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Corina Copp

ATARAXIA: Freedom from Disturbance

On the work of Jean Day

First off, I'd like to say that this is not quite an academic paper; I'd rather like to throw it in the pile of what Buffalo poet Robert Dewhurst calls "affective" or "affectionate writing" in talking about his journal *Wild Orchids*,¹ which collects essays of this sort (the sort being those written in hopes of connecting the author and her subject simply *because of* sincere care, if I can speak for him); and the journal is a marvelous and sort-of devotional thing to behold, the first issue focusing solely on Herman Melville and the most recent on Hannah Weiner.

To continue to mention others, I encountered the work of Jean Day through our mutual friend Miles Champion, a British poet and current New Yorker who has long been an admirer of Day's work. Miles suggested I read Day's 1985 book *Flat Birds*—published by GAZ in San Francisco in an edition of 350 copies—at a time, many years ago, when I felt rather despairing over the contemporary poetry scene. Though a kick out of despair over a world you cannot help but inhabit can actually be endearing, and I'm speaking more to the salaciousness of wanting to hear about each other's poetic black beasts. "But I hate poetry" she said retreating / from the broad overlook on a dreamed-up theater.² Enthusiasm is, on the other hand, actually more affinitive—yet oddly almost private. Or, as Day puts it in the

1 Robert Dewhurst and Sean Reynolds (eds), *Wild Orchids* (Buffalo, NY: State University of New York). See: wildorchids.endingthealphabet.org

2 Jean Day, *Enthusiasm: Odes & Otium* (New York, NY and Boston, MA: Adventures in Poetry, 2006), p. 109.

first line of the poem ‘Riot in Axiom’ from her book *Enthusiasm: Odes & Otium*, “Life is a ball I begin *e pluribus* / on a bus” (p. 21). Rather than ‘out of many, one’ (*e pluribus unum*), as the backside of a US coin might have it, national spirit has turned into lone commuter fact, with optimism.

If I might take the ‘ball’ even further from its *pluribus*, away from its party (as a primary meaning of ‘ball’ is, surely, ‘having a ball’), to be left in midair as a word that might hang in and suddenly return: this ball is a recurring, merry thing that represents, for me, the feeling that Day’s work is atomic. It is physical stuff that can look like notation or sketches but will soon enough pitch its muscularity, as Ron Silliman has called it in his review of *Enthusiasm*,³ at your head. But the ball is mentioned in formal variancy throughout her many books—*Linear C*, *Flat Birds*, *The Young Recruit*, *The I and the You*, and *The Literal World*—as, for instance: a black dot (that might be a bird), a snowball, a socket, a pair of eyes, coins, heads, mouths, oysters, or, in her new manuscript *Daydream*, “balloons dropped on men toasting”, “Roll along O sick moon”, “an arterial spot”, and so on in humorous ‘o’ assonance.

The ball acts not only as a devotional thing to follow as if at a sing-along, or as something thrown at you, but also as an inevitable dawning. The sun, a ball, being new, every day. The shapes and lines and impressions of her work that jut out then, or so often dangle or carefully hinge, both lob and dawn. ‘Lob’ is, per the dictionary, ‘a soft high-arching shot, throw, or kick’, but acts in Day’s work as an element of surprise, countering a sincere eventuality, so that *lobbing* and *dawning* are two points (not oppositional) from which a self-made, self-acknowledged imaginative ethics extends.

But again, the lobbing and dawning are not two extremes—they work in consort. Lobbing becomes, also in ‘Riot in Axiom’, ‘lobbing’:

³ Ron Silliman, 9/27/2009 blog post. Available at ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2007/09/my-general-reading-style-is-to-be-in.html [accessed 12 April 2011].

Lightning is lobed
in an all-night grotto
from which we eventually rain
 squinting homely at the sun
 (anomaly on a chain)
at the end of which is a shot

or

Whistles blow WE ARE NOT
 bondmen on the take
AFRAID of Sensational Old Generals

(*Enthusiasm*, p. 21)

In this first bit, we actively “eventually rain” but someone or something else is doing the *lobing* of lightning in the grotto—a Zeus figure with striking intent? Of course “lobed” is also adjectival here, but it seems to me just as verbal/active even if so—if lightning is at all occipital, then I feel pretty connected. Regardless, this is physical stuff being metaphorically atomized, the sun an “anomaly on a chain” (and we can envision it there, a terminus for the line of planets, dazzling as an irruption). We, readers as well as citizens of a polis, are doing the raining, assuming a natural power or perhaps just a basic tendency to stream out of a club (importantly, *into the street*) at the end of the night. I imagine when reading this stanza a crowd of people in alignment, made small and squinting after a rain shower by the sudden morning sun that looks down from its superior vantage point. And in due course, “at the end of which is a shot”, we are interrupted, frozen, and possibly captured. “Politics interrupt life,” wrote Tom Mandel in *The Grand Piano* no. 2.⁴ And so, Day continues, “or / Whistles blow WE ARE NOT / bondmen on the take / AFRAID of Sensational Old Generals”. The tension between unexpected bolts of lightning and the unwitting rise of a sun eases through a literal capitalizing,

4 Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Tom Mandel, Ted Pearson, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman & Barrett Watten, *The Grand Piano, An Experiment in Collective Autobiography, San Francisco 1975–1980*, 10 vols (Detroit: Mode A, 2007), vol. 2.

“WE ARE NOT” and “AFRAID” being emphatically here all uppercase, while “Sensational Old Generals” is initial-capped, making it either the title of an early American parlor-room play or a kind of Dickinsonian snake in the grass. Day furthers this idea in the next stanza, where she writes:

O then seize me
parity
I will be small among the small, a little
little fellow
about to walk the line lightly
disappearing among the avenues
behind a smoky line of firs
facing backward

(*Enthusiasm*, p. 22)

Day does “walk the line lightly”, in fact, and not merely stylistically, though her precision of language is balanced both against this subject of feeling surveilled and with generosity for her reader. It’s a participatory space. But “in walking the line lightly”, allowing her speaker here to disappear, Day actually frees up the relational landscape, eclipses singular understanding of meaning (“facing backward”), and provides her reader with belief that she, or you, will return. “I myself am lyric but / the problem is / are words / any more / than what will happen?” Day writes in *The Literal World*.⁵ Like anything, except for scary products, we will perish eventually. But words are in suspense, waiting to be snagged; and when placed on the page, a physical act, they wait for relation, or the impropriety of appropriation. But “Waiting may be a form of praise”, writes Day in her newer collection, *Daydream*.⁶

The anxiety of suspension is met with the event of, albeit irregular, becoming. Writes Day in the prologue to *The Literal World*: “But what

⁵ *The Literal World* (Berkeley, CA: Atelos, 1998).

⁶ *Daydream* (unpublished manuscript). Also see *DAYDREAM (The Eponym)*, Belladonna* pamphlet #114.

makes any word relevant is its ability to go and come back (“The eager note on my door said “Call me”,), to be a ‘thing about to happen to anyone’, its unavoidable contradictions basking in the light of taboo.” But this eventuality is a bettering of the American future, feathering out as a moment of tranquility—or *ataraxia*, freedom from disruption. In fact, I’d say it’s this certain repose that seems more and more prevalent in Day’s newer work, such as that in *Daydream*. The repose is evident in the poetry’s canter, its comedy, and its contemporaneity. Living in the world partly means facing its sonics meeting its “fingerlettes”, to use a term from Barbara Guest. Guest wrote of Osip Mandelstam: “[He] once wrote of sound spilling into fingers. That could be the noise of a poem when it meets the ecstasy of recognition.”⁷

Repose is also evident in Jean Day’s understanding of what I see in her work as an aspect of the irreparable. As Giorgio Agamben suggests, “The Irreparable is that things are just as they are, in this or that mode, consigned without remedy to their way of being.”⁸ He continues, “According to Spinoza the two forms of the irreparable, confidence or safety (*securitas*) and despair (*desperatio*), are identical from this point of view.” With regard to Day, this kind of identification of opposite states of being seems due less to consignment and more to a Lucretius-like interest in the natural order of things; and moreover, an interest in the moments when the political and the pastoral might rally. Consider this poem, part of a series called ‘Romantic Fragments’ within the section ‘Otium’ in *Enthusiasm*:

with neat disguises. Lift the eye

away from its perspective
squandering its interior in a mass

7 Barbara Guest, *Forces of Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: Kelsey St. Press, 2003), p. 23.

8 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, translated by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), ‘Appendix: The Irreparable’ (a response to Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, section 9; and proposition 6.44 of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*).

of tentacular sentences and soon enough
another war—excuse me, “action”—will arrive in a waver (cough)
between travelogue and communiqué: tree farm
or windbreak? Just the kind of diversion you’d expect
armed to the trees
with teeth. These utopian proposals
having foundered on a final orifice
for whom we’re always the last drop; nothing in the world
(*Enthusiasm*, p. 60)

Guest again: “Ideally a poem will be both mysterious (*incunabula*, driftwood of the unconscious) and organic (secular) at the same time. If the tension becomes irregular, like a heartbeat, then a series of questions enters the poem. What is now happening?”⁹ Well, we are “armed to the trees / with teeth”. The idiom “armed to the teeth” is switched almost imperceptibly. If I’m armed to the trees with teeth, I feel I have meat behind my ideas, but what reader isn’t susceptible to Romantic versatility? And so, “founded” is an encompassing choice here. Being so sonically close to “floundered”, of course, it signifies that our “utopian proposals” revel in having been found, being foundlings, having been founded, having found, and ultimately renewing the verb: “founded on a final orifice / for whom we’re always the last drop; nothing in the world”. Really, what could succeed “nothing in the world” here? The phrase is started by a semicolon and lifts out like a limb (branch). Particular feeling makes way for vastness in this poem, ultimately distinguishing its linguistic preoccupations from its psychic space.

This shift only underscores the fact that, in Day’s work, we are constantly reminded of *being numerous*—this is less a “nostalgia for the infinite”, in Guest’s terms for the unwieldy imagination, but an accomplishment of achieving a singularity of story in a world fairly duplicitous and reflective. On one side of things rests, say, a best word like “gemstone”; on another, a sensibility comprehensible through co-optation (lexical or otherwise). All complicit. However, this state of

9 Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 20.

being numerous—“Life is a ball I begin *e pluribus*”—is also a reminder that we ourselves, in loving ourselves who love others, are objects of love, and thus objectified (sort of gladly); and that the love, for the entire series ‘Romantic Fragments’, is the fact of sources. Mary Shelley, Susan Stewart, Merleau-Ponty, Beckett, Beckett quoting Céline, Rosalind Krauss, Preston Sturges, Whitman, Hölderlin, Andrew Marvell, William Kentridge, Paul Klee, Eva Hesse—and so on into greatness and obscurity and musical and critical all—receive their own annotated bibliography near the close of the book, with line after line after article after quotation of use-value. This ‘Sources’ section has a *de facto* artistic resonance: “Friends have eyes and ears, but their flashes of insight are not equal. Some are like ponds that reach only to the mouth or shoulder; others are like ponds that one could bathe in”; *Rig Veda* 10.71, 62. ‘At night all cows are black’; Sartre, paraphrasing Hegel’s denunciation of Schelling’s conception of absolute knowledge, quoted in Clément, *Syncope*, 35... ‘Everyday life, to Pasternak, is like the earth to a footstep: a moment’s restraint and a pulling away’; *Art in the Light of Conscience*, 29.” And so on it dutifully sets out. Day is not the only working poet to know better than to mistake art for labor, but to labor anyhow in her art *and* cite her reading. Yet nonetheless, this sourcing is where the joy is, in such a state of irreparability. It is a sort of co-authoring, experienced by someone, contradictorily, producing the poem alone. And so I return to the word ‘enthusiasm’, which I now also understand as an emphatic gratitude for literary and cultural inheritance, a broad repetition that formally recontextualizes. Though the poems in *Enthusiasm* don’t do much mothering (there are other Day texts for that), they are like crickets in a minefield (those reproduce too), positively charged:

to discourage the world from concerning itself

with us. The game begins with a verb, to *bear witness* or swoon so the little boat that bobs
 on a postindustrial lake
 will always know its mother: FARM
 HORN MOB PASTE (NOT

BE). She is an example
of the circle round the sun when it
becomes a god and what a wit
miles from the nearest dot or ammo cache then
having earned hard scrabble

(*Enthusiasm*, p. 63)

So this inclusion of other writers seems an attempt at forging new perceptions but also returns to the issue of authorship and ownership of language. This question of wresting control from those invisibly (or visibly) governing or co-opting language was sought by Day late in the prologue to *The Literal World*: “But whatever right or ‘vocational criticality’ (imagination) I’ve brought to them, words are the world’s, not mine. (I often imagine myself in the negative space between manifestoes, avidly recycling.) If, on the other hand, information brokers are intent on burying us admitted industrialists in product, must we survive on a diet of the ordinary? Haven’t we already established that any word is an exaggeration?”

Conversely, the concept reminds me of the Austrian poet Ilse Aichinger (1921–), who, struggling similarly with poetics of resistance, wrote in her prose poem ‘Bad Words’: “I now no longer use better words.” As poet Uljana Wolf writes on Aichinger: “All systems of meaning and referring are being rejected: ‘No one can demand that I make connections as long as they’re avoidable.’”¹⁰ Wolf on Aichinger leads me to confess my own anxiety of influence—my impulse to write about Jean Day—“what a wit / miles from the nearest dot”. Day seems to acknowledge that her reader might flit between identification with an object (follow the ball), and with its author on some unregistered personal level, *and* as a person who makes. Yet the reader is thusly more responsive to belief (“real presence” as George Steiner might have it), as Day pulls from determinate systems like science, theology, etymology, American myth

¹⁰ Uljana Wolf, ‘A Werldly Country: Ilse Aichinger’s Prose Poems’, Corina Copp (ed.), *The Poetry Project Newsletter* (New York: Feb./Mar. 2010), No. 222.: poetryproject.org/publications/newsletter

proliferation, and so on in order to investigate, at times, a rhetoric of preaching. This was most pointedly done in her book *The Literal World*, where Day wrote a series of “secular sermons” in order to think about her relationship to that very traditional American form, but it seems a base for much of the newer poetry as well. Formally, Day *rescues* with her choices: utilizing her incredible ear, she gives her attention to both the guiding and consumption of echo, to abrupt propertizing of things or downright CAPITAL REGISTER or acceptably distant incursions in the line, to new thoughts beginning in the middle, and enjambment as swift and gentle as folding a pillowcase. But few of these choices aim to remain simply domestic movements—illogic and unreality take precedence at times, at other times plainness. The faith shared by the words returning, bouncing or limited or no, is addictive. It is a generous encouragement, yet also belongs solely to Day and whoever her ‘you’ might be at the moment. As she writes in *Daydream*:

Not that my abstinence has helped in any way
I try not to want
what you want—
a sleep not mine
but the kind you pay for
empty of black but full of green
as at a bend in the road where the hill is a pillow
in our separate synchronized
accounts The hills by the way
have eyes filled
with images of dales whose
resident birds pontificate
on a great many topics As always

(excerpted from *Day* 23.4)

Author Info

Corina Copp's recent work can be found soon or now in *Triple Canopy*, *Cannot Exist*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Wild Orchids*, *ON Contemporary Practice*, *Antennae*, *Fence*, and other small journals. She is the author of a few chapbooks, with new ones forthcoming very soon from Ugly Duckling Presse, minutes BOOKS, and Trafficker. Her plays include *Tell No One* (SPT Poets Theater Festival, Jan. 2011/Invisible Dog, July 2011); *WALTZ* (CSC/E. 13th St. Theater, July 2010), and *A Week of Kindness* (Ontological Incubator/Brick, 2008). She is the most recent editor of *The Poetry Project Newsletter* (2009–2011), and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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