

## 5. Poetry's Exemplary Subversions

*What makes art an exemplary subversion is not activism, but an activity implicitly critical of taking a position*

Calvin Bedient

The most recent books touched on in this essay:

*Cultural diagnostics:*

Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *And: The Phenomenology of the End* (Semiotext(e), 2015)

Félix Guattari, *Lines of Flight: For Another World of Possibilities* (2011; English translation, Bloomsbury, 2016)

Peter Sloterdijk, *Foams* (Semiotext(e), 2016)

Byung-Chul Han, *The Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. Eric Butler (MIT Press, 2017)

*Poetry:*

Kevin Holden, *Solar* (Fence Books, 2017)

Marjorie Welish, *So What So That* (Coffee House Press, 2016).

Rae Armantrout, *Partly: New and Selected Poems, 2001-2015* (Wesleyan, 2016)

Cole Swensen, *OnWalking On* (Nightboat Books, 2017))

Alli Warren, *I Love it Though* (Nightboat Books, 2017)

Molly Bendall, *Watchful* (Omnidawn, 2016)

Douglas Kearney, *Buck Studies* (Fence Books, 2016)

## 1 The Sickness of Poetry

### We Have a Swing and Other Furniture that Moves

Our houseguest Meridith Grayling in a loud whisper:

"Here we go." She made little word-poems of the kind.

"That is all I have to say." "No more paragraphs."

Poetry after its great moment she said must come

back to being a minor art. "The pool is not the swirl."

monumentality” is described as “sea surface besotted with clouds the imitation sloshing / camouflage efflux,” declining “to build”).

The poetry in question approaches Baudrillard’s notion of an art of radical subversion that ciphers, not deciphers. The poets all but “return the world as it was given to us” at the chaoid beginning of the mind, of time, “unintelligible- -and if possible a little more unintelligible. A little more enigmatic.”<sup>7</sup> Barthes: modern art tries to prevent meaning from taking.

## 5 Linguistic Deterritorializations: Holden, Welish

Kevin Holden’s *Solar* is the bravest debut since earth. It “Houlihans and O’Rourkes etc. etc.” beyond anything this side of *Finnegans Wake*, and without a single portmanteau in its solar carriage, which has no floor, of course, it’s burnt out. Here and there in *Solar* Holden hollows out referentiality from inside, leaving all the pretty words intact on the surface, but implicating an almost absolute aphasia (an inevitable comparison), a mental and emotional loneliness such as an alien might experience if handed a bushel of earthly words and told “Write!”;

Holden leaves syntax round in shape but lightheaded, reeling, *inefficient*, unactualized as “a dream of glass glowing west / against the near of the sun” (58). Though the odds are low, there’s always a chance that shaking the burning bushel will result in something ravishingly intelligible, give or take a twist of the present into the past - for example,

if when you were the oval window  
then follow seven swans  
to the tree at nightswim (59)

but “breakthroughs” into clarity is hardly Holden’s reason for writing. Holden doesn’t need much of a reason. He writes like an appointed medium for the sun. He’s its “alpha steamship,” its “twelve house and shadow of a house”; and frequently without its accidental illumination;

anyway, “all places parallel each other.” Whatever you say, you will get to all of them. What is writing if not “a fashion through written time”? A

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, translated by Anne Hodges (Semiotext(e), 2003), 176-177.

fashion of itself? Just begin it again. “Begin again the rung of sand in air.” Everything is intermixed, and not in Surrealism’s umbrella-sewing machine conflation, but invisibly, quantumly. Objects emit signals of what equalizes them all. Holden detects them, or so I fancy.

Logic has it completely wrong: “white fire on black fire spirals in all” (61).

Here is a solar lullaby:

hush now baby carrot flowers stick  
through amber root clutch all through  
abalone back seat baby cart (55)

Hush, don’t you cry, for all things stick through all things, clutched together and apart. The baby carrot and the baby for whom the baby cart is meant have the same trajectory, the same destiny, seen through the yellow solar window. Are there baby abalones? They are the same also. Everything goes in for its chances, with a certain talent for grip.

The individual words don’t cease to signify, but their arrangement-logic deviates with a clear lack of respect for mere earthly linguistics, which don’t allow a confusing crowding up; keep two clicks from the nearest word! It’s as if the lullaby beginning “hush” had thrown the rules of grammar into a doze.

Gertrude Stein’s “baby talk,” as Wyndham Lewis dismissively called it, is something more self-comforting and idly playful than Holden’s wordsmanship; nor does the latter resemble the young Rimbaud’s decadent extravagances: “black azure, / Where shimmers the sea of topaszes”: he’s fields and particles away, really, from all previous mutations of language, in the meaningless eternity of objects without death (which Stein in *Tender Buttons* entered for the only time).

Objects in SOLAR are equal to one another; science’s indifferent conscience rules (but not its stickling for verifiable truth). But the academic disciplines overlap each other’s territories indiscriminately, without “proper” respect: for instance, geometry invades astronomy witness “white hexagonal sun,” which may remember (it is true) that geometry became the language in which the new universe was expressed (after the old Cosmos collapsed) but gets it provocatively, arbitrarily wrong, and so on. The language frequently crawls into Latinate alienness like ants into a hole; this is the world before and after human beings were capped out into a “we” but their scholarly classifications have stuck; dusty learned words stop you (but not the sun-attendant Holden, who has smoked the whole dictionary) in your tracks.

A Holden poem half aspires to let objects converse with other objects, indifferent to the observing mind. It is therefore not a work of intelligibility; if it is not entirely left to chance, the reason, in part, is that the mind is already built into language and hard to eradicate; his language *will* begin to mean in spurts;

it mimics the “radical heterogeneity” prior “to all geometricism,” in Lyotard’s words: it adopts “the Cartesian problematic, namely that the mind finds its origins in multiplicity and chaos, in the murky and phantasmagorical” mind of childhood, but not Descartes’ drive to reclaim it “from opacity and curvature.” Anamorphosis dominates; the accidentality of the world has here been stripped of its veils; Holden’s pre-world-in-this world is super-saturated in its own materiality; nothing can enter it that is not simply still more world. Dreams occur, but they are elsewhere, nowhere.

Language came into being in dribbles as the mind (millions of minds) formed what Baudrillard calls a “world-effect”: not the world itself, which language cannot know, but multiple humanverses, shadows and spreadsheets of the chaoid actual nature of reality:

so understandably desire cannot find a pure object that is actual and singular, not a harlequin of effects, at rest in itself, a white angel on its side. All objects and the words for them are entangled:

Downlow and through the nightstrung black the owl all around you Mimnermus  
this in his hand erva & forever and that is a thing twixt asex and ask compendium  
phlogiston of redux dayne and through arks in stone woods prism sphere that  
mould of fur melts upon the wall of fir oceanic longing in and moontide baby  
broke open axes in axial zen on excuse the user and the beused, abalone shine  
through all pearl mothers full of fathoms inscribed in names the grace that grew  
into a wire cage the holy image or page on knees in front of night his temporary  
master star fucking his bright face . . . (63)

The entwinement of things confuses spectacle, dims the impasto of differentiations, interferes with romantic and religious wonder (“oceanic longing,” “pearl mothers full of fathoms,” “grace,” “the holy image”): this while failing to erase them from nostalgic memory. Holden’s poetry of chaotic assemblage agrees with Guattari’s broader, schizoanalytic idea that assemblages disorientate the polarization of objects and subjects, undo limits, contaminate fields with other fields (*Lines of Flight*, 53); but this disorientation, Guattari argues, is a positivity; in the face (or facelessness) of which it becomes illusory to circumscribe a problem, limn an axis, dig for a fixed root. This is of course the position of quantum physics (in this case to be taken in the plural, there being competing theories).

Holden's Minerva is cut up like a Picasso woman ("Mimnermus . . . erva") but she is a wise owl. What all she sees from her trees! She knows of "Grace that grew into a wire cage." She observes the page on his knees being facefucked by starlight (feudalism at the cusp of romanticism). There is a harsh grandeur in these expressions which argues that there is something real in them, real in their pathetic "too little" in the great All. Our use of "beused" names is a failure of vision, it misses a whole world beyond the human one; a use dark and small in this "downlow" place, which no ark can float us out of.

Holden's question "How . . . could there be a logic since there is a world?" in the poem entitled "5.5521" (from Wittgenstein's *Notes on Logic*) states the theme upholding the whole collection like a planet on a stem. Wittgenstein: Natural materiality is oblivious to the concept of a world.

There is no immunity. There is only a fatal situation. "You take the red road to reach the empty inn" (Rimbaud, *Illuminations*).

Nouns and adjectives are Holden's primary immortal materials, verbs the occasional accidents of time, but not calendar time. His words are undated. History stays indoors. Holden evokes the radically real, which is entirely material; over it names slide like licked stamps. (The modern revolt against nineteenth-century materialism has come back to materialism here, but overshoots the shiny leaves of appearances, shaking their tree. Marjorie Welish's materialism is similar).

Holden calls the bluff of the fictive solidarity of language; Roland Barthes calls this sort of practice "Drift. Drifting . . . the active pursuit of dissociation"; aggression against the aggressive consistency of languages - their pragmatic, defensive consistency, their *come to us for the word*. Holden's erupting grammatical ground is in Barthes' words "a counter-attack, a practice of in-consistency." Writing that aims "for an elsewhere that is inside . . . , thwarting . . . the power grabs, the publicity offensives, the pledges--all that will-to-possess that lurks in the very organization of language"<sup>8</sup>;

yet Holden's grammatical drifting (which is not always as extreme as I have indicated; but "Very Birch its identity with / time of silver rind formed gravels / banks and herbes betulla semida / birck baum it groweth in woodes and forests," (37) is about average. It avoids exuding a Rimbaudian criminal air; it just goes, unprogrammed.

Occasionally in *Solar* the poetics of the *neben*, the side by side ("abalone back seat baby cart"), is counterpoised with cryptic discursiveness. The combination of the two - no connection and partial, murky connection - keeps the reader guessing: should I decipher, or take the hint that Holden is Cipher King?: take

8 Roland Barthes, *A Very Fine Gift and Other Writings on Theory*, translate by Chris Turner (Seagull Books, 2016), 162).

“the tangles at the /edge of our sky garments to tie and retry / those knots the burning corner of the mouth / the wall the bull: the many day light / in lock and barrel blue spheres a / full field full” (53); pretty much got that? Perhaps it is to say (and not say) that we make sense of the tangled material that the world lets dangle; its objects (wall, bull, blue spheres) allow delineation: suggest, like the “roygbiv” breakdown of the rainbow’s spectrum mentioned a line or two above what I have quoted, that dissections can be made: suggest enworlding boundaries: All these form our “stock” for “lock and barrel”; the mouth burns a little with the effort to verbalize it all. Mouth shooting off.

On rare occasions Holden even turns Apollonian-solar and sends well lit messages: “There are people in the rafters visible . . . / There are principles of translation working / The potential for you to understand the other” (52): so, you see, he is really almost average-sane; no one has to lock him up; in the stranger moments he’s just playing with you - or rather with the violence of lucidity;

Holden can even regard time-and-language as quickening, like a romantic:

time begun and thyme that rose

among the scattered carrot daises  
in a day the mind that blows in  
scattered fall from phases kiss the  
prince and kiss the prince a field  
among the rows (56)

In its “phases” the mind can imagine persons and provide world-spaces for them. Isn’t that something? But, wait, we see that Holden isn’t claiming much for the feat. Subjectivity imagines a prince: prince has subjectivity: subjectivity is a field without (a field “among”) rows, a grid prepared for planting. How are we ahead, exactly? At least the field could be thought to escape the grid, destined refrains, in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the refrain as a familiar action, a routine.

*Solar* is made up of small and less small independent *pieces*: it is one huge assemblage. A field without rows. An Easter egg packed with strips of shredded language. Though the “Red on top of the circle of red . . . could be a nucleus” (48), don’t count on finding it in *Solar*. Still, Holden is not in the least a tragic writer; qua poet, he even seems impervious to melancholy. His is a strange sort of neutrality. The flames of the sun have licked his sensibility; he’s annealed.

**Marjorie Welish’s** new book, *So What So That*, is also at the experimental end