Jena Osman

Arve Kleiva

A LETTER FROM
JENA OSMAN

on *The Network* and a reader's
response to that book

JO   Jena Osman

AK   Arve Kleiva

JO   Hi, Arve

I'm glad to hear that. I hoped that there would be the same sense of discovering an infinite number of connections as I felt myself while doing the research for these works.

I hadn't really connected the failed mission of my writing "The Franklin Party" with the failed mission of Henry Hudson, but now that you mention it, it's definitely there. Although 'failures' can be frustrating/embarrassing, they can also be fruitful. This is why I'm interested in error and accident as phenomena that push thinking forward. As I wrote in "The Knot," "the mistake shows the way." An error works against the norm, tears holes in what is taken for granted, proposes an alternative possibility. Whether these 'serendipities' lead to revolutions (in thinking) is up for debate. But they can certainly lead to a re-perceiving of accepted narratives.

I usually think of parataxis as pointing to the space in-between—to the link space that hasn't been filled according to conventional expectations. In other words, the space between two clauses, two sentences, two ideas, is still there, but words haven't been plugged in to do the work of coordination. The grammatical middle manager has been dismissed. So it's this very open blank where something unexpected might happen. We know there's a connection to be made, and we use the materials (the facts and timelines) at hand to do so, but that connection is essentially indeterminate, it could have been made otherwise.

When I was working on the "Financial District" poem, I started with two elements: the history of Manhattan Streets in the Wall Street area and the etymologies of words that had to do with finance. The combination of the two elements felt too mechanical, too procedural, so I decided to add in something very narrative as a counterweight. The italicized section is the closest I've ever come to writing fiction. I was thinking of Leslie Scalapino's work a lot while writing this part—in my mind it is an homage to her invented/real worlds—she was and is a very important writer for me.

The urgent desire to find the Northwest Passage was based on the need to find more efficient trade routes for the British in the 19th century. Although a route was eventually found, it wasn't particularly useable—until recently. Climate change is opening up these

territories to more economic exploitation, which in turn causes further environmental shifts, perhaps suggesting that the tsunami of capital is melting the polar ice.

Words are the product of their usage, and I'm interested in trying to map out those uses. As I say in the book, if I could follow the history of the words I'm looking at, maybe I could understand the history of the times. But I'm not a linguist, so this is more of a fantasy than a reality. The word maps I trace in *The Network* are thoroughly amateur, the product of my trying to 'translate' the entries I found in a book by Eric Partridge called *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*.

My interest in connected etymology and history was sparked by the work of two poets who have been really important to me: Cecilia Vicuña and Tina Darragh. I quote from Vicuña in the first poem of *The Network*: "To enter words in order to see." This is from her book *Palabrarmás* (translated by Eliot Weinberger and Suzanne Jill Levine in the criminally out of print *Unraveling Words & the Weaving of Water*), which begins "The original book Palabrarmás was born from a vision in which individual words opened to reveal their inner associations,

allowing ancient and newborn metaphors to come to light." She goes on to make the power of etymology explicit ("A history of words would be a history of being …") through her own verse lines and an extended mix of quotations from Ernest Fenollosa, Heraclitus, Heidegger, and others. In that book, there were moments like this:

"Truth, in English, is derived from the Indo-European root deru, to be firm, solid, steadfast. Suffixed form variant drew-o, in Germanic trewan, in Old English treow, tree."

And these moments were clearly in the back of my mind as I sat down for the first time with Eric Partridge's dictionary.

In 1993, Leave Books published a chapbook by Tina Darragh called *adv. fans—the 1968 series*. This book is very rare, almost impossible to find, but thankfully Craig Dworkin has posted it on his incredibly useful small press poetry archive, *Eclipse*. In this piece etymology is read as the record of a specific historical moment. Visual collages made from folded-over dictionary pages are sandwiched above and below by definitions of words that came into existence in 1968. Of this work Darragh has said that she

was trying "to investigate what went wrong with language in 1968. I remembered the dissolution of alternative living arrangements and businesses as beginning with words—the failure of political projects as being partly a language problem." And so this book, too, was in my mind as I worked the etymological charts in *The Network*.

Yes, as I say above, accident, play, following whims—such actions are very important to my process. I gather the materials I want to work with (the products of my various obsessions), but then I try to get the materials to tell me what to do. I know it's not equivalent to what someone like John Cage was doing with his chance procedures (another important figure for me), but I'm interested in starting with a question that's based in experiment: "what would happen if …"

In the U.S., the example given of the liar's paradox is "I always lie." It's funny how the example changes in your language. ["All Cretans are liars, said the Cretan Epimenides." — The Epimenides Paradox (ed.)] I'm not sure whether such a difference counts as a 'mistake,' but I'm interested in these misalignments, these almost-equivalencies. The 'law' can't stabilize in the face of

such differences. Rather, those differences, those slips revealed by language, reveal where there's work to be done, investigations to be conducted.

I think about how on the one hand, we naturally look for connections—connections are pleasing because they give us the sense of some kind of order, some kind of larger system at work. I start the book with an epigraph from "The Garden of Forking Paths" by Borges. In that story, time is discussed as multiple tracks that happen simultaneously (in one track you and I may be corresponding about a book called *The Network*, in another you and I never connect, in another we are sworn enemies, etc.). Such a conception fits the random sequence of a life into a larger grid structure, and that sense of structure is comforting. But on the other hand, seeing all events as the result of a larger system can be a symptom of paranoia, and that is not at all comforting.

The idea of "The Franklin Party" being a ghost story intrigues me. Everything we write (or say) is haunted by a host of alternatives that we've rejected for one reason or another. Even these sentences that I'm writing to you now are the result of hundreds of mental edits …

The ghost is an alternative, a double that il-lustrates how things can be otherwise. Henry James wrote a story called "The Jolly Corner." The American protagonist spends most of his life in Europe until he inherits the family home in New York. Upon his return he goes to the empty house every night to try and discover the man he would have been if he had not left in the first place … he succeeds at meeting his own ghost and it is heart-stopping.

Yes, "The Franklin Party" was a poem that I lived with for a long time (decades). I describe its lifespan in the piece itself.

Rosmarie Waldrop, in her essay "Alarms & Ex-cursions," wrote "In the early stages of my writ-ing all the poems were about my mother and my relation to her. Rereading them a bit later, I decided I had to get out of this obsession. This is when I started to make collages. I would take a novel and decide to take one or two words from every page. The poems were still about my mother. So I realized that you don't have to worry about contents: your preoccupations will get into the poem no matter what."

I think your comments indicate that you are picking up on the fact that my preoccupations have been fairly consistent over a very long period of time!

Thank you for your thoughtful reading of my work.

Best,
Jena

AK   dear jena,

yes, i have questions. or, do i?

★ the failed mission, project, adventure, investment, assignment,–
seems to be important to your writing?

this figures prominently in "NETWORK 3: The Franklin Party,"
but can be found and re-found throughout the poem(/book). sad
and funny, the history of european failings to reach india and other
eastern destinations has become a history of the world. the ameri-
cas were discovered to europeans that way; manhattan to the dutch
east india company.

"1845. Franklin (age 59) and a crew of 129 men ship out to discover
a shortcut to Asia through the Northwest Passage—the mythic
waterway that runs from the Atlantic to the Pacific by way of the
Arctic. They are never seen again.
|
Our most complete maps of the Arctic region results from search
expeditions sent to solve the mystery Franklin and his men be-
came." [NETWORK 3: The Franklin Party, p. 29]

and again:

"Henry Hudson […] hopes to find a passage through the Arctic to
the Indies; instead he finds Manhattan." [NETWORK 4: Financial
District, CORTLAND, p. 44]

the term serendipity (see endnote) may be boringly temperate and
bleak for the class of phenomena it denotes, still it gives something
away? or like a receptacle contains something, something forceful
and prone to shifts. even revolutions.

★ "… I dig out the notes I took years ago on the Franklin Party.
I think, perhaps this story is more about the empty space on which
parataxis relies, rather than about facts and timelines." [NETWORK
3: The Franklin Party, p 32.]

if i'm not mistaken, parataxis has been described, defined even, as
starting the whole thing all over again with each new sentence etc.;
a new (or repeated?) beginning with every attempt. its opposite,
hypotaxis, would build a structured hierarchy of sentences and
notions; coordination as opposed to subordination.

the § continues: "I know the beginning, I know the end: How do
I choose to fill in the blank of the in-between? Is that choice really
a free choice?" [ibid.]

"I return again and again and feel the lively failure." [p. 34] the
phrase is repeated and then connected to "Not where I am / but
how I go as if to find while never will as if to fill." [p. 39]

these quotes can be read as poetics of *The Network*, maybe even
of Jena Osman?

reading the book i hear captain willards voiceover from apocalypse
now: "I wanted a mission, and for my sins, they gave me one." even
clearer in your recent book *Public Figures* (2012), which seems to
play mockingly with the mission, as if a spy was working out a plot,
a secret agent of arts and letters.

★ "How to map a shifting thing, rather than a target of frozen
particulars." [NETWORK 3: The Franklin Party, p 38]

another line read as *The Network* poetics.

★ toxics, intoxication, is another theme moving through the poem
(*The Network*), in a very concrete fashion—lead and mercury, for

instance—and in a more ideological sense, like mercantile idealism or racial hierarchy. i think it would be fair to say that it's there even in the long series of maps, whether the historical lines of etymology or outlines of land and city or solar system and color variations (taxonomy), hierarchical value maps: drunk and sober, high and low, satirical, funny or lexically dry. mercury could be a password for all this, moveability, transaction, transport. reading the poem(/book) has a similar effect on me, intoxicating, obsessive. that seems to be the way for me to enter the book, or enter the desire for (entering) the network. i came to look in the italicized lines between the §§. [NETWORK 4: Financial District, pp. 46-101]

★ as far as i can see, irony is the dominant trope, in rhetorical terms, of *The Network*, restless like mercury moving along the lines and idioms, never quite fixed in frozen particulars. sometimes it pushes into the frivolous, and that's where the poem becomes most drastic, intoxicated, sensuous, secretive, revolting, willful. reading those parts i feel the pressure of the poems' desire. a driving force. do i know this force in any other form? what is it?

★ "A Magazine asks me to invent a world. Ambivalent about my assignment, I try to skip out. 'Often a man grasped by his cloak would slip out of it and flee […]' Rather than invent a world, I want a different means to understand this one. I follow Cecilia Vicuña's instruction to use an etymological dictionary: 'To enter the word in order to see.'" [NETWORK 1: The Knot, p. 3]

the irony of the opening is the end of the book: you invent a world. lots of figures are in play there; "NETWORK 5: Mercury Rising (A Visualization)" can can of course be read as an entering of words, but it will be in the form of an invented world. the whole structure (composition) of NETWORK 5 is set in this duality (etymology, encyclopedia; fantasy, construction). this applies as well to the mystery story in NETWORK 4 (and of course other parts of the poem [/book]). a further irony may be drawn from a question: is it at all possible to enter a word?

i came to think of another book, read when i was very young; i've lost it since, but think it was by martin buber and called (approximately) "the children of longing, a collection of hasidic anecdotes from central & eastern europe." a great rabbi, possibly the Baal Shem Tov, instructs his students in the rules of prayer. "When you pray, you should enter each word completely and inhabit it with your whole being." A student asks, "Rabbi, how can a full grown man enter a tiny word?" The rabbi, smiling, answers: "Obviously, this rule doesn't apply to those who are bigger than a word." as i remember it (quoted from memory more than 30 years back), the rabbi's comment was not on holy writ exclusively, but any word.

★ some would see manhattan and wall street as a more central node to the current conditions of human life than washington, detroit or houston, to name some historical centers of modern day power (was not philadelphia home to the first stock exchange in the usa?). some would argue that the northwest passage was opened by wall street and now busy with commerce. finding the americas and manhattan was in a very slow, but accelerating, sense also the making or navigating of the northwest passage.

★ sometimes the poem (or suite of poems) reminds me of a crown of sonnets, many times removed. NETWORK 5 would in this analogy be the 15th sonette, in my language or mother tongue it's called the "master sonnette."

★ *The Network* has fun with *whence* and this makes me sensitive to the lure of etymology, its fascinating (even seductive) suggestive power. it is very interesting much the way a person would be;

it is also a poetical structure in its own right; and still there is a suggestion of hypotaxis in the scheme of origin, though no such hierarchy is evident when you trace the shifting meanings or uses of a word (or 'word') over time. w/hence a hypotactical fallacy related to the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* ("after this therefore because of this") will play along. would you like to comment on how you work this field?

⋆ "The mistake shows the way." [NETWORK 1: The Knot, p. 4]

how could i fumble about and not relocate this sentence; this string in the knot or knot in the network, laying down the rules of engagement early in the game. my questions are failing. silly. not even questions. so be it. in this game the rules are in play? this playing with (not by) the rules is the game? the game as such? hence the rule is not a stable ground or framework, frozen particulars will melt from the energy of play?

The Network demonstrates or keeps on reminding a reader that the mistake did show the way; this was the case with the europeans happening upon the americas. in the quote above ("The mistake […]") it reminds a reader of the principle, the law, the guiding line or the *exemplum*—a moral tale, short and dense.

the poetic structure of this rule also reminds a reader of some classical paradoxes ("all cretans are liars, said the cretan"), and the strange play of color in the congressional hearing on sugar, Thomas Harding's play on "the nigger" and the "white and pretty" is a subtly paradoxical image that probably reproduces or clarifies the structure of doxa; a joker [see final § on p. 25. see also all of "NETWORK 2: The Joker"].

further, the sentence could be a play on the hypothetico-deductive method; any form of exploring; religious thought, either as a point of belief or as religious experience, mapping the path to

enlightenment; a puritan and pious rule; any mapping of any world; a destructive and light hearted method of writing [see also Borges "The Theologicians," and Walter Benjamin, "The Destructive Character"]. is this image or proposition a knot? i seem to find it everywhere i look when i read the sentence.

early on you introduce an image of conspiracy, cloak and dagger style, followed up by reading/quoting a congressional hearing on a conspiracy of sugars, a legislative and commercial conspiracy; historical, well documented and of sorts exemplary. your secret agents form a network whether they themselves know it or not? the police didn't get involved. it seems to me that another play is on, post- or prior to the current rule of law.

⋆ is she/there a key to *The Network*? the italicized mystery story between the paragraphs obsessed me. i tried to enter the poem in this obsession. [NETWORK 4: Financial District, (the + series)]

obviously the poem has the reader think about a wide fan of networks (etymology, law, color, property, conspiracy, mythologies old and new, and so on and on), with the interrelating or tying together of these networks into *The Network*. as i continue reading, the notion of 'the network' tempts me into the dangerous realms of epistemology, even ontology. is the network a condition, a *conditio sine qua non* (without which it could not be/the condition of its possibility), for anything manifest in *The Network* (the poem) including the image of the network?

is *The Network* a poem about time? in a very concrete sense of that term (time)? or say a poem proposing a concept of time, a proposition in form of a poem …? eh … let me try again: the proposition would seem to be that time is a poetical structure, in any form of language or discourse, including those of facts and the factual, and will always be burdened with what was said and done? this would also be, as far as i can see, a political concept of time. a

theory with no purity if i may say so, every knot and line dirtied by historical investments (in propaganda, law, legal documents, debt, crime and punishment, capital, pollution, poetry, matrimony and money, what you will)—language that is shifting at all times with the practices of power and desire?

there is a methodical difficulty in dealing with language, and the quite wonderful wittgenstein is in a sense joking when he says "language"; especially when the joker says something like, "language is the limit of any- or everything," hence proposing an outside of language from where the proposition is stated. that is a poem, *a pars pro toto*. your poem says *The Network*. it makes a material, if fantastic, image of that network (– in fact a string of images, knotted here and there, like a net—no?). i have read *The Network* as an allegory. or a riddle.

the poem is of course about what is written and told in the poem in the most straightforward and factual sense. the title—*The Network*—is like any other keyword, a knot, a connection of (lexical, historical, political, legislative, financial, geographical, racial, scientific, poetical, rhetorical, etc.) meaning, function, ideology.in the italicized story and in the superhero suite ("NETWORK 5: Mercury Rising") something happens to the factual narrative, it enters into the fantastic. while reading i have associated this with the utopian motif you introduce early in the poem(/book). if read this way, it is a utopia ridden with problems, violence, loneliness, addiction, destruction and quirky mysteries. there is a mood of pleasurable transcendence, abundant resources, freedom of movement and speed, passage through danger and guerrilla spirit, the secret agent on an unauthorized mission. the thief escapes torture, surveillance and imprisonment, finds a means to her end within her own organism and intervention by a mysterious (dead?) body; she escapes her grave predicament, the guard saves her life in laying down his own, her body transformed into other modes of existence … she's getting away with it, in the disguise of a simple person.

there is a certain frivolity in both of these tales (NETWORK 4 and 5) as there is in the phenomenon of serendipity and the joker. i have let the frivolous (frivolity) guide my reading of the poem: the toil, the labor, my fears of inadequacy, failure, of not quite getting it or being the poems target. and further on: in my pleasures. to take pleasure from all of that.

★ "Textual remnants are awful, embarrassing, should be burned." [NETWORK 3: The Franklin Party, p.30]

i was surprised by this confessional sentence, at meeting the passionate writer face to face in a heated, almost intimate moment. and even if the ritual burning of manuscripts is a literary cliché, i believe most readers share this image and its mood, immediately recognized, devoured in privacy.

the sentence opens a sudden, private space in the poem, shameful and ambiguous in pain and pleasure, like any public confession, an erased world of letters, what was not printed and possibly the source of what is now printed, a hint to a shadow world or even network of hidden-away speech. a ghost keeps haunting the published writing, for one never really knows, does one?

did you want an effect like that or did it just happen, as an element out of control? to me, it suggests an important relation of any network, an important part of the speaker's relation to other speakers and to different forms of speech, the tensions between on one hand what is published and said and used, and on the other hand the speaker's desire and the pressures it provides to any system of form, especially when you live with it over time.

i try to follow the whole motif of the ghosts (from the opening motto by Borges on) and am at loss. maybe i'm losing the whole and that is a rule of the game (*The Network*). by association and tradition (habit) i come to think of the opening sentences of

the manifesto by karl marx and friederich engels. i also think (habitually) of hamlet, prince of denmark, his dread of his father's ghost and of incest, that of his mother that is, in all ambiguity. of oedipus being his own ghost and antigone being the daughter of one. herod's dread of john the baptist, fearing that jesus is the ghost of the prophet he killed for the pleasure of seeing his daughter by law dancing. strangely, herod is not said to fear the ghosts of the infants of betlehem.

★ i did the math while reading "NETWORK 3: The Franklin Party," and if i haven't messed up, the story of writing the poem is touching on a stretch of more than 20 years, if the publication of the book is taken as a timeframe/coordinate. the story of the franklin party itself goes 200 years back in time, and the etymological time frame is by definition historical time as such [NETWORK 3: The Franklin Party, pp. 29, 30; also see the whole story].

reading some of your previous and later work in order to read *The Network*, i came upon two sentences published in 2004 and perhaps written even earlier:

"The photo is taken of the statue straight on. And then another photo is taken of where the gaze of the statue falls." [*An Essay in Asterisks*, p. 10 (2004)]

this is a material concept or starting point of your *Public Figures* (2012) and is executed in that book. "To see the sigh of sighted stone you activate the idea." very much could be said about these connections, this network if i may. my question is twofold. firstly, do you dwell upon your written images over long periods of time? let me try again, do you often spend long periods of time with what you write before publishing your work? secondly, you recount or draw up long historical lines in much of your work. the sense of time almost turns into a sense of visual space. in this space a change takes place. a story of that change is told, questioned and played

upon. i have no feeling of continuity in what happens—say, on the island of manhattan—like an order of cause and effect. the changes share a common ground, and what happens on that ground is almost magically interlaced, even if the magic would simply be that of violence and money—superiority of power. then come the changes brought about if and when the story transforms in the poem's play, being the case more often than not. access to that ground is scrutinized by the poem (say in the streets and institutions of the financial district, or the arctic tundra for that matter). the poem itself takes place on the same ground. that is to my mind an intervention. or: the poem makes an image of an intervention in and on the space that is drawn up by the poem itself: that is the intervention. is this metaphor of time as common ground a concern you recognize as yours? the long and winding question.

★ the hero/ine of "NETWORK 5: Mercury Rising" has developed a serious mercury habit. it supports her or his powers and abilities, speed and loneliness. i cannot help myself, i read it as an allegory on writing, maybe also on reading; not exclusively, of course, and still. i can't really stop.

i have not begun to see the end of my notes on *The Network*, which i am not sure i understand. it seems endless to me. i don't know that i've read a more complex text. it's awkward to say so in conversation, i know.

as always,
arve

Endnote

"*Serendipity* means a 'fortuitous happenstance' or 'pleasant surprise.' It was first coined by Horace Walpole in 1754. In a letter he wrote to a friend Walpole explained an unexpected discovery he had made by reference to a Persian fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*. The princes, he told his correspondent, were 'always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of.'

The notion of serendipity is a common occurrence throughout the history of scientific innovation such as Alexander Fleming's accidental discovery of penicillin in 1928, and the invention of the microwave oven by Percy Spencer in 1945, to name but a few.

The word has been voted one of the ten English words hardest to translate in June 2004 by a British translation company. However, due to its sociological use, the word has been exported into many other languages.

The first noted use of 'serendipity' in the English language was by Horace Walpole (1717–1797). In a letter to Horace Mann (dated 28 January 1754) he said he formed it from the Persian fairy tale The Three Princes of Serendip, whose heroes 'were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of'. The name stems from Serendip, an old name for Sri Lanka (aka Ceylon), from Sanskrit Simhaladvipa and Persian Sarandīp سرندیپ. Parts of Sri Lanka were under the rule of South Indian kings for extended periods of time in history. Kings of Tamil Nadu, India (Cheranadu) were called Chera Kings and dheep means island, the island belonging to Chera King was called Cherandeep, hence called Sarandib by Arab traders."

– Wikipedia

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