American Literature Readings in the 21st Century

Intuitions in Literature, Technology, and Politics

Parabilities

Alan Ramón Clinton

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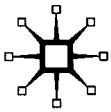

INTUITIONS IN LITERATURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND POLITICS

First published in 2012 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®
in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN: 978–1–137–00696–7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: October 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

Other Books by Alan Ramón Clinton

Mechanical Occult: Automatism, Modernism, and the Specter of Politics (2004)
Horatio Alger's Keys (2008)
Curtain Call: A Metaphorical Memoir (2010)
Necropsy in E Minor (2011)

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Linda Wagner-Martin for the honor of appearing in her fascinating and prestigious series American Literature Readings in the 21st Century. Also, Brigitte Schulz for first taking an interest in the work and seeing it through the review process even when it got rocky, for sticking with "my" vision of the work and presenting it in such a way to the editorial board at Palgrave that convinced them to take a chance on a hybrid work of criticism. To Joanna Roberts and Maia Woolner for their work with me in the production process. To Joel Breuklander and Deepa John for what looks like an arduous process of copyediting. To [anonymous reader] for recognizing that my strength lies in experimentation rather than traditional dialectics and for pushing me in the directions of both my interests and strengths as a writer. To those who encouraged me by looking at or discussing various portions of the book or related questions including the Science, Technology, and Society Research cluster at the National University of Singapore, Dina Smith, Marsha Bryant, R. B. Kershner, Paolo Javier, Walter K. Lew, Angela Flury, Susan Cersosimo, Mark Hostetter, Robert B. Ray and his reading group at the University of Florida, Mike Chasar, and Heidi Bean. To journals that published earlier incarnations of portions of the book while allowing me to retain copyright including *IJCS*, *LIT*, *Reconstruction*, and *Rhizomes*. To Alexander Tarampi, for working with me to produce the cover image *Eschaton* (http://theimaginary.net). To the collection agency in graduate school who introduced me to the world of schizophrenia and capitalism, which made me search for other writers who had expressed resistance to property in avant-garde forms. To Northeastern University for showing me the difference between empty theory and ethical praxis; also to Phil Savarese for being smart, reading good books. To my current colleagues, Diane Dreher, Eileen Elrod, and John Hawley, for their understanding and slack-cutting during the stressful time of producing the "final" version of the manuscript. To Ray, Ulmer, Kershner, and Bryant for contributing their

talents to helping me be the best writer *I* can be, being open enough to send me in the direction of historicism *and* experimentation. To Santa Clara University, for their support with cover art and permissions fees. Most importantly of all, to the most supportive and understanding parents in the world, James and Donna Clinton.

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John Ashbery, "They Dream Only of America," excerpts from The Tennis Court Oath.

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Quotations from Hannah Weiner's poetry courtesy of Charles Bernstein for Hannah Weiner in trust.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Intuitions In: Methodologies

I. Prefix/Silent Teachers

Parability. The poet Larry Eigner, who had cerebral palsy, taught me that word, though he never used it. I was preparing a conference paper on disability and literature and decided that with Eigner what I was encountering was better defined as parability. Eigner's poems—characterized as they are by a sort of spatial topography that, noting their influence from American "projective verse" and resemblance to Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, only more fragmented, yet more connected to the world—were for me best characterized as "tracts without organs" that suggested a simultaneous, wireless intuition of both the world of the everyday and more globalized views. The spaces between his words and "lines" allowed him to move from one to the other by means of a power realized on Eigner's page that echoed Jack Spicer's "theory" of the poet as "a counterpunching radio."[1] And then I thought, if parability—which I will provisionally define as the ability to tell improper stories, write improper poems, whose leaps from one image to another cannot be "justified" in traditional ways—was good enough for Eigner, it might be something worthwhile for the critic to attempt, noting that such simulation would of course look somewhat different in the language of criticism. Walter Benjamin, in *One Way Street*, wrote that when it comes to understanding culture, "[s]trength lies in improvisation," where "[a]ll the decisive blows are struck left handed."[2] Was the author of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" talking about a left-handed radio? Undoubtedly Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, dominated by collaged quotes that are the textual version of photographs, is leading the reader-critic to the possibility of forming intuitions about culture in a manner that points as much to the future as the past, asserting

the indispensability of history and authorship even as it requires us to sense resonances between passages, pointing outside their original sources, their authorial intents, toward a utopian future that, to steal a neologism from Gertrude Stein, is "everybody's autobiography."[3] This is a disposition that alters (without abolishing) the temporality of traditional literary criticism. We still revere documents and their authors in more traditional ways, the way we preserve sacred objects, but we also read them messianically, as pointing to a politics yet to come, yet to be formulated. In this sense, a literary object is a prefix that marks a singular starting point for the reader—as irreplaceable as it is always changing—but does not posit the reader as suffix.

In his discussion of parables and the "para," J. Hillis Miller taught me, without putting it in quite these terms, that the best prefixes are those that, because of their oblique possibilities, always detour us, unpredictably, before the "fix" that never comes. Not locating us, such prefixes are themselves hard to locate:

> "Para" is an "uncanny" double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it, equivalent in status and at the same time secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master.[4]

Every "para," then, is also a parasite, a place whose lack of location allows it to become a creature who, rather than sickening us, is "'negentropic'—the motor of change or invention—recalling Benjamin's art of interruption [collage]—consisting of a new logic with three elements: host, guest, and interrupter [interpreter] ('noise is the random element, transforming one system or one order into another')."[5] Parability and the parasite, regardless of the extent to which they are acknowledged as such, are thus agents of the interdisciplinary machines so integral to any study of literature and culture.

Prefixes, in this new economy, are no different than suffixes or any other morpheme of one's choice. Each is a "cantilever" where innocence is "not the inn in which the Christ Child was born" but a device with support on only one end, but which can transport us using the cantilever resonance in micro-electro-mechanical systems (MEMS) into "some dark forest where we wander amazed."[6] In this sense, we can understand the object, literary or otherwise, as always abject, along with the subject, where both are thrown about (*-ject* coming

from the French word *jet* or "throw") in the process of becoming unlocatable motion that, paralogically, resists the motion of pure speed that is "a power component of the [technocratic] system" that wants to pull "humanity after it, dehumanizing it in order to rehumanize it at a different level of normative capacity" more in keeping with the needs of late capitalism.[7] The *ab-* designates this motion as "off, away, from," which the *ob-* had never fixed in the first place, but unfixes us "in the direction of, towards, [or] against." This intuition of unlocatable position/motion is what is necessary to begin to think of literature, technology, and politics simultaneously, even as a particular writer, for instance this one, may privilege literature due to the vestiges of disciplinary specialty that still slow this motion.

In this sense, I would designate the "para" as not a subset of prefixes but the other way around. This would account for why, in his attempts to theorize and then realize a notion of "paracriticism," Ihab Hassan was, in 1969, so drawn to explaining it in terms of the theories of Marshall McLuhan and Norbert Wiener.[8] Both Wiener and McLuhan were instrumental in repositioning language in light of new technologies, formulating a situation that Jacques Derrida, also referencing cybernetics, was later to crystallize in his understanding of how the beginning of writing, both as history and as futurity, lies outside the linearity (and containment) of the book.[9] This sense that writing had been unhinged accounts for Hassan's realizations of paracriticism becoming, to a large extent, experiments in typography that were not so much attempts to simulate the montage and concrete writing methods of (post)modernist (and Dadaist/Surrealist) writers as a means of understanding through simulation, a genuine confrontation, on the level of form, with the realization that writing, in the electronic age, has left the line. So, of course, Jacques Derrida's and Roland Barthes' contemporary experiments with these things reveal not *just* that Hassan was aware of their work, but that a realization of the relationship between technology, the "para," and space must take a vanguard form on the level of criticism itself, in what Rosalind Krauss termed, in 1980, "paraliterature."[10]

Most suggestive for a project attempting to designate parability as a potential ability whose techniques are not determined in advance is Krauss's point that when "criticism finds itself caught in [or freed by] a dramatic web of many voices, citations, asides, [and] divigations,"[11] this shift on the level of both form and content must occur as an attempt to understand the complexities of culture itself. Roland Barthes' *S/Z* is the model here, for as Krauss points out, Barthes insists that the goal is to "unroll the carpet of codes, to refer not from

a language to a referent, but from one code to another,"[12] because this view of literature as a coding system actually works against the idea of the literary work as something from which to abstract meaning and more toward what parability aims to think, which is that literature is to a large extent not the invention of codes but the realization of certain intersections of codes already existing in culture. Whereas *S/Z*, in exploring Balzac, focuses on the dystopian results of such a system, the book's thesis does not foreclose the idea, which I intend to pursue, that there are works of literature that produce intersections of codes more critical in their relation to culture than Balzac's mode of "realism by unspoken agreement," particularly when the critic himself becomes part of that intersection, part of the hyperbolic "throws" made possible by the critical event.[13]

At whatever speed, with whatever trajectory, with things being thrown about like this, and despite disciplinary restraints, syntax is always parataxis, which renders the nature of traditional argumentation not only difficult but philosophically suspect; rather, one would perhaps find more by not always attempting to simulate scientific rigor, "which identifies *precaution* with its discursive effect," especially when critical discourse that aspires to scientific rigor is, inevitably, merely "metonymic" in its relation to science.[14] Yet "one plays at science, one puts it in the picture—like a piece in a collage"[15]—because one cannot ignore it when studying late twentieth-century writers and their forebears. One does so with daring but without confidence as to the existence of dialectical relationships between "spheres" of culture. Rather, one accepts that the syntax (of language, culture, ideology), formerly grounded and hierarchical, has been pulverized in midair, rendering fragments of possibility in which the reader, the "subject," stands below these things, receiving them in a new type of space, one that is more Leibnizian (by way of Gilles Deleuze) than Cartesian, "pierced with irregular passages, surrounded and penetrated by an increasingly vaporous fluid, the totality of the universe resembling a 'pond of matter in which there exist different flows and waves.'"[16] In this situation, "Ab" is also the fifth month of the Hebrew sacred year and means "verdure"—the disseminating objects fall on the critic who, inevitably, plays, along with Jean Genet,[17] all the roles in the "Parable of the Sower":

> A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants

> were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.[18]

So we will listen, parability requiring that we notice all types of growth, even that we imagine where the birds flew after they stole the fragments of text.

It is a new kind of rigor that does not foreclose flashes of insight because they may not be substantiated in traditional terms, but hopes that a flash that is shared may illuminate another area for yet another reader standing elsewhere. In that sense, when the critic is both the falling seed and the ground on which it falls, as is the text, the result is similar to the mingling of signatures Jacques Derrida describes in *Signsponge*. By using the coincidence that poet Francis Ponge's name is a pun on the French *éponge*, or "sponge," by developing a method of reading Ponge's poetry derived from a deliberately absurd metaphor that reminds us of the value of, at least from time to time, evading traditional hermeneutic regimes, Derrida makes obvious what the critic is always doing even when he believes he is *most* faithful to such regimes, that is, signing another author's text. But because signatures mingle, it is not as simple as that, because Derrida is literally doing what the strictest adherents of authorial intent implicitly claim to do—they putatively sign an author's text not with their own names but by forging the signature of the author himself, saying, in effect, "The author did not write everything he intended to write, so here is the rest." Ghostwriting. This is what we are always doing, but why should Derrida make so explicit that he is signing the texts of Francis Ponge with the name "Francis Ponge," and where does that leave Derrida, or for that matter, us? By literally signing Ponge's name to his text, Derrida in fact converts the idea that the author did not write enough to the possibility that he did not sign the text enough, or sign it in all the right places. The author's signature alone is not enough, nor is his putative style, his "signature" method of writing. There is another way the text must be signed for the author with that author's name (and not just by Derrida):

> Thirdly, and it is more complicated here, we may designate a general signature, or signature of the signature, the fold of the placement in abyss [of the text] where, after the manner of signature in the current sense, the work of writing designates, describes, and inscribes itself as act (action and archive)...which excludes *nothing* since, when the

> placement in abyss succeeds, and is thereby decomposed and produces an event, it is the other, the thing as other, that signs.[19]

When the text becomes an archive in this manner, however, there are any number of *archons* or guardians of the archive who come into play, into aggression, into communication. And though Derrida claims to be on the "threshold" of "a science of chance,"[20] he would no doubt agree that as a general rule what has been made possible here is a form of silent teaching, which is a word he learned from Hannah Weiner, his silent teacher.

As Ron Silliman explains of Weiner's concept, which is really a practice, silent teachers "are those whom Hannah Weiner identifies as sending her subliminal instructions she alone hears and whose content she must determine how best to interpret in a world otherwise deaf to such messages."[21] These teachers are real people who are not aware of having sent Weiner such messages, which, in the late twentieth century for her, and the early twenty-first century for us, must be understood as operating according to a system simultaneously technological and spiritual, two "mediums of communication," which can no longer exist separately, if they ever could.[22] And with the airwaves this open, time is no more of an issue than space. So this book will introduce a lot of silent teachers, which does not preclude but is not eclipsed by any traditional notion of epistemology. This book will claim (claim or show?), for instance, that Thomas Pynchon taught Gustave Le Bon (among others) about crowds, Carolyn Forché taught Rorschach about chaos, Hannah Weiner and James Merrill taught one another about telephones, Sylvia Plath invented electracy for Gregory Ulmer, John Ashbery taught Lord Alfred Douglas that not speaking is indeed daring, Raymond Roussel taught Alan Turing about computers, Larry Eigner taught Deleuze and Guattari about being anti-Oedipal, and Louis Zukofsky taught quantum physics to Karl Marx. This book is dedicated to silent teachers.

II. *Intuitions In*

Intuition is a constantly changing, plural way of apprehending things that is very similar to the sort of silent teaching experienced/espoused by Hannah Weiner. But Weiner is a special case, one whose intuitions are "intuitions in," relying on a sense of clairvoyant poetics but a poetics that always goes back in, into the world of thrown bodies and objects, politics and technologies. Her interest in immediately recognizable political issues such as consumer culture and Native

American rights, among other things, does not "validate" her methods by bringing them back to earth. Rather, one who understands the object of the committed poet or critic in the postmodern era, a postmodernity primarily defined by the universality of the spectacle and the spectacular, recognizes that even the most committed politics is not a politics of earthliness, subjects, or objects in any traditional sense. We are all abjects, in a flow of capital-intensive technologies and processes that work in a spectral sense with earthly effects and affects. We must not only understand things in terms of victims and oppressors but in terms of systems that, due to their very nature, may be understood partly, if not exclusively, by intuition, immediate apprehension that always goes back to an "in" that may be the beginning of the words *inside* or *intuition*. Louis Althusser famously wrote that "ideology has no outside,"[23] a statement that has since been transformed by various readers to mean that there is no outside of ideology or capitalism. *Intuitions In* is not concerned with outsides and insides as such, but instead practices poetic thought as a means of producing intuitions in literature, technology, and politics. These intuitions may or may not produce lasting insights or lead to political praxis, although they always are oriented "in" those directions. *Intuitions In* operates in two (or infinite) ways. First, they are pedagogical simulations of a technoculture which, both in its structure and its rhetorical means, lends new validity to a poetic mode of thinking that seeks relations between hitherto unconnected spheres of culture, often by the means of a "switch word" that moves between radically different forms of discourse, resulting in a new field of knowledge.[24] Second, in connecting these cultural points, they represent the "lines of flight" that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, produce new cultural possibilities rather than simply seeking to "represent" existing cultural formations. One is still working among these formations but imagining new possibilities within/without a given situation:

> Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times.[25]

Noting that Deleuze and Guattari, when speaking of a "stratum," are thinking of the term in its ideological, abstract, ***and*** material instantiations, we see that the "schizoanalysis," as they term it, is a materially grounded practice of interpretation as enactment of

possibilities. If you sense a possibility, whether it was deliberately placed there or not, you pursue it while always planning another line of escape. In that sense, it is a mode of interpretation that, like the "switch word" described by Gregory Ulmer, simulates the politics of freedom that it seeks to produce.

Intuitions In is thus a necessary double articulation of the "in" in order to articulate the inadequacy of traditional spatial categories for cultural understanding in the age of abjection, which is the age in which we replace objects with abjects. It does without the out as much as without the in, or rather, it does things with them while doing without them. Poet Leslie Scalapino imagines a creature called the Gazelle-Dihedral, which is in some ways all creatures, in order to (not) understand this new kind of space. Gazelle-Dihedrals are "humanlike creatures with structures opened to show their organs and muscles who inhabit the emerald dark apparently either cyber or real space.... [T]heir organs-musculature-skeletons are simultaneously displayed to be literally outside and inside at once. These creatures are either protective or threatening, akin to Tantric Buddhist figures."[26] *Intuitions In* also aspires to be "apparently either," having always been in mediation, using the "immediacy" of intuition to return to varying insights concerning a completely mediated world, apparently either the material and the immaterial, or, in Heidegger's thinking of these things, the thought existing in language which is "first attuned in the silence of mood."[27]

Intuitions In addresses the desire for encyclopedic knowledge about global situations and the impossibility of accounting for all the important variations that exist even under the most monolithic instantiations of, say, the "cultural logic of late capitalism," to use Frederic Jameson's phrase. Indeed, Jameson's admission in *Postmodernism* that cognitive mapping will have to continually "reinvent new forms"[28] due to the rapid shifts in global technoculture is even more true now than in the early 1990s. To combine this issue with the concerns of the first section of this chapter, one might ask how the "ob" in objects in general contributes the difficulty of global knowledge. If objects are always scattering and moving in and among subjects in a state of thrownness, as Heidegger and Derrida would have it, then how is one to conceive or justify taking lessons from objects or turning them into object lessons? The rapid shifts in culture we witness now are part of this more basic ontological problem and therefore problematize the senses of "global knowledge" we have traditionally applied to history in general. How does one "contain," in encyclopedic form (whether contained in a book or an electronic

database)—the form of knowledge par excellence—that which does not sit still. Upon closer examination, it would seem that the history of the encyclopedia itself presents substantial problems to traditional concepts of knowledge. Despite their pretense to global knowledge, encyclopedias have historically functioned like maps. That is, they were possible, desirable, and even legible not based upon what they included but upon the principle of compaction and exclusion. As Alan Rauch points out in his historicization of the encyclopedia, this genre functioned as a bourgeois fantasy of global knowledge, where "encyclopedias encapsulated knowledge in relatively compact texts for consumption in private."[29] At best, the encyclopedic aesthetic is a flawed attempt to produce global knowledge. At worst, it is a form of knowledge that is ideologically synonymous with global capitalism's endless proliferation of objects: "From an economic standpoint, knowledge texts [encyclopedias] thus had the potential to be financially rewarding, particularly because their very 'quality' depended on revisions and improvements."[30]

Marxist theory, facing this dilemma, would seem to want to retain the desire for encyclopedic knowledge inasmuch as such knowledge is necessary in combating the global strategies of late capitalism, but to retain it as a desire that cannot be fulfilled and whose methodologies are not necessarily "incremental." In their update of the encyclopedic form, the New Encyclopedia Project, editors Mike Featherstone and Couze Venn seem to recognize this strange position. Their first volume of this project, in fact, is titled, as is their introductory essay, "Problematizing Global Knowledge." Featherstone and Venn in fact are facing what could be termed a very specific aporia whose escape routes—not to be confused with solutions—are problematic precisely because they are so endless. It is the aporia that we arrive at when attempting to classify what is, due to the object's irrevocable association with the event, always singular. "In considering [such] questions," Featherstone and Venn write, "we are trying to use, in what we hope proves to be a new way, an old form, namely, the encyclopaedia."[31] If in no other sense, this attempt to use a traditional object in a novel way aligns the New Encyclopaedia Project with what I am trying to achieve with *Intuitions In*, that is, even while acknowledging the retrograde qualities of particular ways of knowing (intuition associated popularly with "gut feeling" or by Heidegger with "a priori" thought), also allowing for the fact that there is never any type of knowledge that can be wholly dispensed with, precisely because the status of knowledge is what is being called into question here, a questioning which must not only allow for the