorb instead of reflect light? Words that speak in the direction of the void? Words that lead to a final section called “And Sometimes I Stare Blindly” in which “At

the point of innervation, where the image reflected on the retina becomes sight, the eye is necessarily blind”?

Soon enough Eve, the original “backwards and barefoot” female,<sup>23</sup> given the choice between the apple-polishing of obedience and the nutritional value of knowledge, disobeys, and chooses both knowledge *and* the body, the great returning theme of Waldrop’s work:

Thought is so little incompatible with organized matter that it seems rather one of its properties, on a par with geometry. The apple she ate was satin green, sharp, sweet...Her soul sat in her brain, substituting inner for space.

Yet, “Sight is organized so as to prevent us from seeing its blindness,” just as language organizes its apparent “lucidities” in such a way that we are often prevented from recognizing its opacities. So, as O’Hara would have it, we just go on our nerves (or synapses). This is the trouble with, or challenge of, both language and brains.

And the socket of the eye surrounds the ball in so close a manner it derails the train of thought.

But what if the Pragmatists and the biologists are right, and both brain and language evolved to perceive what helps us better adapt to our environment, specifically the three dimensions of space and one of time that make it possible for us to live on this particular speck of dust? What then if the string theorists are also correct, and the universe turns out to actually have eleven dimensions? To face such drastic inabilities of perception will require a temperament and language of acknowledged unknowing. Perhaps this will be a new place for poets, in Waldrop’s case, one in which “Language is not a tool...but a medium infinitely larger than my intention.”<sup>24</sup>

It is difficult to give a full sense of the orchestration of recent works such as “Blackwards,” with their fugue-like composition, in which phrasal units and thematic strands are interwoven in a pattern of repetition and variation within and across sections, and engage subjects and language from other poems. But as an example, the first section of “Blackwards,” titled “No Apples Here,” includes the following: “She had a telescope with which she viewed the heavens from her roof. Women are well positioned to focus on unstable subjects.” The apples (present even in their negation), the problematic issue of “sight” and of “the subject,” immediately chime with parallel passages in *Reluctant Gravities* and *Blindsight*. At the same time, new motifs are also introduced, such as the apparently autobiographical “I dropped my letter into the mailbox and walked toward St. Paul’s,” a statement that will be repeated, with alteration, in the very next paragraph:

What constitutes a body? What you keep, what you throw. Death fell savagely on the unstable subjects. She positioned me by the telescope for a squint at the stars. Hardly a recipe for begetting children. Our lives being now language, the emphasis has moved. More and more often I don’t arrive at the mailbox I set out for.

This paragraph in turn introduces repeating themes from previous works, such as the begetting (or not) of children, while putting forth new ones that will reappear in altered form in subsequent paragraphs. Cumulatively, the experience of reading these elaborately interwoven multi-part works, with their almost, but not quite, diagrammable structure of cross-cutting fragments, is of semantic sliding on a “macro” scale, coupled to what might be described as an “intellectual musicality.”

In "Blackwards," this expansive formal structure makes possible an "orchestral" work with multiple altering and recurring thematic strands: mortality, Africa as the site both of Eden and of some of the sourer fruits of current globalization, the situation of woman ("A Stinking Eden, a forlorn Eve.") and of man ("In both the infinitely great and small circles boys set out to rob the orchard."), science (especially understandings of our physical nature gleaned from molecular biology and genetics), the chemistry of love, and the "temperature of philosophy," which is, as always in Waldrop's work, exactly 98.6 degrees.

If these be the fruits of knowledge, long chosen over obedience, how much more abundant can the orchard be?

*iv. Reluctant Coda*

My intention was to end this essay here, but I feel I must acknowledge a surprising turn at the very end of "Blackwards":

The contract stipulates drowning. If we were truly able to see the blind spot in our eyes we would see nothing. Which some call God.

I want to ignore this seeming flirtation, after all, with the notion of "filling the gap." But how, given its emphatic position, the coy "some" contradicting in some, but not all ways, this "last word"?

It makes me wonder if perhaps I've been mis-reading Waldrop, and in fact, it is emptiness number 7 that's going to win out in this long career, a swerve, after all, in the direction of the transcendent.

I, for one, hope not.

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Waldrop in her essay "Form and Discontent," reprinted in *Dissonance (if you are interested)*, University of Alabama Press, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Especially interesting in this context are the essays "Helmut Heissenbüttel, Poet of Contexts," "A Basis of Concrete Poetry," and "Form and Discontent," all reprinted in *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

<sup>3</sup> Waldrop, however, like others, points out that the actual practice of Creeley and Olson in many ways contradicts such a proclamation.

<sup>4-7</sup> "Why Do I Write Prose Poems," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

<sup>8</sup> "The Ground is the Only Figure," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

<sup>9</sup> "Split Infinite," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

<sup>10</sup> "The Ground is the Only Figure," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

<sup>11</sup> Waldrop notes that this phrase from Olson's "Projective Verse" is actually a para-

phrase of Alfred North Whitehead.

<sup>12</sup> "Lawn of Excluded Middle," section 7, pdf available at [www.durationpress.com](http://www.durationpress.com).

<sup>13</sup> John Cage, from the introduction to *Themes & Variations*, 1982, reprinted in *Post-Modern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> From "Admiration of Animals," a section of "Blackwards," in *Love, Like Pronouns*, Omnidawn, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin Bedient, "The Predicament of Modern Poetry (The Lyric at the Pinch-Gate)," *Chicago Review*, Spring 2006.

<sup>16</sup> This is especially interesting given the fact of Waldrop's birth in 1935 in Germany to parents sympathetic to Hitler, a fact of which she has written on numerous occasions. I tend to think that in this case the fact of birth turns out not to be the determining factor in her writing, even though certain works such as "Split Infinites" and her novel, *The Hanky of Pippin's Daughter*, address her childhood. By all accounts, it appears instead that the young Rosmarie Sebald was someone truly "liberated by the Americans," in her case, by meeting the GI Keith Waldrop and getting the hell out.

<sup>17</sup> "The Ground in the Only Figure," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

<sup>18-19</sup> "Form and Discontent," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

<sup>20</sup> "Alarms and Excursions," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

<sup>21</sup> This is my memory of part of a David Antin work presented at Poets House in Fall 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Claude Royet-Journaud, translated by Keith Waldrop.

<sup>23</sup> Also of note are the lines in *Reproduction of Profiles*: "You said it might be different if we were able to stand outside logic. I knew by this you meant: barefoot." These were brought to my attention by Linda Russo in her talk "Spaces too wide to reach the next word: Gesture and Gender in Rosmarie Waldrop's Poetry," given at the CUNY Conference on Contemporary Poetry, November 2005.

<sup>24</sup> "Thinking of Follows," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.