

John Wrighton

Interview with Bruce Andrews 2004

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J: As an undergraduate at the University of Southampton, Peter and Nicky introduced me to the work of the Language poets and having read some of their work, at that quite early stage for me, I found myself sat in front of the computer screen with an essay to write on this work, and along with everything else that was going on at that time, the poetry seemed to, at least temporarily, blow away my ability to write expository prose, in the kind of standardized academic form. And so reflecting on that experience I was wondering if this might be called an effect of a poetics of interruption in your work?

B: To have that impact, you mean?

J: Yeah.

B: That it would have the impact of disabling people from being able to write expository prose?

J: Yeah, I mean only temporarily. The reason I ask that, is I was sparked off by something Steven McCaffrey said, that "language centered writing dispossesses us of language, in order that we might possess it again."

B: Right. Well, so I think that if you think of expository prose as an ability, then this might be the manufacturing of that disability, so that you could then get beneath the level of expository prose. I mean I think one of the emphases of experimental writing of my era, generation has been to operate with the raw materials, with building blocks, of sense making and putting readers in direct confrontation or relationship with those raw materials. So, that may lend itself to simply, you know, blowing up the scaffolding of the expository prose that you might have otherwise been able to possess the poetry in. So, I think that would make sense.

I was interested in this chapter in Tim Woods' book, which I think, in the very beginning he talks about stages in so-called Language writing that first, in his

way of talking about it, was involved with - and I think this is fairly accurate - in the early and mid 1970s, on the part of many of us, to focus at a more granular or microscopic level. And one of the things that happened a little later in my own work, and that of several others, in the late 1970s was the movement towards, you know, larger units of construction, as he pointed out, that was partly a way of gaining some purchase on a more insistently social material. So that, if the emphasis throughout was on delving into language at this raw material level, then the nature of the raw materials, I think changed. And moved toward more socially charged particles, in a sense. But still below the level of overall argument, below the level of overall elaborate ideological construction, which I think all of us felt, or many of us felt, wouldn't allow enough productivity on the part of the reader. To present and manipulate and to orchestrate or choreograph material that was already fully codified and protocoled up in a sense, simply cut off possibilities for the reader. So there was that insistence on the preformed nature of the material we were using but it did shift in that way. So, you know, I think your sense of it may, you know, might make sense.

J: Going back to the ethics that I mentioned earlier, do you consider your work to have an ethical imperative in the way it opens up linguistic meaning then, and allows for an otherness that...

B: Well, you'll have to tell me a little more about what you mean by that. I often see ethics floating around in discussion these days as a substitute for politics and I don't know, you have to ask, what do you mean by an ethical imperative, or what do you mean by ethical?

J: Ethics is certainly quite a slippery word. Just recently I've been looking at Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy - I don't know if...are you familiar with ...

B: Sure. There's an essay of mine that's in *Paradise and Method* that was about the role of sexuality in my work and... 'Sugar, Milk, and Water' is part of the title...Do you have a copy of my book?

J: Yeah, I do.

B: Ok, so the second three sections of that essay are basically a response to Levinas. I was interested in the notion of face, partly in relationship to ethno-methodology and sociology work by Erving Goffman on face work. So when I talk about facework in my writing it's somewhere in play between Levinas and Goffman as a kind of model of interaction. Although not so much with this ethical, loaded sense, the loaded sense that Levinas gives it. So, it still wouldn't be enough for me to understand what you mean by an ethical imperative to just toss the "L" word, you know, Levinas. But still, I'm curious what you mean...

J: Well, I guess the key thing in Levinas for me is the idea of the interaction with the other, between a totalitarian thinking that's based on, kind of, objectivity, as opposed to one that allows for more subjectivity, where you kind of work towards a...

B: Hold on, let me go slow there. A totalitarian attitude would work with objectivity? As in, what, transforming the other person, or transforming something into an object?

J: Yeah...

B: So who would be turning something into an object in a totalitarian mode? Would it be the writer, the writing, the...?

J: Potentially, yeah. In Levinas isn't so much interested in writing...

B: Right, but I mean for you...I'm just curious...

J: Yeah, that's right....

B: So the Totalitarian mode is objectifying...is that what you're saying?

J: Yeah, I guess what I'm looking for is whether there's a poetry that has as its praxis a non-predatory mode of representation that, kind of respects the other....

B: Ok, so the other...all this stuff gets slippery and most of it is tossed around pretty fancily...If you're saying respects the other because it's not a predatory

representation. So that would mean that the other in that sense would refer to, would indicate things the writing refers to...that the writing is representing something...people, objects, historical events, whatever it is...and that it could do that representing in a predatory way and that would be totalitarian. I guess, I'm not sure how would you distinguish a predatory representation of...let's say I wanted to write about the weather, how would you tell if it was predatory?

J: I'm not sure that it works so well with objects but more for people...

B: Oh...

J: As in the other as someone else you meet....

B: Alright, so let's say I'm writing about, I'm writing a sentence that has to do with a person, ok. How would I be writing about that person that would make it predatory, in your sense? How would you tell?

J: I think it's in the method of writing, so that, it's kind of very ideologically loaded, a discourse that kind of, categorizes, conceptualizes the other as a particular genre say....Think of Jack Kerouac, as an example, I think the way he was received in many ways, didn't do credit to him, because there was a romantic idealization of Kerouac as this 'King of the Beats' and that almost could be a predatory mode of representation of this...

B: Oh, but now you're talking about criticism...

J: Yeah, sorry...

B: Right, so I'm trying to figure out, let's say you read Kerouac, you know, Kerouac talks about incidents involving other people. Could he write in a way that you would then look at it and say: that's a predatory representation?

J: Hm, I don't think he...

B: Cause that's what we're talking about, right? Poetry that could, if it did certain things, or it didn't do certain things, would be open to the charge of this

totalitarian mode of predatory representation. So I'm still trying to get at that, cause that's what you're setting up as an antipode to an ethical response, right? But the response is on the part of the writer and the way the writer is figuring or representing something. So, I might write a paragraph talking about you, let's say, or poetry, or things that have happened to me, or people that I know, or I might talk about my grandmother, whatever. How would that be predatory? What would I have to do to make that predatory?

J: I guess that if it's a very closed kind of prose...Like maybe what we saying before about how the expository essay on your poetry, for example...

B: But I just want to talk about poetry now, because you could argue that any critical writing is predatory, you know, in that way...but we're talking about poetry, the ethical imperative in poetry, right? Unless you're talking about criticism....

J: No...in the poetry.

B: It seems like somebody could say, if they were very phobic about this, that anything that you say, if you make a distinction, if you say something is 'x' instead of 'y', if you designate something, that that's closing off possibilities. If I say that your tie is purple, you know, it's actually maybe not. There's probably a fancier word for that colour, I don't know what that is, you know, aubergine, you know, whatever. Any type of distinction making, I guess you could say, closes something off. And any differential could be considered by somebody as a closing off. So you're talking about some kind of threshold, I think. In other words, if you do enough of this, if it goes too far in packaging or describing it, you know, representing it, that you are going to think something's wrong here, that this is verging on the totalitarian, verging on the predatory?

J: Yes, that's the idea essentially. I think...

B: And then the opposite of that is somehow automatically becomes ethical. I don't understand. Am I missing it here?

J: Well, not necessarily, I think it's pushing towards trying to break down that way of writing. Like, the way some modern poetry is very fragmentary in style and opening up the different meanings of a single word. And thinking off Lyn Hejinian's My Life poem, you know that one, that seems to break down the idea that you can, you know, write the story of your life in the kind of typical autobiography, bestseller style.

B: There's something that's kind of easy about this, I'm feeling. In other words, that if all that's required to get the positive valorizing gloss of 'ethical' is to avoid this predatory, fixing, closing off, kind of representation, it seems like then there would be a thousand ways to achieve that. It could be fragmented, it could be vague, it could be meaningless, it could be, you know, just throwing words around, like I've actually been collecting these lately - the kind of word salad that comes with the bottom of email spam, commercial spam which they use to get through spam filters. You know, that maybe I can work on this, chop it up, Dada strategy, just toss it on the table, that would then not have any predatory representational relationship to anything, but would that make it ethical, in your mind?

J: Yeah, I think it probably wouldn't, cause they still has to say something at the end of the day.

B: So then, the ethical imperative involved not just failing to be predatory or also has to involve some other...

J: Yeah, some kind of alternative mode of representation.

B: So then, if it's not predatory, how do you determine whether it has this extra quality? In other words, why wouldn't this email spam gibberish, why wouldn't gibberish be ethical? What else would it have to do? What would it have to do to be ethical?

J: I mean, there has to be some kind of transference of meaning in there, I think.

B: It has to have some transference of meaning!?

J: You know, if it's describing a person, say the poem, you have to have some sense of who they are but without...

B: Just by definition, it sounds like?

J: Yeah.

B: Then that would mean...Wouldn't you be able to say the same thing about painting, landscape painting...? The other here is not the reader. The other is the stuff in the outside world that you're referring to. The object of the reference, the target of the reference. So that you're demanding that it be referential in a certain way, maybe even demanding that it has some kind of representational charge, but it's gotta be a certain kind. It can't be heavy handed. It's gotta have a light touch. It has to somehow...Do you know what I mean? I'm just wondering about that...Everybody would want to be ethical. But the idea that, let's say if you're a landscape painter, you have an ethical relationship to the landscape, or let's say a portrait painter, you could have an ethical relationship to the person whose sitting in front of you, the model, or you could have a predatory relationship toward the model. And that would mean that the photo-realist painter couldn't be ethical. The naturalistic painter could somehow automatically not get credit for being ethical.

J: Yeah, photography is a particularly difficult area as well.

B: Yeah. So, I guess I'm wondering...Maybe I'm really asking about the lineage of the use of that term in talking about poetry. Which I don't know. You say, Levinas is not using it...if he's not talking about writing. Then, who does? I hear chatter about this but I don't know the literature, I'm not in graduate school, I'm not an English professor, so I don't necessarily know what the current usage is...

J: Well there are other writers in this area. Jill Robbins has written a book, *Altered Reading*, which is in the light of Levinas' philosophy. I mean, I guess there is a place for poetry that doesn't necessarily transfer meaning in the sense of representing the other, but there could be value in it in the fact that it just

disrupts, you know, your idea of language, makes you aware of the political ideological, loaded nature of it.

B: Right, so if it involves shock, or involves defamiliarizing Brechtian strategies, then you could say positive things about it. You could say that was good, that was opening, you know, that broke the barriers that were keeping us from blah blah blah, but does that make it ethical? That's what I'm wondering about that.

J: I think it would, in the fact that it does that but the trouble is...

B: But why is that? In other words, if it doesn't have to have any particular type of relationship to its reference, then you're talking about the relationship with the reader.

J: Yeah. But it affects the reader by making the reader aware of the way language operates.

B: Right. OK. You see that's different. The first thing we were talking about was a subcategory of representation. That there are types of representation: one was predatory; one was ethical. And then if you are dealing with work which isn't clearly representational - and lots of contemporary experimental work is not - then the ethical relationship can't be in the way... the ethical charge, or value of the work, can't be located in the act of representation then it ends up being located in the impact on the reader, or in the relationship with the reader. I have a feeling that... So maybe the term, and maybe this is how it's used in talking about poetry, conflates those two things.

J: I think that's one of the problems with some contemporary poetry in that it's become... it's always fragmentary, disrupting the reader's expectations without actually having any reference in it.

B: Right. But why is that a problem?

J: Well if all their work is like that then it's only doing one thing essentially. And it's saying that expository writing say, can be a predatory mode of

representation. But then, it's not really offering any alternative unless it actually comes up with some kind of new aesthetic mode of representation.

B: Well, but if it's a completely fragmented nonsensical type of work - let's say something operating down to the level of a letter, like Peter Inman's work or Melnick's work or some of my early work, the stuff that's in the book *Factura*. I mean that's offering up another mode of functioning, you know, and it has a certain impact on the reader. You could say, well, it only does one thing; most writers, in their whole careers, they only do one thing. Certainly a book or a piece of writing generally is functioning in a particular stylistic box, you know. So I see that you're thinking that that's not enough to be ethical, that that wouldn't be rising to the ethical imperative.

J: I think if you only did that...

B: If you only did that...?

J: Yeah it would be for me. I kind of see that tension in some of the ecopoetry work like Gary Snyder and in current ecocriticism there's been a discussion going on where they suggest that to be...well they say political, but I would say also ethical, the poetry needs to be both self-reflexive, so that its kind of making you aware of the ideologically loaded nature of language, but at the same time has reference in it to global realities, namely in ecocriticism, to an environmental crisis.

B: Well, ok. Then you're raising the bar. You're saying it has to do these two things?

J: Potentially yeah.

B: Right, well to me that's an evaluative criteria that I don't see is located in the word ethical. Does this term 'the ethical imperative' that you're using, is this used to talk about poetry? Is there critical literature that...

J: Going back to Tim Woods' book he talks somewhat about that in the earlier stages...he talks about a poetics of the limit that kind of does operate as a nonpredatory mode of representation.

B: Ok, I've only read the last chapter of the book. I hadn't seen the book before. Peter had a copy on his shelf. So I think there's just something....I mean the easiest way I could think about ethics in regard to the poem — and that would be true with the word politics too — would have to do with the relationship with the reader. In other words, visual artists for instance are allowed to be considered political just because of the nature of the work itself. Even if no one sees it, they show it in a gallery, somebody there buys it and some painter that has highly charged, iconographic political material that's been thrown up there on the canvas, that somehow it's political without it even having to have any relationship to any viewer, that somehow there's an autonomous space of the painting that you can operate within to make judgments about and I suspect that people might do that with poetry too. In a sense, that would be talk about the representational strategy of the poem or the writing as an autonomous sphere. No one would ever read it, that it wouldn't have any relationship to a reader, you could just say well I think the way this person is representing the outside world or people or events is open, you know, is not closed off, it's not fixed, its not ... blah blah blah. And then all of a sudden you could say that makes it ethical and somebody might even be able to say that makes it political. In other words if the poem struck poses, you know, banners, had billboard type language. You know, like I wrote a poem, The Trashing of Blair. Whatever relationship it had to the reader, somebody could come along and say well that's political. And if I didn't do that, then somebody could come along and say nothing you're doing is political because politics then would have to do with the representational content of the poem. So it seems like you could valorize work as ethical either way. And that makes it troubling for me, that the work would be considered ethical just because of the way it's treating its subject matter or it could be considered ethical because of the things its awakening and opening up for the reader. Which is it that you would yourself be interested in?

J: I think it can do both.

B: You think it can do both...? ok...

J: One thing that struck me as an ethical imperative is the way it can have an effect on the reader, besides from what it says about representation, but whether that is enough on its own...? It would still be ethical, but maybe we need to push language into new forms in its ability to represent as well.

B: OK, well, what if I said why? Why would it need to do that? Why wouldn't it be enough just to make a permanent estrangement effect on the part of the reader?

J: I guess because just at the basic level language is our only method of communicating our ideas and establishing communities and things like this.

B: But not poetry particularly. Literary art doesn't have to do all the things that language is capable of doing. I mean, it could adopt, as it does, this particular sphere for investigation and just say we're not interested in a different representational strategy, we're engaged in nonrepresentational art. Just like an abstract painter could say.

J: Yeah, I think you're right actually. I certainly wouldn't say that poetry that doesn't come up with some new mode of representation is unethical at all.

B: But then I'm just wondering whether you might need more differentiation in your terms. You know, if you want poetry to do both, or that you prefer that it does both, that's the poetry that you find most valuable, that's the poetry that you would like to write about, that's the poetry that you would like to maybe present to others, that you'd like to buy those books and give them to your friends to have them read, to experience that, or you're going to use those books in the classroom if you were teaching literature, then you have more criteria than simply one that could be located either at the level of content or at the level of the relationship with the reader. You want both, so maybe you should develop your own term. In other words that maybe the whole term — the ethical imperative — may not be enough and you would discover that, I think, when you notice that there are books that you find insufficient that you nonetheless have to admit fit the category of the ethical imperative. Someone says: doesn't this meet

the ethical imperative? And you could say: yeah it does but I want more from it. OK, so then you want a couple of levels — you want upper level ethical instead of lower level ethical. So, you know, coining new terms, this is the way to academic success.

J: That's a handy hint...Picking up on what you said about reader-positioning, I was going to ask you about how you kind of prepare for the dynamics of reading your work at a poetry event and whether the special dynamics of poetry performance might shift the reader positioning or...

B: Well, that's an interesting question...I mean to me increasingly I did this at the paper I presented at Birkbeck college which I'm going to try and get a photocopy of for Peter — so you can get it from him — which was about reading notes. I'm increasingly focused on the position of the reader as the source of pretty much all value in the literary transaction. I've become quite closely connected with younger poets who are working almost in a conceptual art way with writing who will do things that are awe-inspiring, extremely impressive, and people are "wow that's amazing that you did that". But, on the other hand, like a lot of conceptual art, they're not necessarily designed to be read. The idea of the eight hour movie of Warhol just photographing somebody sleeping. The idea that wow, there's no experience because you wouldn't want to watch it. So I'm trying to think about how the reader negotiates the work — this is going to lead me next I think in the future to ask: what's the actual process, the experiential and cognitive process, that the reader is allowed to move towards because of certain types of work. More radical work to me lends itself to a richer, more productive experience on the part of the reader. Now, public readings are interesting in that way, because one of the things that I find is complexifying on the part of the reader is to not to have to route their experience through some identification process with the author. This is the Brechtian problem that I would have with so-called traditional lyric poetry or any foregrounding on the part of the author of an authorial voice. You know, the "I" - I talk about this a lot recently in my work, the first time systematically in the piece I wrote about Michael Lally in *Paradise and Method*. Michael is somebody whose work is essentially autobiographical, he's had a flamboyant fabulous life which is at the center of the work and it's very

interesting and rewarding to read, but you are always having to track your experience and mediate it through the position of him that he creates and puts on the page, which I find abhorrent, in a way, I just find it suffocating. And my work pretty much from the beginning has rejected that, and it rejected that because it seemed suffocating for the reader, when I think of myself as the reader. I mean, I'm the central reader of my poetry in a sense, I mean the poetry's written for me to read it on the page. Even if I'm doing something that requires me to track my own reading, even of something I wrote, back through some model or simulacrum of me, even that I would find burdensome and irritating. So in that sense — and this is exactly what I was saying before about wanting to work with raw material — I'm very interested in the process of socialization, I'm very interested in the process of interpellation, you know, disciplining, training: how people are seduced and packaged and processed by cultural and social institutions and machinery... how the social machinery is like a factory of personhood and cranks those out to fit various specifications and I think that a lot of literature does that too or it mimics or it parallels that process. So to me I want to break that process of identification, I want to break that need to have to track your experience through that of this author's subject position. Now the problem with public readings is that the dynamics of a public reading almost automatically undercut that, especially if you're a good reader. The good reader, and I'm a good reader, set themselves up as a kind of somewhat charismatic figure so that it's as if the work is automatically personalized into the author's subject position even if there's no "I" in the work. That there's at least this person standing up there talking, you know, and it does sometimes create a kind of tracking of autobiography in the work, whatever it is, and so that to me just means that you have to go even further in the work itself to avoid that. The teeniest trace of personal commentary can just colour an entire half an hour reading in that sense, so that everything then gets interpreted back as some kind of gnomic, secret revelation about the author, or just that you're impressed with the author — "Wow, that was great," you know, "great reading", etc. — somehow that's what happens, but for me, going back to this ethical thing, that would close off possibilities for the reader to exfoliate outwards in a more complicated way. But I don't see any easy way around it and I'm unwilling to give bad readings

where the work is just completely objectified and has no seeming relationship to me at all. If its not in my voice...or I can have other people read it...A lot of times there's a personalizing of just the rhythm of the work that I find inevitable. So, there's no way out of that I don't think. I think what happened in this shift that Tim Woods talked about — moving toward larger units of meaning — in my case that happened when I moved to New York City and started to give public readings. That in fact I was aware that the only kind of material that was easily graspable in performance, that was the easiest to grasp in performance, was work that worked with longer units, not necessarily speech based but at least phrased based, and so my work started moving in that direction at that time and that did open up also the possibility of using more social material, using socially-loaded material, which is now pretty much what I love to do, almost exclusively in things that I choose to read. You know, so what I'm going to read today is only that material. I don't read the work that I used to write, that I still do write, there's just certain types of work that I don't chose to read out in public because it doesn't lend itself for the audience to be able to just get it in the experience; if it's on the page then it's different: they can slow down they can go backwards they can mull over it. For something to be gotten just right away for most people I find is better, it has more resonance to it. But as I say, that may make it even more likely to set up this personalizing appropriation on the part of the reader.