

Uneven Uneventfulness

— for Kathleen Fraser

Susan Gevirtz

Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling

Kathleen Fraser

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If a writer was allowed to fold one critical essay into the pages of one of her books, so that the essay might fall into the lap of a future reader, Fraser might slip Burton Hatlen's "Zukofsky As Translator," into Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling.

Recently she handed me a copy of that essay. Next to the word "TRANSLATOR" in the title she had written and underlined the word Transmutation.

From the first section of Discrete Categories titled "*Champs* (fields) & between":

3. The air came down like rice. It scattered through unevenness and uneventfulness.

came down unevenness

—

The first two sentences of the Hatlen essay read:

' "To Zukofsky," Creeley says, "poetry represents a way of seeing words as in the world in much the same way that men are." Words and men alike are "in the world," to Zukofsky, as material objects.' ' p345

The Air

“The air came down like rice”

like

“It scattered through unevenness and uneventfulness”

The air The rice scattered

The words uneven the event of

them an unevent

that the poem marks.

Fraser’s *like* as Creeley’s *alike* (“words and men alike)” transmutes air, words, the actions: “came down” and “scattered” into the material rice and into the words we can touch and see on the page, and into the material of the human that is not touchable, that is the time of the unevent, and the feeling of unevenness.

The Materials of the Material

In that alchemy time is also shown to be material in nature. While made and presented here, time remains unnamed but palpable, and so does its passing. The modernist revelation that the subject is no subject — or is the minutia that has not traditionally occupied the subject position (in both senses) is revealed again here and given a contemporary twist. Fraser renders a treatment of banality and description through a kind of hyperrealism in which the material of words, human bodies, rice, air and many other objects turn into one another by the transmutations she performs throughout Discrete Categories. Air into rice — by the magic of simile; uneven into unevent — by the addition of one letter that changes one non-thing into another entirely different non-thing; and by a cutting and splicing that creates a sense synaesthesia — which changes the intangible coming down of air that cannot be seen, into the imagined coming down of rice, which would be seen and felt, into a coming down of the uneven gaps between the drops of implied falling rain that could be seen.

The Unevent

In Discrete Categories the unevent is not a non event.

It is a space-time in which nothing happens except transmutation.

Fraser names this space-time through the objects and subjects of the mundane. Using this kind of hyper-realistic description, that seems to spring from acute observation, reportage and imagining of that which presents itself on any day.

While Fraser uses simile, there is also no simile or metaphor operating here. There is no comparison of like to unlike things, instead there is a perpetual motion of things and states and humans becoming, which is not like an immersion in actual language but is an actual immersion.

Seeing Things

Fraser underlines “But the Zukofskys remind us that the ‘littera,’ the letter, is an aural and visual shape, not a ‘meaning.’ ” —Hatlen, p348

An inventory of kinds of transmutation that occur throughout Discrete Categories reveals a continual return to the visual, a refiguration of the visual, as a kind of imaginal pivot through which, on which, kinds of transmutation turn and return.

A few examples:

—*Film stills and out-takes*

“ a cinematic event” “...again a swerving laid out to any random viewer, in this case herself a cinematic event to which she would gradually attach herself as she drove forward and slowly shifted gears through the lengthening.”

— from “*Champs (fields) & between,*” p8

—*Photos and the process of being turned into a photo*

“*Why must the photograph of the two of them come out of its envelope every year and be pinned to the wallpaper?*” (Fraser’s italics)

“A still believes D. is the girl he thought she was and continues describing her to herself, even as tree bark is creeping between her thighs and pushing from roots that lift her body higher with the force of minute-by-minute growth.”

“exposing the anatomy of imagined capture....”

—from, “You can hear her breathing in the photograph” p48

The process of being turned into a photograph in this poem is also the process of Daphne being chased and turned into a tree, or a member of a family being fixed into one role in that family, or Bernini fixing Daphne and Apollo in a sculpture, or a museum photographer capturing that sculpture in a photo.

—*Windows, Drawings of windows*

“During the second half of their marriage, her first husband had drawn a window in oil pastels.... She looked at this picture every day, even carrying it to her new house ten years later upon marrying a second man. The window pulled her into an unnamed world: its grainy surface concealing and exposing something unfinished, so that the turquoise curtain, being closer to expected light, became a defined plane beyond which she might retrieve each vagrant thought.”

—from, “pressure,” in “You can hear her breathing in the photograph” p51

—*Paint, painting*

“She gives you her colors when you scrape her down and layer her again with rose madder bleached by repetitions of white in the width of big

embankments, as if you thought of her as a road to somewhere called “dedication to light”

--from “**notebook 5: “in spite of gradual deficits”**
in “AD notebooks” p63

—*Depiction on Tracing paper*

“You, yourself may remember a map

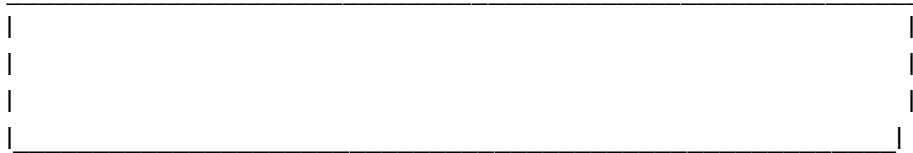
in which the colors bear no relation
to the terrain they represent.
the ocean growing lighter and lighter

or its depiction (traced on thin paper)
hangs over it, touching and leaving a smudge.”

—from “**notebook 2: radiant inklings**” in “AD notebooks” p57

—*Geometric memory bank*

“ ----I will mark this space as a kind of geometric memory bank, not so much to contain or trap the sentence but to give it a place to rest, once I find it, or even where it might reconstitute itself outside of the context in which it was first discovered.



The sentence, of course, will be different once it has been retrieved.
from “Soft pages” p21

Letterbox screen, mail slot, soft bed of the soft page on which words can rest, savings account for memory, new context for the soon to arrive new sentence, container, frame, marker of the future difference of the sentence once it has been retrieved and altered by its loss, window, hole through which to spy on the mysterious geometry of memory

“To show the images between the images”

—Ackerman in Margulies, p4

No orgasm, murder, birth, starvation, war

Instead

indifference

Fraser as purveyor of indifference, but indifference as a kind of care. Tending with relentless scrutiny to that which often receives indifference

weather, traffic, cooking

scrutiny of the different kinds of indifference manifest in bodies, as flesh, language, the monument, the moment, the force of forced couples such as Daphne and Apollo but not only them, also marriages, also Alzheimer’s which forces Fraser’s mother next to DeKooning in Fraser’s mind and in the readers, in the last section of the book called “A.D. notebooks”:

“the track of DeKooning’s hand

the track of my
mother's hand"

—from "notebook 7" in "AD notebooks" p66

Not the image that DeKooning's hand may have been making, not the impulse behind the gesture of her mother's hand tracking,, but the space on the page between these two hands, the image between the images that are here composed of letters of words on the page, the image of the blank space between

Between

"hand"

and

"the"

Dedicated to the transmutation of the literal into the otherwise literal

sometimes named as it fleetingly passes:

"Do they see the gray animal shadow whizzing along the floorboards? Do they hear the parquet geometry of the wooden floor expanding, as if giving-up an hour of footsteps randomly wandering backwards, forwards?"

—from "You can hear her breathing in the photograph" in
"You can hear her breathing in the photograph" p47

This naming of the fleetingly passing as one of the main necessities of this writing. Naming as a showing of the images between the images.

Nothing Happens

"...Ackerman's strategic indiscrimination between registers — the alternation between representation and abstraction in her minimal hyper-realist work... a dual ambition: to pursue what happens when nothing happens." (Margulies, p4) could also be said, has also been said above, to be an ambition of Discrete Categories.

extended duration, the thematics of the everyday. Who forces whom?

to couple, quadruple, quintuple

Perhaps much more than a “dual” ambition — an ever-increasing ambition and series of investigations into questions about the nature and origins of force.

The time of this air and/as rice. In this “uneventfulness” in which nothing happens: Air turns into rice and though that’s not exactly nothing, it’s also not a thing that can be measured or seen. Instead the duration of this passing, of this transmutation of something invisible, air, into something visible, rice, or letters falling down a page or sky, demonstrate the material nature of “unevenness.” Unevenness and scattering through are in service of coming down, and together they alchemize and make an unnamed and unseeable object: *duration*, visible:

“...*words* as particles of matter in motion.” —Hatlen, p357

Forced Questions

“...again a swerving laid out to any random viewer, in this case herself a cinematic event to which she would gradually attach herself as she drove forward and slowly shifted gears through the lengthening.”

—“*Champs* (fields) & between,” p8

In this passage an “anatomy of imagined capture” is exposed and imagined. Am I called to gradually “attach” myself as the “she” does? As a reader I try to imagine my options. Resist identification with the “she.” Wonder if it would be a pleasure to attach myself to the “she” and thus become “any random viewer,” and a “cinematic event” fueled by the forward motion of the car. Resist, whether a pleasure or not. The pleasure of resistance.

Barthes:

“...the only linguistic approach to pleasure is, I believe, metaphor or more precisely catachresis: “limping” metaphor in which the denotated term doesn’t exist in language (the arms of a chair)...

To speak not through adjectives but through metaphors, that is what poets use to do.”

—The Neutral, p18

to reveal that the metaphor is not metaphoric is, I think, what Fraser wants to do.

The arms of Barthes' chair, parallel here to the pleasure of the reader:
as if the chair could gesticulate
as if the reader has arms to choose with
as if the limp is someone else's

tension between writer insisting on pleasure and reader
not sure of the shackles of that, reiterates the thematic underbelly of transmutation present
throughout the book — the inability to turn into, being stuck or stopped in motion — made to be
static as a photo, statue, old story.

“She was inside and outside of him and visible, forced too soon by his definiteness.

Her indefiniteness was not tolerable to his practiced will.”

—“You can hear her breathing”
in “You can hear her breathing in the photograph” p49

Translation, Transliteration, Transmutation, Trance

“I was stunned, for example, by the exact moment in a recent fictional work when a woman notices her foot stepping up onto a curb and understands this to be an ‘event.’ It was not so much the physical presence of the foot. No, that’s wrong, it *was* the physical presence (even though we are given no details, but at precisely the same time—as in both sides of an equation—it was her knowing she knew, her discovering for herself the nature of ‘an event’ or that this particular moment, or motion, had any importance at all to her in a world of rain and cars...”

...”what had been the curb now became a screen with her foot projected onto it.....”

—Soft Pages, p22

In discussing Zukofsky's translations of Catullus, Hatlen says there is “...a rigorous fidelity to the line pattern of the original.” (p357)

Rather than a false parallel between Zukofsky and Fraser, I'm interested in Fraser's interest in this essay about Zukofsky and the kind of translations he and Celia did.

If Discrete Categories were a series of translations, the originals would be rain or traffic or thought interrupted by shoes or walking, instead of Catullus. And it could still be said that there

is “a rigorous fidelity to the line pattern of the original.” A rigorous discovery, not finished with the end of the book, of the nature of “an event.”

Sources

Roland Barthes, “From The Neutral,” OCTOBER, 112, Spring, 2005

Kathleen Fraser, Discrete Categories Forced Into Coupling, Apogee Press, Berkeley, California, 2004.

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Ivone Margulies, Nothing Happens, Chantal Ackerman's Hyperrealist Everyday, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1996.

SUSAN GEVIRTZ

