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Barrett Watten: "Poethics" And Historiography¹

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In his preface to *Il formaggio e i vermi*,² historian Carlo Ginzburg argues the importance of witnessing in the writing of history. As he takes up Bertolt Brecht's proletarian reader's question ("Who built Thebes of the Seven Gates?"), he also lays emphasis on the unsaid and unsayable underlying each and every historian's narrative: how does one deal with the resistance to investigation and objective account which does not only stem from ideological choices and the historiographer's decisions but is the direct consequence of irretrievable or suppressed sources? If one is to integrate the amount of uncertainty and ignorance which the very idea of so many anonymous agents and witnesses of history generates, the foundations of historiography are at least shaken under the "weight" of a question that has no answer. And this scientific question has ramifications beyond the reevaluation of historical discourse: it reaches out to our daily survival in history and to ethical questions about the notion of truth in history as well as reliability among witnesses and historiographers.

From *Progress, Under Erasure*, to *Bad History*, Barrett Watten consistently constructs a common field of action for poetry and history, leading one to think about the writing of the poem in terms of historiography and repeatedly questioning the gray zones of unaccountability: history becomes a contextual, political and ethical form of discourse which cannot do without a serious examination of its methods and its aims. A reading of these texts allows us to propose approaches to Watten's work

insofar as it articulates the issues of witnessing and anonymity. The issues it raises coincide with the impulse that makes Joan Retallack coin the word “poethics” in the title of her eponymous essay, “The Poethical Wager”: a willingness to take risks, to engage with otherness, unintelligibility, and uncertainty, the “poethical wager” implies taking responsibility in the world and proposing alternatives to the reluctance to commit that is often associated with the so-called postmodern aesthetics. Although witnessing and recounting have their aporias, often expressed in terms of the unknowable and the unnamable, there emerges a necessity to proceed with them, instead of refraining from them: for a number of contemporary poets this is the only possible ground for continued, or recovered, relevance. These interrogations about relevance are at the core of Barrett Watten’s work, and entail constant interaction with theoretical thinking. As the conditions and consequences of writing are constantly questioned, the theoretical movement unfolds in complementary ways through the essays and the poems. It is thus one of the aims of this presentation to show how Watten’s poetical thinking about history, especially in the 1998 post-Gulf-War book entitled *Bad History*, is enlightened by a close analysis of his essays on Gertrude Stein, and Kathy Acker, and of his review of Sherman Paul’s critical work.

Thus, in his article for *Modernism/Modernity*, Barrett Watten offer a reading of Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* as an “epic of subjectivation” (1998 [1], 95): countering the formalist reading which Stein herself promoted—according to which the text would be the unfolding of iterated attempts at beginning highlighting the stylistic feat of Stein’s own patterns of repetition—, Watten opts for an interpretation in which the text works out “a poetics of identity as a construction” (1998 [1], 96). In his reading of the Oedipal episode (a son wins over his desire to kill his father, thus reenacting the similar act of self-control that prevented his father from killing his own father), Watten underlines the process through which personal experience, especially when traumatic, can be integrated to collective experience through the double narrativizations performed by trauma narrative and by historical narrative:

Such “heroic” repetition makes a narrative of collective destiny out of a retrospectively fantasized, founding trauma. Stein’s anecdote proposes itself as a skeleton key to the authorizing myth of patriarchy, presenting, in miniature the repetition compulsion of its fantasized first principles. (1998 [1], 97)

However, this reading, as Watten demonstrates, does not account for the “complicated matrix” (1998 [1], 99), which is constituted through the discarding of the linear simplicity of lineage in favor of an envisioning of the subject’s construction in terms of social and familial networks. This abandonment of linearity for the ramifications of the network is not just a change in our view of the individual’s construction, proposed by Stein at the onset of *The Making of Americans*, it also corresponds to a more general evolution in the ways history can be thought about. Chronology and its teleological implications as projections of history are cast aside along with linearity, whereas the notion of a network entails the possibility of a plurality of actualizations of history through the plurality of narratives that recount its events in the very terms of their present making: in “the present continuous,” to take up Stein’s words. In Watten’s own *Bad History*, the unfolding of the text refuses to follow chronological linearity as the dates at the bottom of the pages move from 1991 back to 1990, then on to 1993 and 1994. Textual linearity follows what could be interpreted as the meanderings of remembrance, underlining the difference which separates the theoretical notion of memory from its practical actualizations. Or this order could be arbitrary—of the poet’s choosing for reasons unknown and unknowable to us: the reasons, as a matter of fact, do not matter and are of no interest to the recognition of the arbitrariness and distorting potentialities of a process that is unavoidable. The very piecing together and narrativizing that remembrance implies prevents any transitive move from memory to history, and constructs “history” as “bad,” forever plagued with error and approximation.

What such an evaluation of history produces, when expanding out of the formal and willfully abstracted realms of the literary and effectively “bleeding into history” (Watten 2006, 61), can be seen as a radical negativity, which Watten

underlines in his analysis of Michel Foucault's treatment of Pierre Rivière's confession as it "reaches the final instant in which the work locates its truth in the world at the limit of its unaccountability" (2006, 62). When this negativity is simply understood as the negation of all positivity—i.e. of all historical positives—, it inexorably leads to an aporetic moment in which pervasive doubt affects all discourses. The very notion of truth is to be cancelled in the proliferations of the signs of subjectivities at work autonomously, simultaneously and possibly contradictorily. In his essay on the work of Kathy Acker, Watten offers an alternative, which is also an entry-point into his own poetry. The aim is not so much, to return to Foucault and Rivière, to question the truthfulness of certain discourses but to become aware of the interaction between the methods of documentation and the construction of discourse. There are lacunae that must not be forcefully filled in since their very presence, in all its negativity, guarantees the continuation of discourse:

As long as such gaps between the discursive elements remain open, we are in the domain of construction and may avoid the false positives of history; this is how genealogy keeps the inaccessible moment of event open through a play of negativity that at the same time constitutes discourse and judgment. (Watten 2006, 63)

But, to pursue this in Watten's acknowledgment,

It is legitimate to question here the nature of this avoidance: if we refuse all positivity (of personal identity or event), on what possible basis can we make a judgment or write a narrative? (2006, 63)

Taking up the example of Acker's novels, Watten works out the notion of discourses that would not propose unified narratives informed by the dominant ethical positives but allow for the "possibility that resulting identity is a disrupted construction" (2006, 70): "it is not simply that identity is an other; identity is an impossible historical event of coincidence and undoing" (2006, 71).

The "bad event" which happens to the "I" of *Bad History* possesses the same quality of a "disturbance of identity occasioned by a historical event":

A bad event happened to me, but its having occurred became event more complicated in my thinking about it. Even if this event had happened only to me, it was only recently made available for retrospection; it had to be proved as taking place in every other event. (Watten 1998 [2], 5)

And what the text performs has a lot in common with what Watten sees as Acker's obstinate writing of the event:

In the event, identity is dissociated and revealed; Acker continues to write the event. More precisely, Acker continues to look at writing as the dissolution of an event within a structure that can heal it. Her continued desire for the dissolution of identity--of literary coherence, a stable canon of works, of a consistent address--begins here, with the trauma of an event in which identity could only be seen as an interruption of history. (Watten 2006, 73)

The "I" of the first section of *Bad History*, a section numbered one in Roman figures, thus also entitled "I," tries to return to the primary traumatic event but it is not just its identity that is dissolved: the event is also missing. Thus, to give one possible reading, history has turned "bad," because it has become conceivable that it could be subtracted altogether from attention, that it could become detached from the actuality of events. Thus writing history could not be negated only through the questioning of its accountability to events, but by the very possibility of an absence of events. The traumatic event would then be, provocatively, the recognition of this subtraction of event, of this irretrievable loss. This is what Watten implies as he elaborates immediately after the passage I just quoted: "after the war" triggers the question "which war," so that many losses of the event get inscribed into the poem.

In both the study of Stein and the commentary on Acker, Watten elaborates from his core preoccupations with the individual psyche in its construction by and of historical events. The passage from the personal to the collective is achieved through a movement of extension and expansion, which makes the issues of poetics and those of historiography coincide. One must write on, not only despite the questions and the aporias, but because of them, in repeated attempts to defeat them first by recognizing

them, then, in a Wittgensteinian manner, by working to push back the limits they have set. One of the consequences of this coincidence between the objectives of poetry according to Watten and historiography is the question he asks as he analyzes the presupposes of Sherman Paul's mode of criticism in *The Lost America of Love*: "what if crisis is outward and historical, as well as a negotiation of self with the object?" (Watten 2000, 296). Characteristically, Watten uses a question to counter what he sees as a one-way reading of poetry as the actualization of intention, and as a critical investigation that limits itself to the elucidation of this intention through the production of mimetic texts. And characteristically the question is formulated not as an alternative ("either...or...") but as a coincidence: "as well as": "what if crisis is outward and historical, as well as a negotiation of self with the object?" (Watten 2000, 296).

Intention exists, and Watten will not deny it, but, in his own words, "seeing poetry [through Paul's readings] as an unfolding of intention within the larger matrix of tradition predicts the turn to language to be taken up by poets in the next generation" (Watten 2000, 285). In other words from *Bad History* (1998 [2], 35): "And so indeed have we come to see ourselves predicted as the outcome of our incommensurable acts." Above all, this leads to a self-defeating investigation of events that cannot be documented: intention if it ever crystallizes is shifting; in the analysis of Paul's quest for intention, intention comes to stand for the event that undeniably happened, since, to quote from *Bad History*, "it has been proved as taking place in every other event" (1998 [2], 5), but can only be assessed indirectly, through the mediation of its traces. The event becomes the dark matter of history, and of the poem, a necessary assumption "as well as" an untouchable reality. In Watten's work, to "frame" "bad history," one must take the risk of a "return to a poetics grounded in history, rather than a myth-based or language-centered 'regularity in dispersion,' as the prime mover for any discursive formation of 'literature' that underwrites our claims to literary value. This is precisely the genealogy of 'bad history' in the New Americans' poetics of love" (Watten 2000, 313). Symptomatically, the rejection of a type of criticism that does not attempt to

recontextualize the poem but rather imitates its form and invents its history—the disconnectedness of some texts in Watten’s examples, or the narrative quality of others as in Paul’s *So to Speak: Re-reading David Antin*—calls forth the title of Barrett Watten’s own book, *Bad History*.

One way of outlining the similarity would be the interpretation of Philip Metres as he focuses on the First Gulf War part of *Bad History*, then extends his analysis to the whole volume, underscoring the oscillation between complicity and oppositionality in the poem:

Bad History, therefore, is an epic of worried subjectivity, attempting to resist even while knowing its own complicities and limits—all the while refusing to bracket the moment at which the text is being produced. (Metres 2003, 19)

According to Metres, the text is shaped by Watten’s evaluation of oppositional art in the 1990s: it does not respond to the context of events, but only to the events; it seeks approval from its supporters but does not attempt to convince others; it does not question identity politics, and consequently fails to question itself.³

So even as *Bad History* refuses the traditional subjective position of the nationalist epic poet, it is also inflected by the successes and failures of oppositional art from the period; rather than simply relying on a self-protective oppositionality, it becomes a subjective history swinging between complicity and resistance. (Metres 2003, 21)

However, rather than “swinging between complicity and resistance,” which is but another version of the alternative, it seems to me that what is at stake in *Bad History* is an iterated practice of the “as well as,” as in “complicit as well as resistant”: it is the very formulation of a “poetical wager,” a crucial neo-Pascalian gamble which preserves some possibilities of survival despite accumulating evidences of unfathomable despair.

Poetics here thus coincides with ethics and historiography as both tell us about the possible coexistence of several histories not as a result of counterfeiting but as a vital play of hypotheses in perilous situations of radical uncertainty. The example of

the “secret” meaning, which Barrett Watten humorously fails to reveal to Manuel Brito in an interview, is not so much about secrecy, a fiction which the use of inverted commas underlines, as about the “juxtaposition of two different interpretations of the same set of facts” (Watten in Brito 1992, 182). Two or more: Watten’s poems raise the same issues as Jacques Derrida did about the writing of ethnology in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (2000, 90); moving beyond duality, these poems achieve instances of the Derridean de-centering, combining the realization that there is no center with the ethical urge to be witness to and leave testimony of this quandary. In Watten’s words, “Such is the night in the mountains” should be read, in the end, as no more than the assertion of a both familiar and unearthly ‘suchness’” (Watten in Brito 1992, 194)--nothing to be learnt here or elsewhere about the night or the mountains.

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NOTES

¹ A first version of this article appeared in Tony Lopez and Anthony Caeshu, eds., *Poetry and Public Language*, Exeter, Shearsman Books, 2007, under the title: "Barrett Watten: Poetry and Historiography," 17-24.

² "In passato si potevano accusare gli storici di voler conoscere soltanto le "gesta dei re". Oggi, certo, non è piú cosí. Sempre piú essi si volgono verso ciò che i loro predecessori avevano taciuto scartato o semplicemente ignorato. "Chi costruí Tebe alle sette porte?" chiedeva già il "lettore operaio" di Brecht. Le fonti non ci dicono niente di quegli anonimi muratori: ma la domanda conserva tutto il suo peso." (Ginzburg 1999, xi).

³ On this, see *Metres* 2003, 20-21.