

## ANDREA ACTIS / “alive and watching”: Sharon Thesen and the Eighth Type of Ambiguity

In the concluding eighth chapter of his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930, 1956), William Empson, the Close Reader to end (& begin) all twentieth-century close readers, defends his project as follows:

Most of the ambiguities I have considered here seem to me beautiful; I consider, then, that I have shown by example, in the nature of the ambiguity, the nature of the forces which are adequate to hold it together. It would seem very artificial to do it the other way round, and very tedious to do it both ways at once. (265)

It is a very tedious concluding chapter, but as one Amazon reviewer (one “Word Lover” from New Jersey) has advised, “This is not a book to read before you go to bed, or while you’re at the gym. This is a book to read on your day off, when you can shut off all outside distraction.” Bringing Empson into my festschrift piece for Sharon Thesen, I’m either setting up an anachronistic “straw-man” or pretending I can engage with the opiated caterpillar of *Alice in Wonderland* who betrays no sense of cultural memory and insists on antagonizing poor Alice by keeping oblivious (“Whoooo...are...you?”) to her repeated protestations of subjectivity (“I’m Alice!!”). A creature determined to shut off all “outside distraction” and stick to smoking things beautiful.

But actually I bring in Empson because when so many readers of one poet’s work locate a fundamental “ambiguity”—as they do in this issue of *TCR* (which I’ve had the rather unfair advantage of typesetting)—I think it’s worth the work of tracing our reading back to one of the first creatures who had something to say about “the nature of the ambiguity.” Something else that I carry in mind is the need to ask what the aesthetic “nature” of anything means in more material terms, and what the material terms might mean for any critical or creative practices we take on (this is the asking, as you may be familiar, of *What’s at stake, and how is it to be cooked?*). In her interview, Daphne Marlatt points out to Thesen, “...you have taken the lyric and inflected it with a deeply ironic, even sardonic, voice at times, letting it masquerade as simple de-

scription.” Like many readers, Marlatt is drawn to the problems that Thesen’s “lyric” sets up for itself—problems of gender, place, and privilege that it never pretends don’t exist.

Consistently, the other contributors to this issue have been compelled to document the same aspect or function, that complicated irony or ambiguity, of Thesen’s poetics. “As Above, So Below,” Kent Lewis titles his essay on “Parallax in The Good Bacteria.” Or, some earlier parallax:

I drive the car  
while the choir ascends  
toward a far transparency  
these words tap at  
with a show of politeness. (“I Drive the Car,” *Aurora* 13)

So it’s largely the same thinking we’re thinking, the same thing we’re liking, about Thesen’s poetry. Thea Bowering quotes Fred Wah—“She balances the geography out there with the heartography within”; Mary di Michele notes Thesen’s tendency “to balance high and low culture references in a poem”; Lewis remarks on how Thesen’s “ambiguous syntax helps blur the boundaries between subject and object, the figurative and the literal”; Meredith Quartermain shows how “Thesen’s poems . . . often hold eerie weldings of glossy materialism with spiritual or non-material experience”; and Pete Smith finds himself struck by Thesen’s “frequent juxtaposition of the banal and the transcendent.”

o, the fear of life  
stinks—

dirty snow in the dogshit early spring . . . (“Japanese Movies,” *AHR* 11)

Here, in one of her early poems, Thesen oscillates between a classical or romantic impulse to address a metaphysical problem—“the fear of life”—and a starkly unromantic commitment to record (in scatological terms, if need be) the “play-by-play as play-by-play of the day-to-day” (to borrow Gerry Shikatani’s description of how Thesen’s work works). It’s a matter of Olsonian proprioception, as Thea Bowering

suggests; like Olson, Thesen “relies on the much-battered, sensory body to find a new cadence with which to re-write the commodified word-world” (in this case, the reified genre, the gendered paradigms, and a Prince George experience of “Japanese Movies”). But is there some methodology, I want to ask, for sorting out how “the nature of the ambiguity,” the situated material body, and the critique of ideology relate to one another—how these build and sustain a poetics in Thesen’s work, and maybe even disclose a *poethics*? By Smith’s reading, Thesen “extend[s] the boundaries of lyric poetry.” The work is personal, we sense, without being too personal, funny without being too funny, sexy without being too sexy, reverent without being too reverent, irreverent without being too irreverent, and political without being too political. But it’s ambiguities such as these that bring me precisely to a confrontation with my own orientations to language, social formations, and the question of taste (the “too much” or “too little”—or the somehow “just enough”—of something in a poem, let’s say).

Marlatt does begin to address the more material implications of Thesen’s formal ambiguity: “It seems to me this allows the political to enter the poem in oblique ways similar to the way the political impacts our daily lives and then continues to resonate.” Likewise for Quartermain, quoting a definition of “romantic irony” (the kind of “open” irony she gauges in Thesen’s “open” poetics), it is “‘ethically indeterminate by virtue of the self-reflexiveness and synthetic balancing it enjoins.’” For Empson, however, “the nature of the forces” that “hold . . . together” any one of his seven types of ambiguity are purely aesthetic, linguistic, immanent forces: “*First-type ambiguities arise,*” as the chapter summary goes, “*when a detail is effective in several ways at once, e.g. by comparisons with several points of likeness, antithesis with several points of difference, ‘comparative’ adjectives, subdued metaphors, and extra meanings suggested by rhythm*” (v). Offering “*General discussion of the conditions under which ambiguity is valuable and the means of apprehending it,*” plus “*Discussion of how verbal analysis should be carried out and what it can hope to offer*” (vi), Empson ultimately, in his own terrifying words, “want[s] to suggest that the machinery I have been using upon poetry is going to become increasingly necessary if we are to keep the language under control” (268). Unlike the “ethical indeterminacy” of Thesen’s poetics, the “machinery” of Empson’s imperious reading intentionally delimits a passive, consumptive role for the reader; as he maintains, “It is the business of the critic to extract for his public what it wants; to organize, what he may indeed create, the taste of his period” (277). It’s worth noting, then, that only the worst and most blatantly normative of Thesen’s readers have

lamented the “random bits, haphazardly sewn together” (Neilson par. 6), of her literary projects. If only Empson’s seven types of ambiguity could still be stretched to fit our critical engagements with cultural production, there might be a way for all such English Mistresses remaining to drape their canons with the Canadian flag!

Of course, Thesen’s “random bits, haphazardly sewn together,” are exactly what keep her poetry away from the monologic and allow us to read along the three big registers or “determinants” her material evokes: the metaphysical/ontological, the bodily/phenomenological, and the socioeconomic. As she writes in “The Watermelon”:

“My spirit.” My size 7 ½ shoe.

My Canada Life insurance policy. (*Aurora* 37)

Lewis upholds this “fractured, piecemeal, and tentative” mode of writing as the formal precondition to Thesen’s being “able to use her metaphysical chops to make pointed political critiques.” He adds, however, that “her poems suggest that all events are concurrently creative and destructive, noble and despicable, ordered and chaotic, and so ultimately ambiguous and amoral.” But how can “all events,” even if ambiguous, be “amoral”? How can the language (signs) that we apply to events, even when that language is ambiguous, be anything less than fraught with competing systems/economies of morality? Perhaps rather than speaking in terms of “morality” when it comes to poetry, we could think in terms of ethics—ethics as recently described by Charles Bernstein as “the dialogic practice of response in civil society” (13) or as earlier figured by Simone de Beauvoir as a process which “appears to existentialism not as the formal respect of eternal and superterrestrial laws, but as the search for a valid foundation of human history, such as it unfolds on our earth” (“What Is” 325). So “Bread, testicles, everything!” (Thesen *Aurora* 17)—ambiguous yes, but signs pointing nevertheless to a social foundation we may very well need to talk about.

It happens that I’m obsessed with using Beauvoir to talk about socially engaged poetics today, and that in fact my obsession began with an Honours paper I wrote on the “existentialist impulse” (Hulcoop 29) of Phyllis Webb’s progressively dialogic work (progressive—over the course of her writing and activist vocations—and progressive in the progressive sense too). Unlikely as this project may seem—the existentialists put poetry outside of the realm of *littérature engagée* altogether—I do find it’s been worth investigating why they did so. (A possibility is that they saw poetry, as Toril

Moi has theorized, not as “action” but as an “iconic object-language” [150], which much of it in France probably seemed to be, and as much still does seem to be in North America). I’ve also been trying to imagine how we might revisit the category of “Commitment”—so reproached as an “official” ideology and aesthetic by Theodor Adorno in his 1974 essay—through the work of contemporary poets inheriting much from the investigations of North American language poetry and disclosing what I read as a poetics of *unofficial* commitment. A touchstone for my thinking is Beauvoir’s long essay *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948)—historically the only foundation for an existentialist-materialist ethics (besides Sartre’s unfinished *Notebooks for an Ethics* [1983]). Another is “Pyrrhus and Cineas” (1944), an earlier essay in which Beauvoir insists that “[t]he artist cannot lose interest in the situation of the men around him,” that “[h]is own flesh is engaged in others” (136). Probably Thesen would agree: “When I hear those warnings on the radio,” she tells Marlatt, “that some people may find the following news story upsetting, I’m embarrassed to be a Canadian.”

Beauvoir writes in the *Ethics* that “[t]o declare that existence is absurd is to declare that it can never be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must constantly be won” (129). Crucially, this is a formulation that, even as it posits an ontological fact (or some kind of cosmology, as Duncan’s or Blaser’s writing has been understood to), it also and finally insists on material positions, efforts, and consequences—on actual “meanings”—and the struggles that occur over them every day. A kind of post-structuralism gone not *too* wild is what Beauvoir and Thesen often seem to be getting at. Smith, as mentioned, registers the “frequent juxtaposition of the banal and the transcendent” in Thesen’s poetry, and “[i]n keeping with the existentialist tradition, Beauvoir uses the term ‘transcendence’ to refer to our experience of conceptual detachment from our situation, and . . . the term ‘immanence’ to refer to our sense of being inextricably bound to our situation insofar as we are part and parcel of it” (Weiss 282). Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity, then, resonates particularly well with Thesen’s ambivalent sense of her own poethics: “Ostentatiously narrative-free poetry may be theoretically virtuous but I tire of it very quickly,” she admits. A human “is at the same time a freedom and a thing,” Beauvoir elsewhere summarizes, “both unified and scattered, isolated by his subjectivity and nevertheless coexisting at the heart of the world with other[s]” (258). And Thesen’s poetry assumes these ambiguities—so often making light of its own formal and thematic situatedness, implicatedness, or (to use *the word*) interpellation—tracing

the logics of a writer who “experiences a conflict between a desire to satisfy a demand for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free, unhampered access to the world prompting a correspondingly open response to it” (Hejinian 41).

I hesitate to use the adjective “honest,” but I do think that Thesen’s is a somehow productive assumption of complicity—as much as I’ve been disturbed to the core by such theses as Johanna Drucker’s that in order to appreciate the sensibilities of contemporary fine art we must jettison all those unfashionable “oppositional models of the avant-garde” and bring instead a “sophisticated acknowledgement of complicity” to our engagements with culture (*Sweet Dreams* xiv). But Thesen’s middle-class poetics, I’ll go ahead and call them, do have a critical sense of what’s going on. Instead of letting a full absorption take place, the poems problematize the arrival of such a life(style):

The silver spoon  
we are not born with  
& the silver tongue  
we die with... (“After Spicer,” AHR 52)

Here I think of Beauvoir’s unwavering ethical attentions to “the concrete and particular thickness of this world” (*Ethics* 106), but also can’t help but recall her admitted fetish for American pharmacies and cinema houses (which she’d duck into at every opportunity during her four-month visit there in the late ’40s—see *America Day By Day* for her own take on these matters). Then there’s the epigraph that Clint Burnham chose for his book on Frederic Jameson and *The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory*:

*I blew into the Dôme at 8:30, all agog at the idea of reading Perry Mason and the Lime Canary, but then who should show up but Merleau-Ponty, and I can’t decently take out a detective story under his very nose.*

—Simone de Beauvoir, letter to Jean-Paul Sartre, 13 January 1941

It may be an old story of the “high” versus the “low” that I’m told cultural studies told best a few years ago. But I remain a bit embarrassed and confused about what it means today to be a “critical thinker” and a critical organic shopper—“A bunch / of leeks,

huge in the bag” (Thesen *TGB* 43). I think it’s fun (i.e., scary) to imagine Immanuel Wallerstein pitching in at this point: “And the ambiguity was that bourgeois was then (as it remains today) both a term of honour and a term of scorn, a compliment and a reproach” (135).

But Thesen’s writing—her ambiguous or “ironic” lyric—is nothing if not widely and wildly aware of itself. “Like [John] Newlove,” Thesen explains to Marlatt, “I have a tendency to dismiss or dismantle my own poetic insights.” I drive my car, you see, maybe even a BMW, in the choric midst of angels and “a far transparency,” but in spite of all “meanings, for sure” (“Late Summer,” *Aurora* 33) and what I recognize to be the “absurdity” of consumer “consciousness now” (“Echolocation,” *AHR* 55), I still do sometimes find myself longing for “the pink jaguar” (“The Fire,” *TGB* 78). Thesen consistently helps us admit to things, though, and whatever this “admitting” means, I suspect it must mean something. As in “Hey I Think That’s Me”:

Opportunistic. We went to the door with glee  
knowing someone American & good-looking was there  
with books and hashish and news about the concerts and riots. (*TGB* 33)

For a literature of commitment, Beauvoir did assert that the writer must “participate in the same search he has invited his readers on” lest the completed work be merely (and unethically) “an incongruous mystification” (“Literature and Metaphysics” 271) and lest the artist operate as “an engineer or a maniac” (*Ethics* 67). These are terms germane to a cultural critique of capitalism, and it’s a positing of a kind of ambiguous phenomenology, versus “simple description” (Marlatt), as a strategy for using “[l]anguage [as] an appeal to the other’s freedom” (Beauvoir “Pyrrhus” 133). “I don’t think my work is in any intended way ‘political,’” Thesen explains when interviewed, “though I do think there’s a continuing note of protest that life is not only serious, strange, and sad, but also silly and stupid.”

across the inlet—lights presiding  
over who knows what sorts of imports  
and exports. (“Oh, Danny Boy,” *TGB* 60)

But at least “I was alive and watching” (“Eating Smarties in the Truck,” *Aurora* 53).

And writing always from the position of someone trying to figure out her position—probably hoping to figure out yours too—amongst these nameless “imports / and exports” and the relations of power that their names (and their namelessness) create. “A [hu]man is freedom and facticity at the same time,” Beauvoir maintains; “He is free, but not with the abstract freedom posited by the stoics; he is free in situation” (“Pyrrhus” 124). Alive and watching, Thesen’s poetry never presumes to occupy an “abstract freedom.” It seeks instead to disclose the terms of its situation and finally cut through these terms with a sharp and gleaming semi-autonomy: the line.

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