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Why Adding 'Poetic' to 'Critique' Adds Nothing to Critique

The provocation for the June 2019 *Poetic Critique* conference (from which this volume originated) contains a number of propositions: (1) that there is a distinctive mode of critique in literary studies that differs from the discipline's prevailing modes of critique; (2) that what makes this mode special is its 'poetic' approach to its subject matter; and (3) that the approach is sufficiently distinctive to command a special name – 'poetic critique.' And insofar as this special mode is also understood to be one that, as the conference organizers put it, "has failed to gain a firm foothold in literary studies as it transformed itself into an academic discipline," then at least part of what must distinguish "poetic critique" from all those other modes of critique that *have* prevailed is simply that this one has not (Chaouli et al. 2019). These propositions also appear to add up to a hortatory one: that poetic critique should withdraw from the margins and move to the center of what we do. From my standpoint, however, there is little to compel the exhortation, not because I believe there is something wrong with the critical practice just described – certainly not in Friedrich Schlegel's terms – but because arguing for a particular critical practice to prevail seems misplaced when it has never not prevailed.[1] Or to put this another way, I cannot help thinking that the interpretive activity that Schlegel describes – to "present anew what has been presented," "to shape once again what has already been shaped," and thereby to "complete the work" (qtd. in Chaouli et al. 2019) – also represents the unstated ambition of much of the literary criticism that I read, or for that matter, much that I strive to emulate myself (though I will readily admit to being no Schlegel). Indeed, as someone who devotes most of my research to poetry, I can barely imagine producing a compelling reading of any poem – much less show-

1 By "never" I mean in the discipline we identify with academic literary interpretation, which covers a relatively short time span in proportion to the much longer period during which the works we understand to count as literature have been produced. As Nicholas Brown points out in his 2013 essay "Close Reading and the Market," (in which Schlegel makes a key appearance – indeed, I am indebted to Brown for calling my attention to a key passage from *The Atheneum Fragments*, which I discuss further below): "Questions about the way we read 'now' are always beside the point, for the reason that the way we read now is the way we have always read – provided we understand that the domain of this 'always' is limited to the rather young 'we' of literary studies as a discipline. [...] To be specific, literature is invented in the aftermath of the Kantian revolution – particularly in the wake of its elevation of aesthetic judgment to a keystone position – at the turn of the nineteenth century, in the circle around Friedrich Schlegel" (Brown 2013, 145–146).

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ing someone else how to produce one – without also reshaping and remaking the poem in the process.[2]

For academic critics who also teach, of course, part of our job is to help students see how to perform such labor. An obvious way to do it is simply by example, to which end I sometimes assign my students George Herbert's well-known devotional poem "The Altar" alongside the American scholar Stanley Fish's tour-de-force reading of it in his 1972 book *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature:*

A broken A L T A R, Lord, thy servant reares
Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touch'd the same.
A H E A R T alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name:
That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed S A C R I F I C E be mine,
And sanctifie this A L T A R to be thine.

(Herbert 1633, 18)

In Fish's reading, the ingenuity Herbert displays in the poem's meticulously sculpted form must be read as evidence not of the poet's creative powers but of God's. But to feel the force of the divine agency that Herbert designed the poem to promote, the reader must also feel the force of the human agency that it is designed to demote. The reader is able to recognize the latter, Fish argues, by the end of the very first line of the poem, and it is precisely by rearranging the syntax of that line that Fish most clearly shows us what Herbert has done:

> The delaying of the verb momentarily suspends the sense and leaves us uncertain of the relationship of the three noun phrases. Is one subject and the other object? If so, which one, and what of the third? Or are all three (or perhaps two) in apposition to one another? These questions represent syntactic and semantic options which are available, and in their availability, pressuring, until the verb arrives. [...] In its position "reares" [...] unmixes "ALTAR," "servant," and "Lord" by arranging them in syntactical relationships which are also temporal-spatial relation-

2 I should make clear here that I am addressing Schlegel's idea of "presenting anew" somewhat loosely, and that I am not trying to suggest that he is somehow inviting the critic to take the place of the poet (or the scholarly analysis to replace the poem). It's the "re" in "reshaping and remaking" that matters for the critical practice that I am arguing is quite prevalent.

> ships of cause and effect ("I, thy servant, O Lord, rear this broken altar"). (Fish 1994 [1972], 208–209)

In settling the causal relationship among the three entities in question, the terminal position of the verb, Fish explains, also "reaffirms the claims [...] for the ingenuity of [the poem's] author by specifying 'thy servant' [i.e., the human speaker of the poem] as agent" (209). In other words, while the syntax does indeed establish "thy servant" as the subject who "reares" the "altar," nevertheless the initially unsettled relation among subject and object and the third term, "LORD," also sets the stage for the poem to deliver that third term as the maker of both subject and object. But it is the final couplet of the poem that seals the deal in this transfer of power, which we do not even need Fish to help us grasp if we simply imagine the difference it would make were the lines transposed: "O sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine, / And let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine." Unlike the syntactical rearrangement that Fish performs, this 'reshaping' is one we can carry out at no cost to the poem's intricate form. But while the meter and the rhyme are in no way affected by reversing the couplet, we can also see that the poem's greatest feat is all but made to disappear in that rearrangement. For "The Altar's" central purpose – to pay homage to God's sovereignty – is only fully achieved when what is "thine" overtakes what is "mine."

Of course, seeing how this is done is one thing and doing it is another. To that end we might examine a related but somewhat different interpretive exercise involving two more recent works of poetry. But Fish's reading of Herbert raises two matters that I want to lay out briefly before turning to that exercise. The analysis Fish performs in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* is also part of the history of a larger theoretical enterprise aimed at identifying the meaning of any given literary work with the constructive activity of the reader and by contrast to the idea that the meaning of the work might inhere in it or exist prior to the reader's activity. Or as Fish would put it a decade later in his well-known essay "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One": "Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them" (Fish 1982, 327). My use of Fish here might therefore be read as a way of presenting that theoretical claim – which flew for a time under the banner of so-called 'reader-response theory' – as foundational both to what Schlegel appears to mean by 'poetic critique' and to the kind of remaking that I am arguing we are always doing in our capacity as literary critics. But my argument will show instead why the fantasy of our constructing the poem is not what Schlegel has to mean (much less what is happening) when we "shape again what has already been shaped" (qtd. in Chaouli et al. 2019).

For we might also recall that the very same Schlegel who was interested in the reader's ability to reshape the poem also seemed to believe the very opposite of one of Fish's corollary claims, namely that a poem (or for that matter any object of interpretation) has no inherent "distinguishing features": "acts of recognition," Fish writes, "rather than being triggered by formal characteristics, are their source" (Fish 1982, 326). In other words, for Fish, whatever we might mean when we talk

about interpreting a text, including simply describing the text, what we are really referring to is our construction (and not our construal) of the text. For Schlegel, by contrast, it would appear that *poems themselves* both construe and construct their own interpretations: "In all its descriptions," writes Schlegel in one of the Athenaeum fragments, "[...] poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry" (Schlegel 1991 [1798], 51). If poetry can be said to describe itself, it is hard to see how that can happen without the description being in some sense inherent in the poem, and therefore also part and parcel of the poem's "distinguishing features" or "formal characteristics." And it is the relationship between form and meaning implied in Schlegel's suggestion that "poetry should describe itself" that is essential not only to the kind of critique that we as literary scholars cannot help but perform as a matter of course, but also to recognizing the critique that poems themselves perform as the primary object of our study.

Anyone familiar with "How to Recognize a Poem When you See One" may recall that it famously begins with a classroom experiment in which Fish showed his students a list of names on a reading assignment for another class and then instructed them that it was a seventeenth-century poem they were expected to analyze: interpretive labor that, if Fish's description is remotely accurate, the students in proceeding to unearth a trove of clever prosodic devices and literary and biblical allusions were able to perform with spectacular success. I want to turn now to a very different (but also successful) interpretive experiment that I had my own students perform; however, if the point of Fish's experiment was to show that neither a list nor a poem – nor anything else we might call a text – has any inherent formal features, because whatever we see in it is imposed on the poem by our communal act of reading it, the point of my experiment is exactly the opposite. That is, while my students' exercise might seem to bear out both Fish's claim that readers make poems and Schlegel's imperative to "reshape" them, it also bears out Schlegel's other proposition that "poetry should describe itself."

The assignment is one that I gave to a first-year undergraduate class on poetry – the students in which were largely non-literature majors – where one of the works we read was Claudia Rankine's 2014 National Book Award finalist, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. It is worth noting that the reworking of Rankine's poetry that the exercise asks students to do is based on an aspect of *Citizen* that most reviewers and scholars writing about it have commented on, namely Rankine's extensive use of the second-person "you."[3] With few exceptions, the largely prose format of the work is delivered in this second-person voice, as we see in this passage:

> You are rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica. This friend says, as you walk toward her, You are late, you nappy-headed ho. What did you say? you ask, though you

3 The poet and novelist Ben Lerner, for example, devotes an extended section of his 2016 book-length essay to an analysis of the effects of Rankine's second-person address on a white reader (Lerner 2016, 69–74).

> have heard every word. This person has never before referred to you like this in your presence, never before code-switched in this manner. What did you say? She doesn't, perhaps physically cannot, repeat what she has just said.
>
> Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of "black people time" by employing what she perceives to be "black people language." Maybe she is jealous of whoever kept you and wants to suggest you are nothing or everything to her. Maybe she wants to have a belated conversation about Don Imus and the women's basketball team he insulted with this language. You don't know. You don't know what she means. You don't know what response she expects from you nor do you care. For all your previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. You both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture. (Rankine 2014, 41–42)

The predominant referent for the "you" here is clearly the speaker of the poem, whom we also are given to read as black, and more specifically, to identify with the poet herself. This passage is just one of many that combine to depict a subject confronting a relentless barrage of microaggressions by white people, acts that even in the short space of this passage range from the oblivious to the malicious. Moreover, insofar as the "you" mostly refers to the speaker herself, we can see that the second-person voice is serving a first-person point of view. I say "mostly" because the "you" in the question that the speaker asks twice in this passage – "What did you say?", which also acts as a kind of refrain throughout the volume – clearly does not refer to the person asking the question. In this respect, this passage like many others in *Citizen*, also serves as a bold reminder of the second-person pronoun's flexibility of reference. "What did you say?" – which reads simultaneously as the speaker's stunned expression of disbelief at the racial slur and a pained attempt to call the friend out for it – marks this capaciousness even as (or precisely because) we have no trouble seeing that the "you" who provokes the question is distinct from the "you" who asks it. And as a by-product of that same flexibility of reference, what also emerges here – after we are reminded of the notorious 2007 radio broadcast where the American talk-show celebrity Don Imus and his guest used the same racial slur (along with string of others) discussing the Rutgers University women's basketball team's loss in a tight NCAA final against the University of Tennessee – is that the speaker identified with the "you" is not a lone injured subject but one of many who have suffered the effects of an identical verbal violence. The poem also reminds us, in other words, that in strict grammatical usage, the "you," unlike the "I" that it can be used to stand in for (and notwithstanding the kind of poetic license that might enable one, say, to use the first-person singular to "contain multitudes"), can refer either singularly or plurally.

Using the second-person "you" as an equivalent of the first-person "I" is hardly Rankine's invention, of course; it is a speech pattern that has been put to literary use not just by poets but also by fiction writers, and one that occurs in everyday parlance as well. So an obvious question for us as critics, particularly when we consider *Citizen's* subtitle, *An American Lyric*, is what Rankine is trying to accomplish by mobi-

lizing "you" both for its ability to stand in for the more familiar lyric "I" and its ability to shuttle between plural and singular referents. It is a question that, as a teacher of Rankine's book, I also want my students to try to answer. So to help them understand Rankine's decision to make the first-person "you" one of the primary cogs in *Citizen*'s machinery, I gave them an assignment that would help them examine the differences it would make to Rankine's lyric endeavor if the poem were constructed differently and she were to voice it through the genre's more conventional first-person pronoun. The assignment asked students to follow a two-step procedure: Step 1) Choose one of the shorter sections (ideally less than a page long) from Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and rewrite it, substituting a first-person pronoun wherever a second-person pronoun seems to refer to the speaker, and making any other necessary grammatical changes that follow from the substitution. Step 2) Circle or underline any instances where you're not sure what the right change would be or where it seems the original sense of the passage would be significantly altered or rendered nonsensical by the change from second person to first person.

Here is what the second-person to first-person conversion looks like with the passage discussed above:

> [I am] rushing to meet a friend in a distant neighborhood of Santa Monica. This friend says, as [I] walk toward her, You are late, you nappy-headed ho. What did you say? [I] ask, though [I] have heard every word. This person has never before referred to [me] like this in [my] presence, never before code-switched in this manner. What did you say? She doesn't, perhaps physically cannot, repeat what she has just said.
>
> Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of "black people time" by employing what she perceives to be "black people language." Maybe she is jealous of whoever kept [me] and wants to suggest [I am] nothing or everything to her. Maybe she wants to have a belated conversation about Don Imus and the women's basketball team he insulted with this language. [I] don't know. [I] don't know what she means. [I] don't know what response she expects from [me] nor do [I] care. For all [my/our]? previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. [We] both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, [I/we?] watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture. (Rankine 2014, 41–42)[4]

Entirely by virtue of the "you"'s first-person capacities, there's very little change in the sense of the situation in the first paragraph except perhaps a sharpening of the lines differentiating the speaker's words from those of the friend. But the conversion also makes clear what the "you" can do that the "I" cannot, which is to cut in two directions at once, offering us the grammatical possibility of the speaker and the friend occupying common ground even as, in the second paragraph, that prospect is made to collapse, as if the pronoun "you" itself were at once both "suture" and "rupture" between them. For this reason, it is also clear why Rankine did not attempt

4 I have marked with underscoring those moments in this poem (as well as in another discussed below), where it is unclear which first-person pronoun would offer the most appropriate substitution.

some first-person variation on the friend's comment in this particular section of the work, even though in many of the vignettes in *Citizen*, the white people who are given voice do address the speaker from a first-person point-of-view, as in this short passage:

> Because of your elite status from a year's worth of travel, you have already settled into your window seat on United Airlines, when the girl and her mother arrive at your row. The girl, looking over at you, tells her mother, these are our seats, but this is not what I expected. The mother's response is barely audible – I see, she says. I'll sit in the middle. (12)

But if we return to our translation exercise we can see all the better why giving *Citizen's* black lyric speaker (as opposed to its white ones) a first-person pronoun will not serve, for it is precisely around the moment of the poem that points most explicitly to common ground between its black and white subjects – "you both experience this cut" – that we run up against the real challenges to our translation. That is, while "all your previous understandings" might also point to something the speaker and her friend share in common, the fact that "you" cleaves so undecidably between the singular and the plural when we try to replace the second-person pronoun with the first suggests why we might have trouble settling on either "my" or "our."

The rupture that cuts between the speaker and her friend certainly points to a divide that would rule out "our understandings" as an alternative to "your" in this translation. But it is *Citizen* as a whole that makes a case for why the singular "my," "I," and "me" might be unavailable not just to the speaker in this particular situation, but to any African American citizen who would sing "An American Lyric." Indeed until the very final poem of the book, it is only the white perpetrators of racism who refer to themselves in the first-person singular, while the speaker never uses "I" except in mentioning the pronoun, as in these lines a few pages before the end of the book: "Who do you think you are, saying I to me? // [...] Don't say I if it means so little, / holds the little forming no one / [...] You are injured" (142–143). But even if Rankine has erased the difference between use and mention here by omitting the customary scare quotes in these lines, we as readers have no problem recognizing the difference between these occurrences of "I" and the one that begins *Citizen's* final vignette:

> I can hear the even breathing that creates passages to dreams. And yes, I want to interrupt to tell him her us you me I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending.
>
> Tell me a story, he says, wrapping his arms around me.
>
> Yesterday, I begin, I was waiting in the car for time to pass. A woman pulled in and started to park her car facing mine. Our eyes met and what passed passed as quickly as the look away. She backed up and parked on the other side of the lot. I could have followed her to worry my question but I had to go, I was expected on court, I grabbed my racket.
>
> The sunrise is slow and cloudy, dragging the light in, but barely.
>
> Did you win? he asks.

> It wasn't a match, I say. It was a lesson. (Rankine 2014, 159)

Upon reaching this point in the poem readers are well prepared to grasp the lesson they have been given. If one commonplace of the lyric as a genre has been famously expressed in John Stuart Mill's remark that "All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy" such that "no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself" (Mill 1981 [1833], 349), then what Rankine's "American Lyric" teaches us to see is the privilege that attaches to that un-self-conscious first-person standpoint. The highly self-conscious self-description that the poem *Citizen* enacts through its pronouns is a drama of withholding, in which self-description is exactly what is relentlessly denied to the poem's black speaker. We discover in place of the unselfconsciousness of the traditional (read: white) lyric speaker the double-consciousness (to recall W.E.B. Du Bois) of the African American lyric speaker beset by hostile projections.[5] Thus when *Citizen*'s speaker summarizes the effects of this disparity in the phrase "you are injured," we also see what would be needed to redress the injury – a subjectivity unmolested by the projections of others.

In this respect, however, what we might call *Citizen*'s 'poetic critique' of the lyric also maintains the genre's broader contours insofar as in overturning one commonplace – that of the un-self-conscious solitary singer – it upholds another – that of expressing, to recall one of the genre's major Romantic practitioners, the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 1988 [1800], 246). But as the African American critic Kenneth Warren has observed, in embracing that commonplace in order to describe the subjective wounds of racial inequality, *Citizen* also actively occludes a different form of injustice, and one that disproportionately affects black Americans – that of economic inequality:

> That is, the young men depicted [as victims of racist acts] elsewhere in *Citizen* appear to us as victims not because (unlike you and me) they cannot afford to purchase – or are otherwise unable to earn – elite status tickets, but rather because they, like you, are on the receiving end of actions and gestures that stem from prejudice, racism, and bias. (Warren 2016)

To show what it can look like to perform the kind of 'poetic critique' that would address the economic violence that Rankine's *Citizen*, whether deliberately or inadvertently, occludes, I want to turn now to another recently published work of poetry, Leslie Kaplan's *Excess – The Factory*. The work was published in French as *L'excès – L'usine in 1987,* but it appeared in English translation only decades later, in 2018, with the Oakland-based press Commune Editions (although as the remainder of this essay will suggest, it is not obvious that the choices made by the translators

5 "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." (Du Bois 2007 [1903], 8)

are all that compatible with the ostensive ideological commitments of the press's name). Like the speaker of *Citizen*, the speaker of the poems in Kaplan's book is also rendered in the second person, and to somewhat similar effect, in that we witness a subject grown increasingly wounded by and weary of the oppressive conditions of daily existence:

> You make cables near the window, cables of different colors. You roll them into coils. Light is there, space is soft. You come, go. Corridors, oblivion.
>
> You make the cables near the window. Extreme tension. The sky, and the cables, this shit. You are seized, gripped by the cables, the sky. There is nothing else.
>
> All space is occupied : all has become waste. Skin is dead. Teeth bite an apple, a sandwich. You absorb. The gaze sticks to everything like a fly.
>
> You work 9 hours, making holes in parts with a machine. You place the part, bring down the lever, take out the part, and raise the lever again. There's paper everywhere.
>
> Time is outside, in things. (Kaplan 2018 [1987], *15)*

Just as with Rankine's poem, because the second-person voice is standing in for a first-person point of view, we can try to gain a clearer sense of the effects of Kaplan's use of "you" here if we see what difference it would make if we reconstruct the poem with the more familiar lyric "I":

> [I] make cables near the window, cables of different colors. [I] roll them into coils. Light is there, space is soft. [I] come, go. Corridors, oblivion.
>
> [I] make the cables near the window. Extreme tension. The sky, and the cables, this shit. [I am] seized, gripped by the cables, the sky. There is nothing else.
>
> All space is occupied : all has become waste. Skin is dead. Teeth bite an apple, a sandwich. [I] absorb. The gaze sticks to everything like a fly.
>
> [I] work 9 hours, making holes in parts with a machine. [I] place the part, bring down the lever, take out the part, and raise the lever again. There's paper everywhere.
>
> Time is outside, in things. (15)

Here although most would probably agree that the first-person voice does not quite work, there are nevertheless fewer disjunctions than in our translation of Rankine. At the same time we can certainly point to the awkward shift from "Teeth bite an apple" to "[I] absorb" in the third verse. Partly by virtue of the lack of an interlocutor like the clueless white friend in Rankine, there are, however, almost no moments here where the substitution of the first person for the second would raise a question about which pronoun to use. Of course, a key difference between Rankine's speaker and the speaker here is that the latter is depicted grappling not with the oppressive effects of systemic racism but instead with those of capitalism. Meanwhile there is no information here that would enable us to ascertain the race or gender of the worker whose point of view Kaplan gives us, even as we receive a great deal of information (especially considering the short length of the poem) about the physical work being per-

formed and its effects on the speaker. Nevertheless, converting this poem has some similar consequences to those we saw with Rankine. For instance, in the strange disembodiment of the teeth that "bite an apple" in the third verse, we are at least invited to *imagine* the teeth belonging to the speaker. At the same time, the jump to first-person perspective in the next line, "I absorb," clearly reinforces the subjective aspects of the poem – we might also say the traditional lyric aspects of it – in ways that the "you" does not. It is as if, in our revision, what would appear to have mattered most to Kaplan would be getting the poem to express this particular individual's subjective experience of this particular labor in this particular factory.

But if we return to the original French, we begin to see a very different picture of the poem's speaker, one that we need to see in order to discover Kaplan's full purpose in so vividly depicting the factory worker's immiseration. Both the translator's choice of "you" and our experiment with "I" actually distort the original poem's aims, and the distortion has everything to do with the fact that the poem is intended less as a critique of the laborer's suffering than as a critique of what causes it, namely capitalism. And in this respect, Kaplan's poems demonstrate the extent to which pursuing such a critique – unlike, say, the critique of racism – precisely requires an impersonal rather than a personal point of view. Hence the pronoun that prevails in Kaplan's French is neither the second-person nor the first-person pronoun, but the impersonal "on":

> On fait des câbles près de la fenêtre. Les câbles ont beaucoup de couleurs, on les enroule en circuits. Il y a de la lumière, l'espace est mou. On va, on vient. Couloirs, oubli.
>
> On fait des câbles près de la fenêtre. Tension extrême. Le ciel, et les câbles, cette merde. On est saisie, tirée par les câbles, le ciel. Il n'y a rien d'autre.
>
> Tout l'espace est occupé : tout est devenu déchet. La peau est morte. Les dents mordent une pomme, un sandwich. On absorbe, le regard se colle à tout comme une mouche.
>
> On travaille neuf heures, on fait des trous dans des pièces avec une machine. On met la pièce, on descend le levier, on sort la pièce, on remonte le levier.
>
> Il y a du papier partout. Le temps est dehors, dans les choses. (*Kaplan 1987,* 13)

Given that there's a perfectly serviceable equivalent of "on" in English, what do we discover when we read this poem in translation again, but this time with the impersonal "one" in place of the personal "you" imposed on it by the Commune Editions translators:

> [One makes] cables near the window, cables of different colors. [One rolls] them into coils. Light is there, space is soft. [One comes, goes.] Corridors, oblivion.
>
> [One makes] the cables near the window. Extreme tension. The sky, and the cables, this shit. [One is] seized, gripped by the cables, the sky. There is nothing else.
>
> All space is occupied : all has become waste. Skin is dead. Teeth bite an apple, a sandwich. [One absorbs.] The gaze sticks to everything like a fly.

> [One works] 9 hours, making holes in parts with a machine. [One places] the part, [brings] down the lever, [takes] out the part, and [raises] the lever again. There's paper everywhere.
>
> Time is outside, in things. (Kaplan 2018 [1987], 15)

There is no question here, as with Rankine's *Citizen*, that the speaker is experiencing "powerful feelings," but the effect of Kaplan's impersonal speaker is to make them entirely secondary – by-products of an injustice that is structural, but precisely not in what we mean when we speak, say, of structural racism. Unlike racism, the structure of exploitation under which "one" suffers in Kaplan's *Factory*, the structure that produces the 'excess' or surplus value that is foundational to capitalism, is a structure indifferent to the individual experiences of the laborer on the one hand and the factory owner on the other. As Warren says in the conclusion to his critique of *Citizen*, "What then makes these poems 'good' on their terms is their capacity to keep in the foreground the idea of injustice as a matter of how we feel about each other and how we make each other feel, and to keep our attention away from economic injustice, which is not at all rooted in our feelings toward each other" (Warren 2016). We might then say that what makes Kaplan's poems "'good' on their terms" (to borrow Warren's language) is their ability to imagine the grounds of social change from the standpoint of an impersonal subject. Or to put the point slightly differently, the self-description these poems perform generates a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of no subject at all, a critique we can see all the more clearly in these poems when we see how a re-making of them makes that critique disappear.

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