
REVIEWS

Rosmarie Waldrop. *Dissonance (if you are interested)*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. 313p.

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This collection of Rosmarie Waldrop's essays—taken in the etymological sense of “attempts”—documents the positively schizophrenic production of an active literary life. The first half includes a selection of Waldrop's critical writings, typically sensible and precise close-readings. Certain themes, even quotations, recur throughout these essays like refrains. Waldrop reads with a consistent vision as she goes up to bat for poets she admires, and puts her own work in the context of established and emerging voices. The dissonance of *Dissonance (if you are interested)* arises in the tension between this conventional, institutional voice of Serious Criticism and the *gaya scienza* of Waldrop's poetics.

These meditations on poetics reveal an agenda, a project; but Waldrop is no system-builder. A summary of Waldrop's own attempt to articulate her own poetics, “Alarms and Excursions,” illustrates the affirmative rather than dialectical nature of her method: *poetry is for social change, poetry is for pleasure, poetry is changing nothing*. While the trajectory of this argument or affirmation resembles madness, the internal logic of Waldrop's poetics remains sound and humane, a direct engagement with the conditions of producing visions.

Toward this end, Waldrop fashions a useful tool from the book or language-mysticism shared by Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Wittgenstein early in their respective careers, taken in a post-structural sense. The infinitude of text, meaning always already deferred, becomes for Waldrop an “oceanic feeling,” a disindividuation approaching the mystical: “Reaching down to the beginnings of humanity, throwing bridges between all human beings. For some, direction connection with the Godhead. For some, another name for it” (186). “Another name for it” is an appropriate epithet for the intertextual nature of Waldrop's poetics and poems, suggestive of the infinitude of reference and scope generated by her appropriation of texts by Wittgenstein and Roger Williams, founder of the Rhode Island colony, and her interrogation of these texts and her contemporary use of them.

And that use is affective. Waldrop, following Theodor Adorno and Brecht, seeks to elicit a change in the reader through that reader's response to a poem. The form of the poem must be unconventional, and in such a way that the reader cannot

help but have an unaccustomed reaction to it (174). It is assumed that the new, any change, is a constructive development. In this way, Waldrop is presenting what might be called a transformational poetics; her essay “Form and Discontent,” appropriately given at Naropa University’s Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, elaborates this specifically as a formal, affective function. Here, Waldrop celebrates geometrical, machinic forms and seeks to reverse the centuries-old presumption of inevitability worn by organic and arborescent forms and reliance on metaphor: “Metaphor as hotline to transcendence, to divine meaning, which casts the poet in the role of a special being, a priest or a prophet” (200) is to be discarded in favor of a horizontal, non-hierarchical, rhizomic growth-map. This proposal returns Waldrop to the spaces of language, its gaps, openings, margins as a means.

Waldrop’s intellectual debt to Georges Bataille, Benjamin, and Bertolt Brecht is explicit and pronounced; it is also directly evocative of critical writings she barely references, such as Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* and especially Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. These evocations are perhaps more indicative of what Waldrop is working with and working toward in her poetics: a happy syncretism or spirit of stylistic, generic, and interdisciplinary experimentation; affirmation of the possibility for real change through aesthesis; and a celebration of multiplicity before hierarchy. ✱