

Relative Strangeness
Reading Rosmarie Waldrop

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‘Think of the power. Of a single word. Like for example
“fact.” When I know what matters. Is between.’

—Rosmarie Waldrop, *Blindsight*

‘One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s
nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing
round the frame through which we look at it.’

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

‘And it is by glimpses that we come to know anything that
has any complexity.’

—Rosmarie Waldrop, ‘Between, Always’

Preface

Between Luggage and Language

Even when catching the slow boat from Europe to America, as Rosmarie Waldrop did in 1958, sometimes the rate of travel can be of such a speed that it takes time for the mind to catch up with the body. At the point of crossing is registered the space of between. So it is, suddenly, that the road is already everywhere and it is not always possible to stop a body once it is in motion. Besides, letters written in transit do not, necessarily, always reach their destination, especially when hands are otherwise concerned with holding onto the relative strangeness of luggage and language left behind.

As Gertrude Stein has it, 'nobody knows what the contemporariness is. In other words, they don't know where they are going, but they are on their way.'¹ Or as Waldrop comments in interview:

what matters is not things but what happens between them. Or if you take the linguistic model, it is not the phoneme but the connection of phonemes that makes language, the differences in the sequence [...] The gaps keep the questions in relation.²

'My key words,' Waldrop writes in her essay, 'Alarms and Excursions,' 'would be exploring and maintaining; exploring a forest not for the timber that might be sold, but to understand it as a world and to keep this world alive.'³

For Waldrop, poetry is the taking place of language in the spaces between words. Throughout her writing there is the sense that language can be experienced only as fissure, gap, aperture, an 'empty middle' into which the possibility of meaning simultaneously both enters and escapes. As one of the sections in her 1993 work, *Lawn of Excluded Middle*, has it:

Emptiness is imperative for feeling to take on substance, for its vibrations to grow tangible, a faintly trembling beam that

¹ Gertrude Stein, 'How Writing is Written,' *The Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, Vol. II, ed. Robert Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974) p.29.

² Joan Retallack, 'A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999) p.349

³ Rosmarie Waldrop, 'Alarms and Excursions,' *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1990) p.46.

supports the whole edifice.⁴

‘Gaps’, ‘questions’, ‘exploring’ and ‘relation’ are central terms in Waldrop’s experience of the world, not just of poetry; they are words that resurface repeatedly, carried in each day’s clothing. They are also clue to Waldrop’s frequent critical reference to Charles Olson’s insistence that:

At root (or stump) what *is*, is no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things, these are the terms of the reality contemporary to us—and the terms of what we are.⁵

No longer one single voice. A multiple meaning. The shadow zone becomes an element of structure. Blanchot’s ‘other kind of interruption,’ which:

introduces waiting, which measures the distance between two speakers, not the reducible distance, but the irreducible [...] Now what is at stake is the strangeness between us.⁶

Here, as elsewhere, Waldrop’s poetry is organised by a spatial imagination: the topography of thinking is the topography of the page.⁷

* * *

A sequence of fragments seems the most appropriate form for a work of this kind, introductory, surveying, essentially personal, marked, as with all things, by my own reading and preoccupations. ‘Maybe,’ Waldrop writes, ‘the essence of the fragment is that it cuts out explanation, an essential act of poetry.’⁸ It constitutes, Waldrop continues, a ‘lessening of distinctness, of “identity.”’⁹ I do not claim to be comprehensive. Nor do I mean to speak for Waldrop or her work but simply to speak about

⁴ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lawn of Excluded Middle* (Providence, RI: Tender Buttons, 1993) p.14.

⁵ Charles Olson, ‘Projective Verse,’ *Human Universe and Other Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove, 1967) p.123.

⁶ Rosmarie Waldrop, ‘The Ground is the Only Figure,’ *Dissonance (if you are interested)* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2005) p.227.

⁷ See also ‘Christine Hume and Rosmarie Waldrop in Conversation,’ *12x12: Conversations in 21st Century Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Christina Mengert and Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009) p.254.

⁸ Waldrop, ‘The Ground is the Only Figure,’ p.227.

⁹ *ibid*, p.231.

some of its aspects, its various senses of poetics, the shifting relationships between theory and practice, to draw out a number of examples and to trace certain lines of thinking and shifts of approach.

I do not always know where I am in Waldrop's work. My reading, often, is a balance between glimpses and fades, connections and gaps. Semantic fields slide and frames of reference come and go. As Waldrop says of the work of Edmond Jabès which serves equally for a statement about my own reading of Waldrop, 'passages I thought I understood are suddenly incomprehensible again.'¹⁰ 'To continue,' Waldrop goes on to write. 'To carry from one place to another. To continue thinking, to think another place, another perspective. The content of memory changes as I approach it from a different place, myself a different person.'¹¹ So it is with writing, opinion, thought: everything provisional, of its time, its moment, everything in movement. As Michael Schmidt observes, 'there is something gratuitous and [...] sacramental in what poetry can do. If I understood it, I would leave it behind. Because I don't understand, quite, and my sense of a poem changes as the years change, it stays with me irreducibly.'¹² So much depends upon this 'quite'.

The reasons why are, no doubt, both complex and commonplace. Things change. Life shifts. I have felt, and feel, an affinity to Waldrop's project, for many reasons, not all of which are clear, and most of which are not fully formalised. I feel close to the ways in which Waldrop pieces different texts together, the way she writes, her making. Her rhythms *feel* familiar. Most often, my engagement with Waldrop's writing is no less intuitive than that.

But Waldrop's work also strikes a strange chord inside me, sets off tangential lines of thought, sparks questions which appear at once proximate, naturally occurring, and vertiginous, questions which I don't necessarily recognise as my own but which *feel* familiar; and at different times of the day different aspects feel familiar, different parts elusive. This difference is the site of my reading. And anyway, as Waldrop counsels, it is 'better to trust to the sudden detours, hidden alleys, unexpected corners imagination takes us to' than try to map it out, close it down.¹³ Things are not always straightforward.

¹⁰ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) p.104.

¹¹ Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p. 149.

¹² Michael Schmidt, 'A Little Carcanet Anthology,' *The North*, No.48 (2011), p.42.

¹³ Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p.110.

Bobbi Lurie:

I want to write about the humor, sense of playfulness, openness and experimentation in Rosmarie Waldrop's work. I want to write about her signature use of the fragmented 'I' which gives me the sense that I am standing inside the words themselves. It is clear to me as I think of these things that 'what' I 'think' of Rosmarie Waldrop's work is not a 'what' or a 'process of thinking' at all. I am made increasingly aware of how the gaps in Rosmarie Waldrop's descriptions seem to hover over some unnamed edge which forces me to stop thinking for seconds at a time and brings a sense of wholeness in the reading itself. I sit down and try to describe this. At turns I feel I am getting too analytical, then too intellectual, then it seems I am becoming too mystical, too abstract, and then, in the end, too ridiculous.¹⁴

¹⁴ Bobbi Lurie, 'Meditation on Certainty,' *How2*, Vol. 1. No. 8 (Fall 2002), http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_8_2002/current/readings/lurie.htm, accessed 12 December 2011.

Blindsights

Edmond Jabès has commented how ‘we always start out from a written text and come back to the text to be written, from the sea to the sea, from the page to the page.’¹ ‘In the beginning is hermeneutics,’ repeats Jacques Derrida.² There always emerges on the page before us a blank spot, a *blindsight*, that experience where, according to the neuroscientist, Antonio R. Damasio, a person actually sees more than they are consciously aware. It is, strangely, an experience of disassociation, vision without visual consciousness. What counts is how that blindsight is read.

The notion that all writing is, in one form or another, a process of re-writing has a long history, stretching back at least as far as Moses’ breaking of the tablets or the Kabbalistic tradition of the breaking of the Vessels, where, according to Luria, God’s light proved too much for the vessels meant to contain it and the vessels displaced or shattered. In both cases, the world, here and now, is out of place, composed of the shards of this broken light, these shattered words. As Waldrop notes, according to the Zohar, ‘in every word shine multiple lights.’³

According to Gershom Scholem, as a result of the Breaking of the Vessels, ‘nothing remains in its proper place. Everything is somewhere else.’⁴ The breaking, Stanford L. Drob suggests, implies that all concepts, values, systems and beliefs are inadequate containers for the phenomena they are meant to hold and circumscribe. As such, Drob argues, ‘the Breaking of the Vessels provides a caution against being satisfied with any of the interpretations or constructions we place upon our experience, texts, and world.’⁵

Susan Handelman:

Thus in Kabbalah, it is not only the tablets of the law that are broken. The universe itself has undergone a primordial

¹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) p.40; quoted in *Lavish Absence*, p.109.

² Jacques Derrida, ‘Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,’ *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001) p.81.

³ Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p.20.

⁴ Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1969) p.112.

⁵ Stanford L. Drob, ‘Jacques Derrida and the Kabbalah,’ *The New Kabbalah* (2006), <http://www.newkabbalah.com/JDK.pdf>, accessed 12 February 2012.

shattering; God has withdrawn; the Vessels are broken; the divine sparks are lost in the material world. As Scholem reads it, Kabbalah is a great myth of exile.⁶

In reference to Jabès, Maurice Blanchot describes rabbinic exegesis as a double movement of response and distance. ‘The dignity and importance of exegesis in the rabbinic tradition,’ Blanchot writes, consists of the way in which ‘the written law, the unoriginal text of the origin, must always be taken on by the commenting voice—taken on, but unjoined, in this dis-junction that is the measure of its infinity.’⁷

Here reading well involves being out of place, unsure, unsteady; it entails equivocation. It is to set off, to wander, to go looking, but to find myself travelling in circles, further away, elsewhere. In so doing, it necessitates that such reading be counter-intuitive, that it proceed in fits and starts, with questions and effacements, in manners always turning, always bouncing against the limit of what it has not been quite possible to say: blindsights, pieces. The origin is always foreign and the space of commentary an open field.

Rosmarie Waldrop: ‘The spark given off by the edges of the shards, the fragments, is stronger the more abrupt the cut, the more strongly it makes us feel the lack of transition, the more disparate the surrounding texts.’⁸

Waldrop, again: ‘I love David Mendelson’s false etymology that derives the word “mosaic” from Moses, from the breaking of the tablets.’⁹

Influenced by such readings, Edmond Jabès has written how, ‘by turning away from the tablets, the chosen people gave Moses a crucial lesson in reading. The destroyed book allows us to read the book.’¹⁰ As Gary Mole glosses:

for Jabès the breaking of the tablets into an infinite number of fragments initiates fragmentary writing itself, a form of nonformal writing that escapes generic classification by

⁶ Susan Handelman, *The Sin of the Book*, ed. Eric Gould (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) p.76; quoted in *Lavish Absence*, p.21.

⁷ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Traces,’ *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) p. 224.

⁸ Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p.21.

⁹ *ibid*, p.19.

¹⁰ Edmond Jabès, *El, or the Last Book*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984) pp.39-40; quoted in *Lavish Absence*, p.19.

undermining the very notions of genre. God's attempt to unify the fragmentary, Jabès would argue, is the significance of the renewal of the tablets in Exodus 34, which Jabès interprets in terms of resemblance [...] The second set of tablets that God is constrained to give to Moses permits the reading of the first set, which only Moses had read, while maintaining the break that is their difference.¹¹

Similarly, for Blanchot, 'it is very striking that in a certain tradition of the book [...] what is called the "written Torah" preceded the "oral Torah", the latter subsequently giving rise to a version written down, which alone constitutes the Book.'¹² 'There is an enigmatic proposition to thought in this,' Blanchot continues. 'Nothing precedes writing. Yet the writing of the first tablets becomes legible only after and through their having been broken.'¹³ In other words, Blanchot argues, it means there is no 'original word,' or as Waldrop has it, 'the blank page is not blank.'¹⁴ Rather, 'the Tablets of the Law were broken when still only barely touched by the divine hand [...] and were written again, but not in their original form, so that it is from an already destroyed word that man learns the demand that must speak to him: there is no real first understanding, no initial and unbroken word, as if one could never speak except the second time, after having refused to listen and having taken a distance in regard to the origin.'¹⁵ Or as Blanchot writes elsewhere, 'you will never know what you have written, even if you have written only to find this out.'¹⁶

In his remarkable study of Talmudic reading, *The Burnt Book*, Marc-Alain Ouaknin defines Talmudic thinking as an 'open dialectic.'¹⁷ Talmudic study, Ouaknin explains, is based on a notion of *Mahloket*, or dialogue, that is, a modality of thinking that constantly opens itself to its own contestation. 'The Master of the Talmud', Ouaknin writes,

¹¹ Gary D. Mole, *Levinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement* (Gainseville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997) p.87.

¹² Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien Infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) p.630; quoted in Mole, *Levinas*, p.87.

¹³ Blanchot, *L'Entretien*, p.631; quoted Mole, p.87.

¹⁴ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie* (Providence, RI: Burning Deck, 2002) p.91.

¹⁵ Blanchot, 'Traces,' p.224.

¹⁶ Maurice Blanchot, 'After the Fact,' *Vicious Circles: Two Fictions and After the Fact*, trans. Paul Auster (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1985) p.59.

¹⁷ Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud*, trans. Llewellyn Brown (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) p. 84.

'[...] seeks to be shaken up, to be disturbed, to suffer setbacks, to be overwhelmed.'¹⁸ Fragile and always on the move, *Mahloket* does not synchronise truth as in, for example, Platonic dialogue, but is, rather, diachronic. *Mahloket* seeks to set its 'reading' to an interminable questioning; it takes place in the 'interrelational space' between itself and the enigma (the text) it seeks to engage.¹⁹ In Waldrop's phrase, it is to be found 'in the margins that let the words breathe.'²⁰ Edmond Jabès develops this sense of dialogue when, in *The Book of Dialogue*, he writes:

There is *pre-dialogue*, our slow or feverish preparation for dialogue. Without any idea of how it will proceed, which form it will take, without being able to explain it, we are convinced in advance that the dialogue has already begun: a silent dialogue with an absent partner.

Then afterwards, there is *post-dialogue* or after-silence. For what we managed to say to the other in our exchange of words—says virtually nothing but this silence, silence on which we are thrown back by any unfathomable, self-centred word whose depth we vainly try to sound.

Then finally, there is what could have been the actual dialogue, vital, irreplaceable, but which, alas, does not take place: it begins the very moment we take leave of one another and return to our solitudes.²¹

This inter-relational space, this between point, is everything. It is the ground of thinking, writing, reading, discussing; a zone of movement, of crossings and of crossings out. Indeed, as Ouaknin notes, *Mahloket* 'is possible because the law is *Halakhah*: the etymological meaning of this term being "walking," "step."²²

¹⁸ Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, p. 86.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 84 and 87.

²⁰ Waldrop, 'Silence, the Devil, and Jabès,' *Dissonance*, p.148.

²¹ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Dialogue*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987) p.7.

²² Ouaknin, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

Curvature

Maurice Blanchot has referred to the relation between text and commentary as having the form of ‘curvature,’ such that ‘the relations of A to B will never be direct, symmetrical, or reversible [...] One can see which solutions will prove inappropriate to such a problem: a language of assertion and answer, for example, or a linear language of simple development, that is to say, *a language where language itself would not be at stake*.’¹

In his ‘In Place of a Foreword’ Edmond Jabès writes that ‘[a] good reader is, first of all, a sensitive, curious, demanding reader. In reading, he follows his intuition.’² Jabès goes on to explain that intuition would involve, for example, entering a text not directly but roundabout; and even then, Jabès cautions, when one has wandered, taken many paths, ‘at no moment has one left one’s own.’³

The American scholar Gerald Bruns writes of the way in which ‘poetry *exposes* thinking to language, to its strangeness or otherness, its refusal to be contained within categories and propositions, its irreducibility to sameness and identity, its resistance to sense—in short, its denial of our efforts to speak it [...] poetry is the letting-go of language.’⁴

In his *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin comments the following: ‘Imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted [...] The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker. We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds to and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person.’⁵

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) p.6.

² Edmond Jabès, ‘In Place of a Foreword’ in *From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabès Reader*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1991) p.5.

³ Jabès, *op. cit.*, p.5.

⁴ Gerald L. Bruns, *Heidegger’s Estrangements: Language, Truth and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) pp.xxiv-xxv.

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* (University of Minnesota

Each of these senses of poetry and methods of reading are, I hope to show, illustrative of Waldrop's own literary practice, a practice which, in relative terms, curves, which is highly attentive to the fissures, gaps, slidings, shiftings, breakages, of language, knowing, doing, being. In the words of Andrew Mossin, 'Waldrop is interested in the incoherencies, the off-key, off-balance moments of perception and experience as these get relayed in the language and form of poetry.'⁶

For Waldrop, writing corresponds to a lens, 'a frame wide enough for conjunctions and connotations. And the music of words, with its constant vanishing, to fill in the distance.'⁷ Here the space of the poem is understood, quite literally, as distance. And then the aim to fill this distance not with the unseen or the invisible but with the glimpsed which disappears in sighting: the vanishing, what Waldrop terms 'a tangible emptiness.'⁸ In any case, for Waldrop the poem:

moves within language the way a dancer moves within music.
Not moving through it to some destination or message.
Moving within the constant disappearing and coming-into-being.
With a new, fluid definition of figure and ground the
way the hierarchy of the body turns fluid in dance.⁹

Orpheus turns and Eurydice is lost to him. In the instant of looking back, Eurydice vanishes. 'In this gaze, the work is lost,' but it is also one of the points at which, and by way of which, the poem begins.¹⁰

This is a method of reading staged as commentary, as conversation. Commentary as conversation—with texts, the processes, experiences, contradictions, of reading, thinking—becomes a series of dialogues, each in itself partial, incomplete, on the way towards, a series of snippets, snatches, responses, questions, reverberations. As Emily Carr puts it,

Press, 1984) p.194. I am grateful to Ben Lerner's review of Waldrop's *Curves to the Apple* for drawing my attention to this quotation. See, Ben Lerner, 'Apples of Discourse,' *Jacket* 31 (October 2006), <http://jacketmagazine.com/31/lerner-waldrop.html>, accessed 10 January 2012.

⁶ Andrew Mossin, 'Networks of the Real in Contemporary Poetry and Poetics: Peter Middleton, Susan Schultz, Rosmarie Waldrop,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Spring, 2007) p.150 [pp.143-153].

⁷ Rosmarie Waldrop, 'The Ground is the Only Figure,' p.219.

⁸ *ibid.*, p.225.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.232.

¹⁰ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) p.174.

‘conversation is process-orientated; it is an experience in language.’¹¹ And such experiences are, always, various, fleeting, frequently circular: not a commentary, but commentaries. Just as the question of inheritance plays out across all Waldrop’s writing, from private to public history, to the writings of others, the particular sense of commentary at play here corresponds to a methodological presentation of reading and writing: I want to read Waldrop’s poetics but can only write about it differently, into sketch, dialogue.

Joan Retallack: “That way of working with shorter threads, abbreviated, almost anecdotal stories, juxtaposed perceptions, a motley assortment of narrational and descriptive and linguistic units [...] creates a very different kind of world within the text than what we find in the sustained, internally coherent narrative of the more conventional novel. That form, unless it has moved from its nineteenth-century forward-thrusting track toward the “impossible” impediments and complexities of certain modernist novels, is a fully furnished panopticon, doors and windows sealed shut. The reader is led through from well-marked entrance to well-marked exit by an ever-present, entirely solicitous tour guide. Not much chance to wander and turn up things for yourself.”¹²

‘Who knows,’ Waldrop asks, ‘what motives play into our actions. I do not know what pulls me to the place where I must, and want to, speak. Here. Where I am. “We always search for the meaning of our own life in the text we translate,” says Dominique Grandmont. And sometimes we “find the other inside ourselves.”’¹³

¹¹ Emily Carr, ‘Happily, Revision: Reading Rosmarie Waldrop’s *The Reproduction of Profiles*,’ *Jacket* 36 (Late 2008), <http://jacketmagazine.com/36/r-waldrop-rb-carr-emily.shtml>, accessed 7 December 2011.

¹² Joan Retallack, ‘A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop,’ p.349

¹³ Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p.151.