

***Questions of Poetics: Language Writing and Consequences.* By Barrett Watten. Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press. 2016. xi, 294 pp. Paper, \$55.00; e-book, \$55.00.**

***Intricate Thicket: Reading Late Modernist Poetries.* By Mark Scroggins. Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press. 2015. xiii, 298 pp. Paper, \$49.95; e-book, \$49.95.**

How broad or specific must a critical vantage be in order to address avant-garde or innovative work? The answer by both of these monographs is *very*. Herein, any obvious similarity of approach ends.

In *Questions of Poetics*, Barrett Watten theorizes how a poetics must form itself to address not only “the making of the work in its condition of possibility” but also in its continuing agency (2). Thus, for instance, although Marcel Duchamp’s work is ensconced in museums it continues to exert criticality. And while Language writing got its impetus from a particular set of historical events, its agency continues into the twenty-first century and is evolving. Avant-garde works intervene in neoliberal society—a society all too ready to apportion its “radical particularity” in what Watten calls “the literary entropy of ‘period style’” (84)—through acts of negation and of changed material and formal dispensations.

Although Watten takes account of changing historical times, his larger view is that cultural logics and dominants persist, if differentially. Watten engages Raymond Williams and Theodor Adorno in arguing that an artwork exists in an autonomous relationship to the societies from which it issues, criticizing society through its formal integrity rather than through direct referentiality. However, ultimately for Watten, negation is not, as it is for Adorno, confined to obverse relations between an artwork and its larger cultural, social, and historical realms, but, rather, negation is defined by various kinds of negativity, whether nihilism, defamiliarization, dissociation, or delusion, all of which act against the obfuscating positivism of neoliberal society. Moreover, Watten finds Adorno to be limited since he assumed the prior existence and stabilization of artistic forms and genres.

The quality of this book is in the dialectical relationship between Watten’s rigorous theorizing and the artworks he examines. He criticizes a poetics of Language writing or sound poetry that would reduce it to false positives for, namely, the freedom of the reader or the openness of sound. Noting how the understanding of Language writing necessarily shifts in accounts of the past and present, Watten at once engages the historical milieu of Berkeley, California, in the 1960s and 1970s, while arguing that the writers were also responding, if subliminally, to economic orders that became far more pronounced and

articulated in the following decades, namely, finance capitalism and its attendant politics. The “opacity” of sound art “critically engages the false positives of discourse outside it” (171).

Watten’s work addresses important voids within existing criticism: literary criticism that expends itself on formal differences introduced by avant-garde works but does not attend to their larger historical, economic, and cultural motivations; and cultural studies criticism that is indifferent or hostile to formal properties of artworks. However, in defining the avant-garde aspects of the works he studies as manifesting a disruptive negativity and an exposed materiality, Watten describes *an* avant-garde. Surrealism, the Beats, and Black Mountain, among others, can be defined, at least in part, as affirmative avant-gardes that also work against dominant cultural logics and forms.

This study leaves me with questions. The beginning of Language writing was coincident with the turn to language that brought with it broad paradigm shifts in the academy and many other cultural realms. How might this turn to language be understood as part and parcel of a dominant cultural logic, all the more so in its current iteration of discourse analysis? In other words, how did or does Language writing work within and against this formation, at once contributing to its dominant logics and opposing them? How did or do complex critiques of gender, race, class, and sexuality fail to answer the complex demands of identity politics?

Whereas Watten engages in a full-court press to link historical, social, cultural, and art formation, Scroggins in *Intricate Thicket* marks what he regards as unknowable, agilely moving among anecdote, publishing history, and close textual study. Scroggins’s broad or, perhaps more aptly put, wide perspective consists of the commodious spaces he construes in his often ironic but also earnest engagement with literary texts. He has a strong respect for the virtue of careful denotation *and* gnostic disavowal. For Scroggins a few well-chosen facts can give insight into much larger configurations, including historical periods. In *Intricate Thicket*, Scroggins weaves something of his own history, as scholar and poet, drawing attention to an early admiration of Guy Davenport and his essays’ “consistently alert style” and “abundance of rich and strange detail” (163).

While Scroggins insists on the “occasional” composition of the essays collected in this volume, he reluctantly draws on the concept of “late modernism” to explain some of the volume’s commitments. Many of the poets gathered here began making names for themselves in midcentury America, including Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Ronald Johnson, and Davenport. One of the more far-reaching essays, “Z-Sited Path: Late Zukofsky and His Tradition,” begins by distinguishing late from early Zukofsky: “Zukofsky’s seventies-era poetics effect a quantum leap from his earlier work in syntactic openness, multiplicity of meaning, and sheer readerly difficulty. It is a poetry of deep angular beauty and of obdurate but tantalizing resistance” (30). While he draws on Zukofsky’s contention that influence may

be “no more than a writer’s absorption of a tendency ‘in the air,’” Scroggins does define a limited set of terms by which writers as diverse as Michael Heller, Cid Corman, Robert Creeley, and Ron Silliman create their poetry through the influence of Zukofsky: “the sense of his compressed form, of the overwhelmingly careful and intelligently weighed placements of words within the lines of his poems, and the precise, almost fastidious, crafting of the movements from line to line, stanza to stanza” (33).

Intricate Thicket is laced with many apt comparisons and judgments, including the effectiveness of specific verbal formations. What to make of “flat lines” or anomalous voicings that go against the integrity of a piece? At one point Scroggins asks, “Is one still allowed to talk of taste?” While Scroggins’s essays far surpass what most might think of as a criticism of taste, he reinvigorates and enlarges a domain given little attention in scholarly books, namely, the site of so much exertion by poets themselves, the success or lack thereof of their wordings.

Given Scroggins’s build from Zukofsky, it doesn’t follow that he includes virtually no Lorine Niedecker. When he turns to Harryette Mullen, he primarily engages her *Muse and Drudge*, rather than her works more in line with Zukofsky’s experiments, such as *Trimblings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*, which he calls “exercises.”

Albeit engaged in radically different enterprises, Watten and Scroggins have a shared abhorrence of facile categorization and commodification of literature and art. Their critical works gain considerable quality from each critic’s committed and long-term engagements with specific writing scenes.

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