

**7 times x false starts /  
kineses in the still of reading  
writing in the still**

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X EPILOGUE

Are the poems good? Jade's question solders my steps to the greige square of plastic office flooring as we leave the Milton reading group, where our poet Andrew Benjamin oft holds court, rejoicing in (and yes, pontificating upon) the artistry and the ethical and existential implications of the Fall. This deep reading and philosophizing over an epic such as *Paradise Lost* every Monday is really something more. From the copy of AB's debut collection *Writing in the Still* handed me by Porphyry, corridors of sensuous, dramatic vision — fluid angels' luminous tumult, blazing armour torso torn, honey dusk on skin canopied in flowers... — telescope

outwards, from matte muted shapes of a detail of Helen Johnson's painting "The Blower" on the cover. I can't make out the blur of what the image is nor why it's important to the poems herein, or to the creation of a space or temporality in which to read them. I am not an art critic (respect, Janet Malcolm).<sup>1</sup> Nor am I an architect, nor a philosopher, nor a rhetorician.

X

I find it very strange that the poems of a debut collection should be framed by exegesis and analysis. *Still* opens with John W. Philipps' essay "The Place of Poetry: Andrew Benjamin's Writing in the Still" (also curious is the fact there is no marked separation — e.g. a blank or title page — between it and the first poem) and concludes with AB's own "Notes on Poetry". Two critical, rhetorical, didactic discussions of what (AB's) poetry *does* insulates and directs the reader and are not for me. While I'm sure they are good, interesting etc., they feel like an obstacle and I'm choosing to forego both and go straight to the poems. If this sturdy fencing and firm, guiding hand through the poesy is something you feel you need, gentle reader, then look no further than AB's article for *3:AM Magazine*, "Declaring Poetry" — it's all there. AB writes:

And yet, poetry though always within the poem, retains the question to the extent that any answer while evincing a necessary fidelity to what was asked, and it is this fidelity that carries the project of the poem, cannot escape the presence of further, though now unknown, answers.<sup>2</sup>

I need movement more than answers at this point. This didactic insularity—this enclosure of the poems, this prescriptive circuitry of an internal logic is hard to shake as I jump to the first poem "The Angel Stayed" (35). SPLAT! The visionary telescope contracts. *Caveat lector*. And now for something completely different.

X

I regret just standing there and being talked at by another pale-aled ontologist

on a pub Friday (this is the hill you're going to die on?): Red tells me a poet is by nature a phenomenologist. I don't think AB is one.

X

There is this spectral soupçon of sensuousness in *Still* from “Looking Back” — the fifth and final part of the final section, “Looking” — which is spangles of sun on rolling fish tail: “her departure could be noted in what remained. There were moments of immediacy: touch, smell, the insistence of moments” (96). Wait, could it be? Then, “Then, and by ‘then’ all he meant was at least initially, her not being there was simple. She was not there” and it's gone, back into deep. The report of sensation — “Her touch, he could still feel” — by a third-person speaker gestures towards experience in a rearview mirror. The flux and dynamics of sensorium, body, affect, memory are ekphrastic notations, exemplified in “Looking”, not counting actual ekphrastic poems such as “Rembrandt's Homer” (74).

X

I pause forever in a florescent breath and answer Jade. This book is pushing me hard, making me think a lot about poetry on a very fundamental level, almost elemental: *Still* makes me question how I recognize, engage with, understand poetry as poetry, what I value, seek, respond to, what I'm moved by, want a poem to do *for me*. Is it enough that a poem, a single strophe or image should light up the receptors that allow me to receive it as a one-off transmission of consciousness and body and affect, and not as an exegesis or flatpack instructions for meaning in ideas of things? I want flux and things, things-a-plenty. Long story short, *Still* goes right to the heart of these things, pushes me up against them to see close up what poesy, by contrast, is, in my humble abode.

X

“Labour well the Minute Particulars, attend to the Little-ones” — William Blake, *Jerusalem* (1804-1820); “no ideas but in things—” — William Carlos Williams,

*Paterson* Book I (1946)... No particulars (of any size). No things... “There is nothing to fear. There is no thing in space” — William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (1966).<sup>3</sup>

X

These *Still* poems feel like the inversion or obverse of my sensorium and body — my poetry brain — and I am lost for anything to touch and hold on to. That line from part two of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” tumbles around like a single sock in a dryer as I stand amid AB’s strophes — “in whom I am a consciousness without a body”. Check back in, touch home. Denise Levertov on “organic form” in poetry:

First there must be an experience, a sequence or constellation of perceptions of sufficient interest, felt by the poet intensely enough to demand of him their equivalence in words: he is *brought to speech*...

So — as the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there comes to him the first words of the poem: the words which are to be his way in to the poem, if there is to be a poem. The pressure of demand and the meditation on its elements culminate in a moment of vision... of the correspondence between those elements occurs.<sup>4</sup>

X

Nothing more alien to me in poetry than “starting from the idea” as AB oft insists. We are not after scientific knowledge in writing and reading poetry... Kerouac: “reason can never win out, because poetry is NOT a science”.<sup>5</sup>

X

I share with Blue and Red some of raw nerve-ending impressions of AB’s poems and what I think he might be doing, or not doing. The collection is surprisingly opposite to what I was expecting to see. Given AB’s enthusiasm for Milton and the poet’s presence in the collection, the noticeable (perhaps deliberate) lack in

these poems of the sensuousness and corporeality of Milton is most curious. Blue shares my surprise and for a point of comparison points me to a 1637 letter by Milton himself, in which he confesses to a friend that he no longer wishes to take holy orders but will seek the immortality of the poet:

For though I do not know what else God may have decreed for me, this certainly is true: He has instilled into me, if into anyone, a vehement love of the beautiful. Not so diligently... as I seek for this idea of the beautiful, as if for some glorious image, throughout all the shapes and forms of things (“for many are the shapes of things divine”); day and night I search and follow its lead eagerly as if by certain clear traces.<sup>6</sup>

Where is AB in all of this? Blue’s answer: Whereas for Milton beauty is the vehicle through which the poet arrives at truth and illumination, for AB there appears to be “a scission between truth and beauty.” Beauty, even the idea of the beautiful, is not overt — it doesn’t seep into the eyes, it has no scent, no senses.

X

I take up this Miltonic divining rod of Beauty and Truth and run with it through, obviously, Keats’ “Ode to a Grecian Urn” (1819): “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ — that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” to less obvious ports such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “A Vision of Poets” (1844): “These were poets true / Who died for Beauty, as martyrs do / For Truty — the ends being scarcely two”, but Emerson’s waving me back a bit before I reach AB.<sup>7</sup> In *Nature* (1836) Emerson writes:

Whilst thus the poet delights us by animating nature like a creator, with his own thoughts, he differs from the philosopher only herein, that the one proposes Beauty as his main end; the other Truth. But, the philosopher, not less than the poet, postpones the apparent order and relations of things to the empire of thought... The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the

aim of both.<sup>8</sup>

X

What does the absence of concrete nouns — objects, things, people — do to the temporality of a poem?

X

AB is deliberately toying with the temporality of poetics: that is, his architectural awareness of the mechanics of the poem — the arrangement of the syllable and foot to propel the line through space, perhaps a nod to Aristotle's *Poetics* — reveals a process of building, of creating an enframement of conceptual space to be subsequently populated by things, or ideas of things, then arranged in way through which the reader can then be directed. This expands and stills (suspends?) time.

X

AB has a keen sense of space, especially as it relates to the dis-/arrangement of objects within a field or (preconceived) topos. In these poems these objects are abstractions here — concepts or ideas of things. The result is a slowing down, a stilling, even suspension of temporality as it relates phenomenologically to things, objects, concrete nouns, images, details, sensorium, perception, sensuousness, corporeality, affect — actual life being lived.

X

The units which comprise the line or strophe here — syllable, foot, word (text-object) etc. — are ideas of things, conceptions, abstractions, presupposed absolutes employed and arranged in an equation or equivocation of awareness as cogitation almost separate from the idiosyncrasy and dynamics of an individual consciousness in flux.

X

Straw-clutching — or, as Nick Tsiavos the contra bassist says, in a pitch-dark room chasing after a black cat that isn't there: Mimesis — Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908) pointing to Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) — “nothing strange... an arrangement in a system to pointing” — pointing to AB's book on mimesis and the avant-garde? Language of surfaces as symbol-system reproducing/mimicking to point to the Real Thing (“there's a meaning there...” ).<sup>9</sup>

X

In Dante or Milton group I write this on my bookmark: AB says that in a poem you must have “a sense of geography and therefore movement” — i.e. there can be no kinesis in the poem without (the reader?) first having (or been given, either by poet or God) some notion, some idea or conception of the space and topography of the poem, both of the text and the world it gestures towards in its representation of it. Just a guess, and I couldn't agree less: what, a poem stubbornly refuses to accommodate the preconceptions you impose upon it so that in this prognosis you are better placed to navigate, diagnose and define it? Just walk in, look around, even if you get lost. I am completely lost in these poems, but I'm not standing still, waiting for them to turn into Whitman or Lorca or Ritsos.

X

In my negotiation of what appears to me to be AB's penchant for poetic prognosis, I neither feel I should nor see any point in attempting to read these poems diagnostically — to figure them out — and then evaluate them as art (more than philosophy) with close reading. Rather, what keeps happening is, like what happens in the poems themselves which are ever pointing to actors and objects and sensation outside the proscenium of the poem, AB's poetics keep pointing away to other ideas, practices, sensibilities of poetry which are so vastly different, that by so doing, the poems clarify what they are doing by negation.

X

Red observes that in the history of philosophy, an aesthetics text is often a philosopher's last book — for example Kant, Hegel; Blue adds Badiou — whereas in more recent times this text appears to be a collection of poems. When and why did this shift occur? By chance (again), I received in the post the third poetry collection by another late-career Melbourne philosopher, George Vassilakopoulos, *To σκοτάδι της παλάμης / The darkness of the palm* (urtext, 2024), his third collection. My resistance to doing a comparative reading with AB's *Still* lasts about five seconds, seeing as how both collections have almost opposing poetics, especially when it comes to sensuousness and the body, and the temporality of the experiential. A quick one. Take AB's poems "Warmth" (58) and "Holding" (59) for example. In "Warmth" the sensation is the space of the idea of warmth as a presence departed into which the speaker is looking, cogitating upon the possibility of a definite point of ending:

There was still a playing out.

The moment staying on.

Can there be any signs of life if the object is not there? Sensation here is the empirical fact of sensation, beyond the noun, nary an adjective:

Lights continued.

Stones warmed.

Shadows passed.

This abstraction of sensation is reinforced by the rhetorical questions that follow empirical statements, as often occurs in many of AB's poems. Further, they reinforce the speaker's pointing outside the immediate scene of the poem, which bears traces of that which is absent — a *not there*.

Were there others?

And to answer....?

What is expressed, or rather, declared, is the concept or idea of the empirical fact of a perception, sensation, experience from which the speaker is always separate, detached — statements of fact reinforced by the period at the end of almost every strophe in the poem:

Seeing the sun on a stone.

Warming seen.

Remaining untouched

caught in the continuity of distancing.

Seeing within separation.

To even speak of a speaker of the poem here seems as the voice is so separate from the facts it imparts that the fact of the seeing, and the words themselves, even belonging to a who or a what is ambiguous.

In stark contrast, the sparse, haiku-like poems of Vassilakopoulos (always a curious form in the Greek language — in Seferis, for example) — with each leaf containing a single poem, drips with sensuousness and bespeaks of communion of body and sensorium:

Πριν σμίξουμε σώματα

Before we merge bodies

Οι παλάμες

Palms

Τα τυλίγουνε

Enwrap them into a

Κενό

Space

Με το κενό μας υφαίνουν

With our space are woven

Μανδύες το καινού

Cloaks of the new

Μανδύες

Cloaks

Λικνιζόμαστε

We rock

Space here is a space-between of mutual anticipation, of total presence, of imminent merging, not one of separateness, disengagement, absence. In “Holding” there is no sense of touch but rather a retaining of an idea of a hand “grasping”:

What of the holding?

The hand reaching across

taking the moment. Fingers slipped through

grasping

To grasp, here, to hold, is to retain, contain and understand a thought or idea. What is reached for is elusive, at once “slipped” (slippage?) and “grasping”. In G. Vas, by contrast, touch is also speech, language — finger and tongue-tip are one in the face (or body) of silence

Τα δαχτυλα μου

My fingertips

Γλωσσάρια στο κορμί σου

Glossaries upon your body

## X

Notes on a train stuck between stations: Conception as opposed to (phenomenological) perception — how something (a thing, noun, object, topos) is to be conceived, thought of, constructed to be its (ideal, ultimate, highest — Absolute) self, form, state — is it actually here to be experienced, felt, engaged by a sensorium-in-flux, affect, imagination (possibility), memory transposed onto perception (including the body — eye, ear, touch, breath, voice, speech — word) — kinesis in all directions of space... AB must be a Platonist, right? — the Idea of the thing, not the thing in representation/symbolic order, nor (Heaven forefend!) as it is experienced, as it really is in-real-time and thus be transmitted. What. Does this make AB a Lacanian? Maybe? Lacanian poetics: The poetics of keeping from drowning or rejoicing in a symbolic order in order to point towards if not to grasp at the Real deal of an object or place, a face, or a soft red-purple-orange-blue dapple-lick of light from eyelid onto eyeball in a blink. If we are looking for how poetry declares itself here (ideas preceding things), perhaps the verso are the particularities of how a poem transmits or speaks the poet's reaching, sans preconceptions or prejudices wielded like a dowser's wand as they attempt to reveal, map and navigate a space or a topos without leaving any footprints, without any sign of life.

## X ENTER HERR HEIDEGGER

Recognising my desperation for a way into this house that AB has built with such obvious care and love, Blue recommends a critical anthology *Philosophy and Poetry*.<sup>10</sup> Thank God. Not a week has gone by without me throwing my arms up in defeat. By sheer chance I open to the second essay, which is on Heidegger, which seems to resonate with AB. According to Abbeele, Heidegger's work is the point where philosophy returns to and becomes reconciled with poetry following Plato's expulsion of the poets from the Republic. For Abbeele, the relation

between poetry and philosophy cannot be reduced “to the mere expression of the difference between form and content, appearance and being”, which belong to the very principle of metaphysics which, since Plato, seeks an absolute, a truth or meaning which lies behind or beyond “mere phenomena of appearance.”<sup>11</sup> And while, for Abbeele, such “presentational and representational forms in which philosophy is written should not divert us from the critical discussion of the concepts proposed”, this, in Heidegger’s appreciation of poetry, “should not be understood as a mere ‘reversal’ of the representational paradigm that would maintain the fundamental structure of metaphysics.”<sup>12</sup> Rather, “the question of poetry”, in Heidegger’s case is, for Abbeele, “inextricably bound with the related question of his ‘turn’ (*die Kehre*) from the earlier ‘fundamental ontology’ of *Being and Time*... to the later work characterized by a more adventurous manner of ‘thinking’ that strives to overcome the metaphysical forgetting of Being by opening onto the event of its disclosure or *aletheia*.”<sup>13</sup> Reading AB’s poems strophe by strophe might feel a lifetime away in this language if not for words like origin, metaphysical, mere phenomena of appearance, event, disclosure, ἀλήθεια (to me — non-philosopher — clear/simple truth told, more than Absolute Truth).

X

Flying blind, I feel my way feel my way. Does this “*Kehre*” have anything to do with that in Heidegger’s *Die Technik und die Kehre*? This “*Technik*” sticks my waxy fingertips on page, invokes τέχνη (art, the action or event of artistry), τεχνική (method or technique), also τέκνον (offspring or descendent). The event of the production of art announcing itself? I’ve only read *Being and Nothingness* right through, so this is new.

X

There is also an essay, “The Question of Technology” (“*Die Frage nach der Technik*”) from sometime postwar. There’s that word again. There must be an interrelation between τέχνη (*techne*), τεχνική (*technike*) and ποίηση (*poieses*: a

making, manipulation, construction), ποίημα (*poiema*: made thing, construct, object).

X

More blind luck. As I search in the stacks for Heidegger's *The Event* (I'm sensing there is something here and in AB about the poem as an event/space — event space), *Poetry, Language, Truth* (1971), a collection of H's essays literally falls off the shelf, I kid you not, face down on the first section, "The Thinker as Poet" (this sounds so made up but it's as true as my own confusion).<sup>14</sup> Heidegger wrote poetry? Who knew... There is an immediately striking resonance between the poetry of H and AB, even down to their deployment not just of rhetorical questioning but the ellipsis ("...") — this has to be a deliberate dialogue.

We are too late for the gods and too

early for Being. Being's poem,

just begun, is man.

To head toward a star — this only.

To think is to confine yourself to a

single thought that one day stands

still like a star in the world's sky.<sup>15</sup>

Confining yourself to a single thought that stands still — this *has* to be IT.

X

I bump into Porphyry at the photocopier, rant at him about AB, possible Talmudic

approach of questionings — multiplicities of perpetuating inquiry/scrutiny — the dialogue between metaphysical/Divine conception vs. *poiesis*/making of idea/ thinking, expansion/stilling of (poetic) temporality, and “I’ve finally got it! — AB’s book is a paean to Heidegger and poetic thought!” “Yes!” he exclaims with characteristic double-point and informs me of a Heidegger symposium the next day which AB himself has organised. Done.

X

[Here with my copies of *Still* and *Poetry, Language, Thought*, hoping something happens.] Notes from ACU Heidegger Workshop 2024, Wed 12 June: Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology” — New Readings: An “enframing”; an absolute access to the absolute real (Real?); objects in the life frame and those outside it... Heidegger: “The piety of thought”... Bacon: ‘putting Nature to the question’ — Kant — Heid.... H: The question concerning technology — the role of poetry to facilitate this; the Greek etymologies of *technè* (tek-nay) — τέχνη (I knew it!)... H: *Gestell* (ghesh-tell) “bringing forth” — relate w/ “poiesis”... Can the “saving power” of art save us? ... 1st vol. of H’s Nietzsche lectures — the will to power as art (?... The rupturing of time — primordial or technological/clock time — of the *Event* (of art)... H: “Technology” essay ca. 1949 onwards (delivered 1955) — postwar sociocultural and political context (Eur.-U.S.), e.g. poetics as instrument of inquiry/negotiating existential climate (Note. “The Thinker as Poet” ca. 1947, published. 1954?)... AB on H: Poetry is itself the topology of Being — both a rupture and return to language; The inheritance of language; The place of *poiesis* is always a Place; The Heideggerian *event*... Porphyry on H und poetry: H is not a poet but is guided by poetry towards something(/somewhere poetry can give; asks “how do poets temporalise?”; Poetry as a model for Heideggerian thought — you are lead through the dark forest of language until you no longer know where you are. All of the poets of modernity are obsessed/lead by classical poets: a model for where poetry might lead/points to... Thinking machinations on/ for the poetry of thought. [Ambergold’s paper on “the scene” as event (the last of the day) seems to be angrying up the blood of a few unyielding Heideggerians

with his brazen talk of literature as (shock horror) art and artistry (τέχνη/*techne*) — a space/*place* in which to unfold scenes of human drama beyond the staging of ideas and thinking. One white-haired man (I don't know his name) seems to take an inordinate amount of umbridge this, so I quietly exit this proscenium.]

X

Red points out something fundamental which I've completely ignored: Is it even possible to advance an aesthetic judgement of a poem presented within the philosophical framework of AB's collection: the "I" of poetry and that of philosophy are not the same, and the declarative ego makes for awkward movement between the two.... In "Seminar XI" Lacan enigmatically asserts, "I am a poem, not a poet".<sup>16</sup> Could it be that AB's "I" and "he" in *Still* is a *poiema*? How is the philosophical or poetic ego "made"? Pub Lacanians, don't fail me now.

## X PROLOGUE

*Writing in the Still* is the yellow fog rubbing its back upon the window-panes of most of the poetry I've been reading this year, oftentimes peering, sometimes creeping in. I keep knocking into it, tripping over it constantly, rubbing up against its poems, against the grain of its ideas (about ideas) about language arranging and declaring things, perception, sensation, affect, action, memory, et al. — what and why poets write. The abstracting insularity of AB's poetics — the deliberate stiling of versification to convey if not perform a kinetics of cogitation (rhetorical "mind breaths"?), the laconic disengagement of the speaker within the spartan domain of the *poiema*, stands still, looking to transmit, declare, pronounce the looking more than the seeing, the idiosyncrasies of the kinesis of a consciousness, its poetics and language. The result has been a dialogue, often a frustration-fueled argument, shouted between two far flung galaxies of poesy, voice at times so hoarse, so exhausted and defeated, but ever glad for looking at poetry this other way, wrestling with and pushed by it: looking at a philosopher-reader of poetry exercising his looking at poetry from the outside-in and, in that stasis and

quietude of recognition, formulation, construction, writing it from that inside, outward — to question, to prompt, to provoke you to recognize, and explain, and declare yourself as a poem, if you were a poem.

## NOTES

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2. Andrew Benjamin. "Declaring Poetry." *3:AM Magazine*. 23 July, 2018.  
[www.3ammagazine.com/3am/declaring-poetry/](http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/declaring-poetry/). Accessed: 2 April, 2024. There is also AB's book
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4. Denise Levertov. "Some Notes on Organic Form." 1965; *New & Selected Essays*. New Directions, 1992, p. 68.
5. Jack Kerouac. "Statements on Poetics." *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*. Edited by Donald M. Allen. Grove Press, 1960; 1998, p. 414.
6. John Milton. "Letter 8, To Charles Diodati, 1637." *Complete Prose Works of John Milton: Volume I, 1623-1642*. Edited by Don M. Wolfe. Yale University Press, 1953, pp. 326-327.
7. John Keats. "Ode to a Grecian Urn." *The Portable Romantic Reader*. Penguin, 1950, p. 387; Elizabeth Barrett Browning. "A Vision of the Poets." *The Complete Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Houghton Mifflin, 1900, p. 127.
8. Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Nature." *The Major Prose*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 58.
9. Wilhelm Worringer. *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, 1908. Translated by Michael Bullock. Elephant Paperbacks, 1997; Stein, Gertrude. *Tender Buttons*, 1914; Sun & Moon Press, 1991, p. 9; Andrew Benjamin. *Art, Mimesis, and the Avant-Garde: Aspects of a Philosophy of Difference*. London: Routledge, 1991.
10. Ranjan Ghosh (ed.). *Philosophy and Poetry: Continental Perspectives*. Columbia University Press, 2019.
11. George van den Abbeele. "As the World Turns: Heidegger and the Origin of Poetry." Ghosh (ed.), p. 23.
12. Ibid.
13. Abbelle, pp. 23-24.
14. Martin Heidegger. *The Event*. Translated by Richard Rojcewicz. Indiana University Press, 2013; "The Thinker as Poet." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter, 1971, pp. 1-14.
15. Heidegger. "The Thinker as Poet", p. 4.
16. Lacan quoted in Jean Michel Rabaté. "'I Am a Poem, Not a Poet': Jacques Lacan's Philosophy of Poetry." Ghosh (ed.), 97.