

Lisa Robertson

Carina Elisabeth Beddari

THE PRESENT IS UNFINISHED

a conversation

LR Lisa Robertson

CEB Carina Elisabeth Beddari

LR Well, I borrowed¹ my boat from Rousseau, who describes, in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, floating aimlessly in a lake observing only the flickering of his consciousness in concert with the various patterns of afternoon—light, water, breeze, foliage. He calls this the pleasurable sensation of existing.² There is no longer a

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CEB All of your books make their literary borrowings very visible—most of them are built around predecessors, be it genres or figures like Rousseau's boat. Is that a way of making poetry, or writing, possible? The necessity of restriction?

LR I feel this kind of address outwards, to a populated history, isn't a restriction but an opening, an acknowledgement that all the forms of language are hosted by generous predecessors. And yes, this sensation of being hosted is what makes writing possible.

CEB Every sentence is a symposium.

LR Yes!

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CEB Is this pleasurable sensation important in *R's Boat*? It certainly points toward a take on pleasure that is quite different from the one we're addressed with daily, through media etc. Does your understanding of pleasure correspond to the Epicurean concept of pleasure?

LR Yes, in the sense that Epicurus spoke of restraint, moderation, not extremes. In this era of capital, I am committed to a modesty of means.

CEB Isn't this the main issue for all literature? Some of my academic friends are fed up on deconstructive terms. They've started to long for literature based on representation (Emerson). I find that quite sad.

LR I am certain that there is a vast terrain to be explored between deconstruction and representation. One needn't choose one or the other. The indeterminate, disintegrating and fluctuating don't need social media. I would say this is pleasure as a general distribution of affect, rather than an intensely sought acquisition.

foreground and a background, but a cognitive continuum. For me the boat became the figure of this lascivious and boundless perceiving. In terms of composition, this meant an entirely pliable handling of perspective. No subject position, but a distribution of subjectivity as equivalently charged at any point.

JC Now I feel we've already begun to answer this question, but I'll ask you to consider it anyway. What is Utopia?³ [Laughter] You've been using that word at least as far back as I've been reading you. It's in every book, I think.

LR I used to prefer the term Dystopia because, I don't know, it seemed less soft or something. [Laughter]

JC Tougher?

LR Yeah. How can I put this? My idea of Utopia is not that it's an elsewhere, a non-situated

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CEB How familiar are you with the utopian tradition? Thomas More etc.

LR Quite. Fourier is my favourite utopian. Margaret Cavendish is amazing too.

CEB Actually, I dreamt about this question tonight, something about *The Principle of Hope* ... I haven't read either Cavendish or Fourier, but I feel like your idea of Utopia has more in common with Ernst Bloch than many of the other utopian/dystopian theorists? For him, too, Utopia was more of a process than a pre-existing state. And following what you're saying, the present is always in process.

LR I did read Bloch many many years ago, and forgot that I had until I read you here ...

elsewhere to strive towards, nor that it's contained only within an imaginative projection. Utopia could be instead considered almost in phenomenological terms as a sensed present. I have the feeling that political transformation has to be situated in what we are already in the midst of experiencing. The repudiation of the present, of sensing and of relationship, which is the present, is uninteresting and flattened out. There's a plenitude of unrepresented agency already existent. The present⁴ is materially infinite.

TB But characterizing a book as a project seems to imply an element of research, and I was thinking, when you talked about conceptualism, "Well, okay, maybe," but your writing isn't so

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CEB Another thing I've been reminded of while working with this interview, is Merleau-Ponty's works, where 'the present' holds both the past and the future, and the way he sees the world as an open and unfinished task of human action. Your take on the present must be influenced by phenomenology? Phenomenology is profoundly political, in my opinion.

LR I spent a fine summer in the countryside in France reading *Phenomenology of Perception* alongside *The Logic of Sense*. This was around 2004—so yes, as I was making the poems in *R's Boat*. Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the body, on the infinity of sensing does have a political dimension. At the same time, he seems lodged in a psychology of the subject that doesn't quite extend to inter-subjectivity, as Husserl explores it in his late work. Recently, I've been discovering Husserl, through his work on geometry. I'm very excited by it.

much rule-based as research-based. When you say "project" it's more like a research project.

LR Yes. There is a certain component of rule-based method⁵ there, but basically as soon as I get going on a rule I break it. That's why a rule is interesting to me. Not to fulfill it in some way, but just to get it going long enough to set up a pattern of expectation.

LR In a pretty big way in most of *The Weather*, and definitely in a lot of *R's Boat*, it's not the content⁶ of the sentences that's particularly interesting. I wasn't aiming to write or select or

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CEB This is what I was trying to get at when I mentioned "restriction" earlier! I think it must be one of the very best (and oldest) ways of unleashing text: make yourself a rule. Then follow or break it.

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CEB When I first read *R's Boat* on a trip to Vancouver in 2010, I looked for content on every page—I guess that's most readers' initial response. But even after understanding the project, I still think the content is interesting, especially in the sections titled "A Cuff/" and "Utopia/". Not read as the biography of one person, but as a discussion of different concepts: form, gender, pleasure etc.

LR Well there's also a great deal of very neutral, almost phatic statement-making. But after all it is impossible to avoid the presence of content—language contains us, our experiences. It's there whether or not we want it there. I think, along with Benveniste, in his late work on *Baudelaire*, that language functions as a free-floating historical unconscious. It seems to be an important role of restriction, in your terms, to permit this immanent, impersonal agency to appear.

work with ‘good’ sentences or interesting sentences. I was much more interested in working with very banal or ‘bad’ sentences. It’s banal yet true to observe that any aesthetic and stylistic judgment that you might make about any unit of literature, from a body⁷ of work to a book to a phrase, is completely contextual. There’s no real value in any content. Value’s just what relationships are built through sequence, through temporal distribution. Whether you’re talking about an institution or a paragraph it doesn’t really matter what the units are. It’s what starts happening between the units, and across the time structure that’s interesting.

TB Am I imagining things or does the question “what is love?” occur across several books?

LR I think it must. It’s in *Debbie*.⁸ It’s in the poem “She Has Smoothed Her Pants to No End” in *Debbie*, “And if you call that sophistry/ then what is love?” Is it in *R’s Boat* too?

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CEB In my reading, the notion of the body is important in *R’s Boat*. You have the distributed subjectivity you’ve talked about in these interviews, but the voice(s) in the poems still come off as embodied. It’s not authentic in a biographical way, but it’s still situated. Was embodiment important in your examination of perspective and subjectivity?

LR My strong conviction is that there is no subjectivity without embodiment. My body is my only way of being in social time.

TB I’m not sure, but it was certainly in one or two others. [Pause] I had the notion of a sort of second order irony when I was reading this.

LR What do you mean by “second order ...”

TB Well, for example, the utterance “What is love,” given the contexts in which it’s posed, leaves open the possibility of the question not being serious. The question of love is not resolvable and therefore it’s pointless to ask, “What is love?”

LR Yes. But one would recognize that intellectually, at the same time finding oneself in a position where it seems like a pertinent question to be asking.⁹

TB Also it seems like a complaint when you say it.

LR Mm-hm. Whine!

TB And there are other words—I know I said last time there are repetitions that occur through all of your books—there are words that you just seem to really enjoy, like “louche.”

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CEB One of the things that struck me with *Debbie*, which was the first of your works I read, was the way it makes use of typography. That way of altering the text is not as prominent in your later books. Why not?

LR *Debbie* was working with the idea of screens—in the graphic, cinematic, and Freudian sense. So I worked with a typographer to bring those parts to completion. Other works haven’t needed that attention. But I have worked with artists to design each of my book covers, since a book must have a cover. I’m not interested in simply applying design—it has to work with the book as a whole.

LR I'm trying now to discipline myself to not use certain words. There's this Irish poet, I think her name is Mairead Byrne—I'm not sure if that's how you pronounce her name—she teaches in the eastern States now—but I heard her give an incredible reading in London, and this one line that she used—I'm not sure if she used the line in a poem or whether it was part of the chit chat around introducing the poem, but she said "I now no longer use better words." [Laughter] And that seems to be pretty good advice¹⁰—to be a person who no longer uses better words.

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- LR The question about love is quite serious. It's perhaps the central question of my work. It's one of the most important political questions.
- CEB Whenever I hear that question I think of a well-known interview with Derrida, where he's asked to talk about love, and replies with another question: "Is love the love of someone or the love of something?"
- LR A third love, the love of a work of art or culture might disturb the binary he sets up.

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- CEB For some reason, this had me thinking about the relation between literature and advice. Do you ever see the author as an advisor?
- LR Georgic is the poetry of advice, and so are horoscopes. I adore both, unequally. (For many years I did write horoscopes, under a pseudonym. I tried to give very good advice. Advice about redecorating.)
- CEB Ha, that's really funny! What do you see in the stars for this year's Audiatur festival?
- LR The long retrograde of Mars this spring will make social life very auspicious. And the new moon in Aries at the end of March opens much freedom, unexpected encounters ...

JC One of the things that kept coming up for me when reading the essay in *Nilling* titled "Time and the Codex," is this idea of reading as a Utopian space. At the end of the poem "Utopia" in *R's Boat* you have an image of a decaying reading chair. This image made me think that any model of Utopia has to include some idea of reading, or a text, or a poem. You talk about reading as an attempt to give over to the otherness of the text, about losing one's hold on one's self¹¹ as a kind of Utopian act or space—can you comment on that?

LR Yes. That is so.

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- CEB What about recognition? I tend to be skeptical of reading for recognition, but sometimes I think my skepticism might be unfair.
- LR Reading varies wildly. Recognition can be important. For example, as a very young reader, in the 80s, I constantly felt affronted that I could not find a point of recognition in the extremely masculinist philosophy and literature I was reading. To discover feminist thinking and writing was a recognition that gave me the will to write. That was a very relevant kind of pleasure.
- CEB Who were your first feminist comrades back then?
- LR At the same time I met a group of young women writers in Vancouver—Catriona Strang and Christine Stewart were my collaborators and peers—and I discovered the work of the women expatriate writers living in Paris after the First World War—Stein, Barnes, Loy, Sylvia Beach, Nathalie Barney. Suddenly, I had a double context, both immediate and historical. A little later, when I was a bookseller in the late 80s and early 90s, I was blown away by the work of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, as I was meeting women writers from Quebec—Erin Moure, Gail Scott, and Nicole Brossard. Things got very exciting for me then.

SQ How did *R's Boat* come about? I know there was the chapbook with Nomados, and some of the pieces—"Utopia/" for one—were constructed from text you gleaned from your own archive. Is this a process that continued?

LR All of the poems in the book are built from my archival gleanings. I went over the entire heap of 60-odd notebooks afresh for each poem,¹² each time from a different point of view, or with a different quest in mind, and sometimes with years having passed in the interim. But with each poem I ended up recomposing the gleanings according to very different principles. The first couple were slightly programmatically composed, then less and less so. The poems were written over about 5 or 6 years, so my priorities shifted. But my simple idea was that I wanted to make an autobiographical book that was not self-referential.

LR I've been working through this pronoun matter since my work first started being published, with *The Apothecary*. So even in that work, which is all first person, I kind of fell

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LR I should say that this was the most embarrassing work I have undertaken. The notebooks were in a public archive. I had to go to the archive to read my own work. Friends and colleagues would see me doing this. I felt like I had been caught examining my own bodily excretions.

into this idea of using a first person that I didn't biographically identify with. Using the first person as an impersonal opening device,¹³ as a way of not pinning language to my experience but opening language to other experience. I'm not quite sure how I got to that idea, I'm not sure at all, but at that time I was reading a lot of Leslie Scalapino and a fair amount of William James and Stein and Lyn Hejinian and Steve McCaffery. But somehow all the stuff I was reading and the conversations I was having with my friends, Catriona and Christine, led me to the idea that I could use this "I" in a non-referential, and therefore, according to my thinking at that time in my life, an anti-lyrical way. And it was

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- CEB This discussion about pronouns makes me think of the traditional distinction between poetry and prose, where the lyrical "I" usually is understood as close to the author, whilst an "I" in fictional prose reads as ... well, fictional. It's strange how strong these hierarchies are. Pronouns are truly powerful tools. When I first read Juliana Spahr's *The Transformation*, her use of pronouns was really enlightening.
- LR I guess I'm interested in the first person as an experimental agency. I'm very influenced by the French linguist Emile Benveniste's work on subjectivity and pronouns. For him there is only intersubjectivity. The place of the "I" is given by the other, in an always entwining reciprocity between I and you. Pronouns, and by extension subjectivities, are precisely transformational, that is, form in dynamic movement.
- CEB Right. I've never read Benveniste, but I will! In *The Transformation*, Spahr uses third person plural, probably for the reasons you list, and in search for a more inclusive place to speak from.

a real turning point for me in my work. By the time I was writing *The Weather*, when I fell upon this first person plural, it really became this idea of posing a pronoun as a point of identification that was somehow really spectral, or other, rather than sewn up in a traditionally-conceived notion of subjectivity. It really opened for me and it became ... I could think of this practice of the pronoun in very opened-up political terms, and I could think of the expansion of the field of subjectivity that such pronominal practice could invest as being really where I wanted to go with my work, and also as being the way in which the work functioned politically or socially.

SO The phrasal gesture, or the signature structure that you have been perfecting over several books now seems to have taken on even greater clarity in this book—if that’s even possible. It’s a way to build a sentence that is propulsive backward and forward, and yet exists utterly independent within a chain of other like-minded phrases. It is densely, intellectually layered and imagistically condensed. And you offer, in pieces such as “A Cuff/,” which begins “It is always the wrong linguistic moment,” and “The Present/” and throughout actually, lines that can be read multiply, but certainly as notes on your process. Did you sense something different click with this text?

LR I’ve always been completely seduced by sentences, certainly. I think I’m a sentence-lover before I’m a writer. Much of my earlier work has been testing the internal structure of sentences as wildly psycho-sexual-social units. But here I wanted to find a way to include extremely banal, flat, overwrought and bad sentences, by devising a sequencing movement¹⁴ that could include anything. My thought was

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- LR Walking home tonight, having just bought a used copy of *The Painter of Modern Life*, I thought of the poem as a conversation between the pelvis and the pavement. That thought really made me want to write.
- CEB Talking about movement, the epigram from Rousseau in *R’s Boat* has gotten a lot of attention, but I’d like to ask about the book’s second epigram, from Michèle Bernstein. “We have now reached a stage of experimentation with new collective constructions and new synthesis, and there is no longer any point in combating the values of the old world by a Neo-Dadaist refusal. Whether the values be ideological, artistic, or even financial, the proper thing is to unleash inflation everywhere.” Can you comment on why you included Bernstein? She was involved in the Situationist International. Has that movement been a major influence for you?
- LR I wanted to see Bernstein and Rousseau together, like two flaneurs. I still strongly identify with the call to inflate everything, as a tactic—stylistic, ideological, you name it. It’s really what I do—I inflate language. And yes, Michèle Bernstein has been a big influence since the late 80s when I read about her in *Lipstick Traces*. A few years ago I translated part of her novel, *All the King’s Horses*. She supported Debord with her freelance writing. That has given me a certain courage. I’ve been a freelancer since 1994, when I closed my bookstore. I also feel the need to counteract the heroic role Debord has assumed within the historiography of Situationism, which was after all, collective. Bernstein was not a minor participant, but thoroughly present as a writer and a thinker.

not to judge, but to float the disparity of the units in a continuum. I think what happens is that the caesura, the space between, becomes extremely active, more active than the sentences themselves are. This has the effect of making any sentence semantically legible in several registers—the meta-textual, as you point out, may be one of them.

LR The first Rousseau I read was the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*; I read that after I started writing walks, the walks that became part of the *Office for Soft Architecture* work. What led me to walks and walking was Situationism and texts about the 19th century flaneur. So I was already primed towards walking as a kind of radical aesthetic practice, and then I belatedly discovered the walk as a literary genre through Rousseau. I spent a lot of time reading Rousseau's walks and thinking about that work—to the extent that I actually reduplicated one of his walks through Paris ... I forget the number of the walk now that can be actually reduplicated, since many of them aren't mapable as walks. There's one so-called promenade where he's floating in a boat, snoozing.

JC Is that what led you to choose the shot of yourself as a kid in a boat for the author photo in *R's Boat*?¹⁵

LR Yeah. That floating promenade is cited in an epigraph too. I had so much pleasure in reading Rousseau's walks, I moved on to reading the *Confessions* and other work, his "Essay on the Origin of Languages," and the political discourses. I had already been reading quite a lot of 18th century literature and was really interested in the transition between an 18th century classicism with its irony and its theatrical sense of a performed subjectivity, the transition from neo-Classicism to early Romanticism and Romantic sincerity. It just seemed like such a huge shift that I was repeatedly trying to imagine for myself how that could have happened historically. I feel we are still lodged in the outcome and problems of that shift. So reading Rousseau's *Confessions* became part of my attempt to track that transformation.

JC That's really interesting. I'm thinking¹⁶ of the poem "Face" from *R's Boat*—the one with all the "I" sentences—I heard you read this at Berkeley, so I guess that was 2002, and what I loved about it then and still is the way that it's both an authentic "I" and not at the same time. You spoke about having sourced your sentences

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LR I was 12 years old, I was at my cousins' cottage on Gull Lake, and I had just been allowed to drive the 10 horse Seagull outboard on my own for the first time. The raft in the back ground is the original utopia.

from years of journals, so they are all ‘you’ in some sense.

LR No, they’re not, since my journal is not diaristic. Mostly it’s little citations of stuff I like.

JC Okay, but still, there’s this way they’re coming from your history, from the history of being you.

LR Yeah.

JC There’s no way that one reads those sentences thinking, “Oh, she feels this” or “Oh, this happened to her, or that happened to her.” But to me they’re playing that border between a rejection of subjectivity and perhaps a longing for that, a reaching towards it, or a flirting with it. How do you think about it?

LR Well, the first person pronoun is usually organized around or deployed in reference to

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CEB I read some place (I think it was in Sina Queryas’s introduction to her interview with you) that you were referred to as “the thinking woman’s Anne Carson.” Well, I’m just curious, do you read Carson, and do you feel related to her in any way?

LR Carson’s and my work started coming out in books around the same time. I first read her *Short Talks* in the mid-90s, and loved it—the ironical tone, the stylistic restraint, the proximity of the work to a Montaigne-esque essayism. In recent years I have read her less, other than what I see in the London Review of Books, which I subscribe to, and where she often publishes. Obviously, we both have a strong relationship to classical literature, but she is a scholar in that field academically, and I am an amateur, merely a reader.

the situatedness of a speaker,¹⁷ the enunciative present of a speaker. There’s a kind of focused, centralized organization of that “I” in the time of utterance. It’s always referring back to the moment of subjectivity, of enunciation, which becomes a way of organizing narrative, story, and arguably psychological structure and self-experience. But I was interested to see

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CEB Julie Carr refers to an event where you read from *R’s Boat*, and says she then understood the “I” as both authentic and not at the same time. Are you comfortable with reading from *R’s Boat*?

LR Sure. I have no issues with reading from it. Nor from any of my work. It’s performance.

CEB One of the participants in Audiatur 2014, Fredrik Nyberg, whom you’ve already met at the seminar in November, wrote a thesis titled “How does the poem sound?” How does the performed poem relate to the one on the page? What does a voice and a body add to a text? Are these questions important or interesting to you?

LR For each poet there is a different relation between page and performance. In my work, I have often used the poetry reading as a reflexive pause in a longer writing process. When I read the poem to an audience, I come to understand the text differently, and this has often helped me to make formal and other kinds of choices when I return to my desk. More recently, I am becoming interested in the space of the poetry reading—how very slight, even minimal alternations in the spatial conventions of the reading can strongly inflect the reception of the text, and its potential meanings. Things as small as sitting at a table rather than standing a lectern, perhaps, what is on that table, what direction I face when reading, lighting. Also, I often make last minute decisions about what and how to read based on the work of the person I’m reading with, and the mode of delivery of that work, who is in the audience, what the room feels like, both acoustically and socially.

if I could use the 1st person as a distribution, rather than in a way that always would refer back to a point of origin.

JC Distribution?

LR I think this interest came directly out of my experience of writing the prose texts in *The Weather*, this desire I had to experiment with subjectivity as a surface effect that had no narrative arc, had no point of veracity which would guarantee its representational unity. So basically that's why I was interested in learning about the descriptive tradition of English meteorology. It seemed like an interesting thing to attempt to transpose that lack of a center into an autobiographical text. We are required to behave as if we are a center of our life, of our biography, as if we originate our own experience. You know, this would be the mark of sanity and a well-socialized persona. But in terms of a text I just wanted to see what would happen if that enunciation was completely decentered, if there was no point of veracity or origin that "I" authenticated, if that first person was distributed much as a weather system is distributed.¹⁸

JC Okay, so I have some other questions that are kind of technical. One of those questions

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CEB David Hume?

LR Cigarette?

has to do with repetition. So much of your recent work makes use of anaphora and other forms of repetition. I wonder where that interest comes from.

LR I was a major Gertrude Stein junky; in my late 20s early 30s I was reading tons of Stein with my friends and studying Stein with Peter Quartermain and George Bowering and other teachers. I just loved Gertrude Stein. And then in the late 80s reading Stein led pretty organically to reading Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*. Her use of repetition is quite different from Steinian repetition, but I was really interested by the way Hejinian uses repetition as a compositional motif in *My Life*.

Repetition, whether it's structural or stylistic, a motif or a more substantive repetition of phrase or lexical unit, is partly what helps me get to this surface effect that I'm seeking, the sense of a distribution. It's partly what blocks or disallows a more centralized narrative construction. With repetition there's always this sense of beginning again, so you're always more or less at the beginning. I can't remember if that's actually a quote or crib from Stein or not, but she does talk about the continuous present,¹⁹ doesn't she?

These questions are also really interesting to me in terms of various philosophical

queries that were going on in early modernist thinking, and that continue in the present. Say, Henri Bergson's thought or a bit later Merleau-Ponty's thought, then Deleuze's. The question of the continuous present was introduced to me by Stein through her practice of repetition and then I began to diversify my thinking about it through my readings of philosophy. As my readings of philosophy repeatedly problematized and brought the concept of the continuous present to the foreground, the more I experimented with repetition in my texts.

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CEB There's something about repetition and the way it creates a cycle, almost some sort of ecology. A Danish poet, Inger Christensen, comes to mind. Perhaps it's far fetched, but this kind of writing (disallowing a centralized narrative) somehow seems more committed.

LR I read Christensen's work only recently, but immediately felt a resonance. But I don't feel that commitment can be attached to a particular style or procedure or aesthetic. Narration, in my view, can be very committed. Fanny Howe's novels would be an example of that.

CEB You're probably right. Regarding Christensen, I'm reading a PhD-thesis about the ecocritical aspects of her poetry right now. It reminded me of a recent debate in Norway, where some authors fired off against the critics, saying that most book reviews focus too much on the aesthetic and ignore ethical qualities. It was claimed that ethical commitment might be a literary quality in itself. I cannot come to agree with that, and discussing quality does not seem very interesting to me, but I still think the relation between aesthetics and ethics is important to investigate.

LR I agree that in the best work these two questions are not separate. Think of Celan for example.

But my sense of the present is quite poly-temporal. I mean to me, to talk about the 'continuous present' doesn't exclude a profound interest in historical style or historicity per se. I've always been deeply motivated by thinking about sentences and sentence structure, the shapeliness of the sentence, and exploring historical transformations and transitions in the conceptions of what a sentence can perform, how a sentence unfolds and shapes itself, and how utterances themselves shape subjectivity. For example, 18th century sentences are²⁰ so different from the contemporary norm. My study of the structure of sentence has moved back and forth between the 18th century and the modern or contemporary—Leslie Scalapino's sentences, for example.

JC Since we're talking about the historicity of the sentence, can we talk about the essay form and its history and your interest in moving between poem and essay? What does that mean to you?

LR Well, I'm a repeated reader of Montaigne's essays and some critical work around Montaigne—Jean Starobinski and Auerbach. Reading Montaigne's essays is still such a

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LR I'd like to know something about 18th century sensations too.

decentering, amazing, pleasurable and dense experience. Although I've had a strong relationship to academic intellectual culture, my training is not specifically within that culture. I've overlapped with it at different points, but in fact, I never wrote a thesis, I never wrote a dissertation, so I managed to escape some of that very intense formation. In terms of my own formation I found that I was more interested in quite a traditional essay—traditional in the sense of a Montaigne essay—as an open exploration. Montaigne added to his essays over years and years, so you can track the gradual accretion that becomes an essay. I've also been really excited by reading Adorno's essay called "The Essay as Form." He's rejecting any sort of Cartesian shaping of causation, and opening the essay as a kind of series of forays that don't necessarily relate to each other by typical causal, temporal or cognitive chains. Equivocation, humour and paradox are permitted.

If I tell myself that I'm writing an essay it feels very freeing to me. It feels almost more free than to tell myself I'm writing a poem, partly because the cultural projections and expectations around subjectivity and expressivity are completely different in the essay, at least for me. It's been easier for me to be more playful in that form. So, yeah, I've always been

very, very interested in genre, and genre²¹ has always helped me to explore history. Genre in literature has given me ways to sit down and write. If I say, "I am writing an eclogue" or "I am writing an epic" I have a task to undertake. My developing interest in the essay has freed up and opened what those tasks might be in an increasingly liberating way. I'm not interested any more in working through classical genre. For a time this seemed to be a really stimulating screen for thinking through problems of gender and language, but now it's the essay that is helping me think through problems of subjectivity and language, which may be gendered, and which aren't necessarily organized around any concept of the self as a unified entity.

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- CEB Do you want your poetry to be read as poetry? Or, to put it another way, do think your poetry should be read in a totally different manner than your essays?
- LR I want my poetry to be read, full stop. When I publish it, I let go of it. The reader can do whatever pleases her.
- CEB How does one thing end up a poem and another thing an essay? Do you always use genre as a starting point the way you describe it here?
- LR Often the difference is economic. My essays are commissioned, and I am usually paid by the word. That's part of the way I make my living. My poems are mostly not commissioned and function in a different literary economy. When I talk about genre here, I don't necessarily mean poem or essay—which I think of as forms. I mean the classic genres—pastoral, epic, georgic. And often my starting point is a commission! It is helpful to have somebody else's need in mind, in order to begin.

JC Thinking back to the discussion we were having last night about the difference between ‘thinking’ and the ‘inner voice,’ I was wondering, well, does the essay get to be thinking and the poem get to be inner voice? It wouldn’t ever be as simple as that, but is there a difference in terms of who or what gets to speak, and I think you’re saying there is, when we call it a poem or when we call it an essay?

LR Well, for me a poem is probably hardly ever an expression of what I might consider an inner voice. When I brought up that question, it was as an abstract query.²² When I write poems, probably not for a good 25 years have I had a sense of it being in relationship to an inner voice. It was letting go of that idea that helped me get to the point where the poems I was

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LR Now I’m questioning this assertion. My sense today—March the 2, 2014 at 9:30 am on a Sunday, after a night of working on poems till midnight—is that the site of the inner voice may have shifted from one of putative representation within the poem, to a very active working tool within the composition process. How else do I know what to do as I work, if I don’t closely attend to a kind of inner conversation with the material? Why do I include this fragment and not that one? When do I extend or curtail? When do I break a rule, or how do I form a rule? Compositional judgement seems to be a reflection of the play of the inner voice, which is always in dynamic relationship to the matter at hand—a vocabulary, a source text, an imagined receiver, a politics. Is the inner voice desire?

writing had some sort of complexity that sustained my interest in writing as a practice.

JC That sounds like you actually believe there is an inner voice, but that it just might not be very interesting ...

[Laughter]

LR Maybe, maybe. Maybe in a certain way the practice of writing has been a means of critiquing or querying or opening or distributing my own experience of whatever an inner voice might be. For me whatever I might identify as being an inner voice is not very compelling. It’s really what I want to escape from when I write, what I want to expose to as much otherness and strangeness as possible. Much as I want to escape the confines of gender. Part of what caused me to ask that question—what is the difference between thinking and an inner voice²³—was reading a biography of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein describes, or the biographer describes, Wittgenstein’s conception of what thinking was. Reading this I felt quite

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LR I should say too that this question was introduced to me by my friend, the poet and philosopher Denise Riley, who was reflecting on the relation between the inner voice and thinking for a number of years in the mid 2000s. It was in her guest room in North London that I read the Wittgenstein bio, so my experience of that book was very shaped by my conversations with Denise at the breakfast table.

profoundly that I'd never experienced anything like what Wittgenstein said he experienced as thinking.

LR I'm interested in those sorts of paradoxical or ambivalent or equivocal relationships between kinds of statements, and how the effect of truth or sincerity migrates very quickly among positions and so can't really be located in any statement per se. And it may be that this effect of truth or sincerity in a text actually doesn't come from any content whatsoever, but maybe comes from the very paradoxical nature of a sequence, and the differences that are set up and come into play between kinds of statements. It seems to me that, if you're talking about sincerity, uncertainty²⁴ and equivocation is perhaps the most truthful position to be occupying.

TB Truthful in the sense of honest. And sincere.

LR Yes. But that probably says a lot about my sense of my own psychology. Somebody else might not agree with that at all. But I'm also talking about sincerity as a literary effect, and what sets up this sense of sincerity in a text is

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CEB Society often rewards 'strong voices' and clear convictions. Not the least in oral contexts, like debates and panels. We need more space for the kind of truths you talk about here. Slow, ambivalent truths.

LR For sure. Slow food? Slow truth.

also perhaps the equivocal relation between statements. You see this in a writer like Montaigne. Reading his *Essays* you get a sense of incredible human wholeness because of the equivocal nature of the statements that succeed one another in a reading experience. Reading one of his essays, you're actually not going to learn very much about Virgil or any of the topics that the essays purport to be about. You're not going to find some truth statement about death or a thumb or sex in old age. What you're going to find is somebody's mind at work in time across different kinds of relationships within language. If you read one of the editions of Montaigne where there's a code, so you can see what was added at what point, you see how these texts were built up over decades, and that the equivocation which each essay performs is also a representation of the shifts that happen within our own thinking and experience over the course of decades passing. You know, how you can feel certain about something at 23 that at 50 just ... [Laughter] But what's interesting in Montaigne is that he might leave that kernel of earlier certainty intact. He doesn't decide to excise it from the text. He just puts something different next to it. I think that's incredible. And I feel that's what gives those essays their rigour. The

reason Montaigne's essays have rigour is because they hold human ambivalence within their structure.

LR I believe that thinking is emancipatory. That is why it is frightening, to individuals and to political regimes and institutions. Thinking is a form of acting, an acting within the space of language. I don't mean language in any autonomous sense. Language is already historical, it's never not political and historical. To act within language is always to act among others,²⁵ and in the temporality of others. We change language itself by thinking and writing. Other people's thinking and writing has given me the space and the will to work. I hope to contribute to this quorum, however modestly, because this is what it means to live in history and in politics. It is already a world, already a utopia. I want to insist that creative and intellectual activity is

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CEB Yes! I think we all need to repeat this all the time. One thing I'm really sick of, is the idea of the author as a lonely genius.

LR Yes, sometimes the author is a lonely sod. Or a sad sod. Sometimes the others one writes among are dead.

CEB Montaigne might be an example of that. He's often framed in his lonely tower, but once one reads his essays, they are populated with all kinds of people.

LR Yes! This is one of the things I treasure in him. And he too performed an Epicurian withdrawal from political life in order to write.

real,²⁶ although it's situated outside the mainstream of the economy. The neoliberal political economy is not real. It is violent, and aggressive because it wants to claim the space of reality in order to quantify it. What we are doing, speaking together, reading and publishing and critiquing one another's texts, eating at tables and arguing, loving each other, giving life to one another, is already embodied utopia. That

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CEB Can an artist, writer or intellectual still be 'free' and critical these days, when criticism is so easily assimilated?

LR I think that depends on the writer's institutional setting. Perhaps with economic fundamentalism taking over the universities, the universities will no longer be the factories of critique. They have been assimilated. I am Epicurean, and persist with my dream of a shack apart from those protocols, although I acknowledge the obscene romanticism of that dream. I do think though that part of the poet's work is to compose a life, not to accept the given protocols and institutions. Maybe composing a life is more important than composing a poem.

But I want to add that I believe we have a mandate to be free and critical. We must re-invent the forms of criticality, as we must reinvent our institutions and quotidian lives.

CEB Re-invention by means of revolution, perhaps? It seems to me that the task of composing a life becomes more and more evident to poets. It's prominent in many of the works invited to this year's Audiatur festival: *R's Boat* certainly counts among them (one of the many questions in the book, is, if i remember it correctly: "how do people work and sleep?"), and one of the publications by the Swedish small press Chateaux, which is called *Vårdagens cirklar* (*The circles of every day life*), where poet Martin Högström goes to the core of this exact question.

LR Revolution? Perhaps. But preferably in the way you talked about earlier, in relation to Bloch. Revolution as the

opening of a new relationship with time, a relationship that flourishes in the opened present. As we write these words, the Ukraine is falling to Putin and the future looks terrifying. The speed of appropriation of popular political overthrow by a militarized far right is acted out all around us. I feel frightened when I think of this. Our revolutions have to happen in kitchens, in conversations, in our relationship with animals. Perhaps love is a kind of revolution.

CEB Since we've already mentioned Inger Christensen, I'd like to answer this with a quote from *Det (It)*: "Et samfund kan være så stenet/At alt er en eneste blok/Og indbyggermassen så benet/At livet er gået i chok//Og hjertet er helt i skygge/Og hjertet er nesten hørt op/Til nogen begynder at bygge/En by der er blød som en krop." In Susanne Nields translation, it reads: "A society can be so stone-hard/That it fuses into a block/A people can be so bone-hard/That life goes into shock//And the heart is all in shadow/And the heart has almost stopped/Till some begin to build/A city as soft as a body"... The English version loses its rhyme scheme in the last two lines. But it's still striking.

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LR All these activities together are the sensational season we call Spring. That's when it all begins—Printemps d'érable, Printemps Arabe, Mai '68, the return of growth and desire. Where there is no desire there can't be politics either. Time is the only medium for having a body, extending a voice, acting towards others. Lucretius, who was an Epicurean, begins his poem *On the Nature of Things* with an invocation of Venus as Spring. Spring is an opening in time. He needs her to calm down the political situation so he can have the peace to write. Maybe now we need to heat up the political situation so we can write. The festival of desire can erupt anywhere. Marx, who was also an Epicurean, said in his dissertation on the atomist philosophers "Since according to Epicurus time is change as change, the reflection of appearance in itself, the nature of appearance is justly posited as objective, sensation is made the real criterion of concrete nature ..." I love that statement: sensation is made the real criterion of concrete nature. That's a good definition of both desire and politics.

doesn't mean it's simple. It has to be reinhabited at each turn. This ongoing reinhabitation is the necessary amazement.²⁷ It's politics, it's the future, and it's happening in kitchens and in online spaces and classrooms and gardens right now. It's a resistance.

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