

# THE WOMEN (FIRST REEL): ON SUSAN CLARK



*Ted Byrne*

## WRITING / CLASS

The publisher of *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology* is rumoured to have said that his intention in publishing the book was to “finish off” the KSW. The introduction to *Writing Class* was first presented at a conference on “foundational narrative.”<sup>1</sup> If the function of a foundational narrative is to sustain resistance in a moment of struggle, then the tale offered in the introduction is really more of an origin myth, the function of which is to sustain an institution once it’s established, to buttress an entity whose completion already threatens dissolution or change. And doesn’t the creation of an anthology *per se* serve such a function, even while quietly announcing, or prefiguring, a death? The use of an origin myth to frame this anthology is paradoxical – or, perhaps (giving the benefit), parodical – because institutionalization *is* death in the ethos of the KSW, and the introduction to *Writing Class* is highly conscious of this.

The anthology covers the years 1984 to 1994. It was precisely at the end of this period that an infamous and sensible proposal to restructure the collective was put forward to the Annual General Meeting. This was a moment in which the institution – for, in spite of its self-description, it always exists as an institution by dint of available grant capital – was up for grabs. There had already been a couple of silent bids – from the cultural studies contingent, from the feminist contingent. This particular bid – which actually took the form of a written, and therefore not silent, proposal, and was brought, at the AGM, to that unthinkable gesture in a culture of consensus and coercion, a vote – came from the direction of an older, patriarchal avant-garde, from the age of giants, itself prior to the heroic age. The women organized the resistance. Tears were

shed, and in some quarters those tears, not the extraordinary turnout or the impassioned speeches, were erroneously blamed for the defeat.

The KSW then fell into a period of desuetude. This period has been referred to, by some who still hold to the myth of a heroic era, as the “caretaker regime.” If such a regime actually existed – and if the measure is attendance, at readings, at meetings, it did – there is room for some debate about its duration. Certainly by the time the KSW lost its grant from the city of Vancouver, probably for being “idiots” (see below), the collective was back in fighting form. Beyond that arousal, however, the most dramatic regrouping was the soft, deep entry of a post-situationist contingent from the Friends of Runcible Mountain.

Having so far avoided the naming of names, I’m now reluctant to nominate an agent of change that led the school away from, in particular, instruction, which is to say the institutionalization of pedagogy as paid instruction – away from the notion, not that writing can be taught (of course it can be taught) but that it should be taught. It is necessary to name Aaron Vidaver, however, because one of his undertakings serves my narrative in a very specific manner. It was he who curated the series Anomalous Parlance. How he traversed the ground from Anomalous Parlance, which persisted in the fetishization of writing, to the anarchist political practice that produced the astonishing collective work *Woodsquat*,<sup>2</sup> is another story. For the moment, I’m interested only in the story (the reading) of Anomalous Parlance as redress.

Anomalous Parlance was a series of readings and talks that included Susan Clark, Lisa Robertson, Nancy Shaw, Catriona Strang, Christine Stewart, and Lissa Wolsak. In this essay, I will only be dealing with the work of Susan Clark, but I want to first situate the work of these women in the context of that now distant event.

*Writing Class* was marked by exclusions. Its editors cannily incorporate these exclusions into their narrative. Deanna Ferguson is treated, in the introduction, as if she were included. In fact, she is marked as included by her own act of self-exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Exclusion was her choice and, in the interpretation of the editors, an act of “cultural defiance” and “refusal” emanating from her own “obvious sense of exclusion” (42). Their comments on Deanna Ferguson lead directly into another, more ambitious tactical movement of incorporation, this time the incorporation of the women they describe as “Giantesses” or the “Barscheit Nation,” confounding

two or three far less than programmatic ventures. A reading of the “Barscheit Nation” manifesto as a subversion of futurism, seen as the prototype of a masculinist power discourse *in extremis*, is superimposed on a group identity fabricated by the editors of *Writing Class* and called “the Giantess collective.” Thereby “a contingent coalition working within the KSW” forwards their narrative, correcting a possible imbalance – a tendency to “subordinate gender issues to those of class” – by elaborating a language practice that foregrounds “other significant political issues besides those usually associated with capital and class relations” – i.e. feminism (42–43).

Catriona Strang, one of the so-called Giantesses, is also excluded from the anthology, again by her own choice, although this is not mentioned. A trace of this exclusion persists. She’s the only author, besides Deanna Ferguson, who’s listed in the bibliography but not actually included in the collection. I want to imagine, for the purposes of my narrative, that Catriona Strang excluded herself because of another, and this time not self-inflicted, exclusion – that of Susan Clark and Christine Stewart, who both figure in the recounted episode of the “Giantesses.”<sup>4</sup> It’s this exclusion that I wish to consider. And I’m not arguing, in any sense, that these writers should have been included, any more than, say, Tom Wayman or Colin Browne (founding fathers both) should have been included. The anthology is a retrospective polemic, a construction, an origin myth. It has a logic, an argument, which only a full analysis of its introduction and contents could unpack.

In brief, the anthologists argue for a writing practice which is, in itself, an opposition to capital and its relations of production and of class. What this means, however, is not a discursive practice which, through metaphorical illustration (Wayman’s “hammer,” [28–29]) or declarative command (Stanley’s “explicit social commentary” [32]), interpellates a class-conscious subject and calls for political action, however vague that call may be, but rather a writing practice which reorganizes (“at the point of production”) the language act itself, quite consciously and through the operation of a number of formal devices that can be, and are, in the manner of the Language School essay (polemic followed by close reading), readily identified.

I’m not convinced that this distinction is as distinctive as it’s made to appear, or that the writers treated actually exemplify the latter practice rather than the former. In other words, I’m not convinced that the metonymical devices enumerated operate that dif-

ferently from the metaphorical and iconic devices spurned. What is certain, however, is that the writers included in the anthology write, quite deliberately, from a class-conscious subject-position resulting from their own class origins, class situation or formation. The real antagonist is not Wayman or Stanley – allegorical propaganda or social realism – but what is characterized as “an aesthetic celebration of individual creativity,” or romantic individualism, identified with the work of Robin Blaser and Brian Fawcett. In this respect, the authors, recognizing that they are not dealing here with the bourgeoisie, but only with bourgeois consciousness as they conceive it, assert that marginality, social exclusion (read homosexuality) or political disenfranchisement are not guarantors of an “objective perspective on social matters” (33). The KSW, suspicious of an individualism that speaks from this office, and far from being a “visionary organization” itself, addresses a much narrower and more manageable question: whether language can displace capitalism.

This would seem quixotic, except for the choice of verb. Isn't capitalism, as a set of cultural relations, or even property relations if these are understood only as counters, continually “displaced” by the heterogeneous social justice struggles we engage in, and by the antagonisms endlessly expressed within the poetries we propagate? Didn't Blaser put his queer discursive shoulder to the wheel with “Even on Sunday”? Don't Lisa Robertson and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk both construct texts that, within a rhetoric of address, “displace” the dominant relations of power, within and without the language they employ? Don't we live in the hope that all these minor acts of defiance, however they may be accommodated and recuperated, lead beyond a displacement of capital, to its dismantling?

When I say that neither Susan Clark nor Christine Stewart belong in this anthology,<sup>5</sup> I mean to judge them by the criteria the anthology itself establishes. I think that their work, like the work of others captured by *Anomalous Parlance*, is post-romantic. It's delirious not realist, excessive not minimal, dialectical not analytical, philosophical not sociological, argumentative, but within a rhetoric of figures, not Aristotelian. Its argumentation is constative and accumulative. It confronts the literary with its own decrepit image. Its retention of a disturbing kernel of the beyond is always utopian, not paradisal.

## BELIEVING IN THE WORD

Susan Clark's *Believing in the World* (1989) is "a reference work," part of "an encyclopaedia project" (*The Round*). It is a dictionary, treating of words, but as if they had no limits. It is not phenomenological, in spite of a superficial (anthropomorphizing) resemblance to Ponge ("Fire enjoys reaching up," "Dust has no ambition"). It has no desire to break down the barrier between word and thing. In fact, it redefines words, puts them to other uses, develops them as terms of art, more in keeping with philosophical than with poetic practice, more like Levinas than Ponge. The grass: multitude and neighbourhood.

Where does this particular notion of the reference work, of the encyclopaedia, come from? The encyclopaedic impulse is there in modernism, but more as a need to write the world, its totality. Here, as in the work of Christine Stewart (*Taxonomy*) and Lisa Robertson (*The Apothecary*), among others, it obeys more of an avant-garde (surrealist *and* feminist) impulse to subvert the authority of the reference work by adopting and then mocking its form, its reach.

Their encyclopaedic work is ludic, festive, disruptive. The encyclopaedia is an impossibility, like the dictionary or the index – like empire (the apotheosis of patriarchy, which in itself, as a micropolitic, is not impossible at all). It is the impossibility of the encyclopaedia that fascinates, precisely because it prefigures a rupture within the order that requires it. These works despise authority. It is the authority displayed in rhetoric, in the structure of language, in grammar, syntax, that is attacked. "We are Flaubert," says Debbie. "Think hard; when we speak of style, we speak of desires. They vex a prick's ubiquity," says "The Barscheit Horse."<sup>6</sup>

"Believing in the World" sounds like the title of a self-help book, or an immense, naïve reaching toward faith in a wonder-working immanence. And this book, or pamphlet, carries remnants of a literary style that will be stripped away as Clark's work progresses towards a grand subversion of the book, of literature, of rhetoric (argumentation), away from an approach based on overarching devices – literary or surrealist games – like the mock dictionary, or even the encyclopaedia.<sup>7</sup> However, the title is immediately undercut by its subtitle. "Believing in the World / a reference work" is an excellent joke because, of course, a reference work both cannot be, by definition, and always is, in its usage, a matter of belief. Belief

in the world, like belief in any totality, like belief, is something we fall into, endlessly. It is at once the motor and the horizon of all our acts. “Believing in the World,” of course, can also be read as an act – believing, as an act that takes place in the world, has no exterior locus or destination. The problem of belief stands at the outset of this book, and weaves its way through it like a delicate and debilitating fabric.

*Believing in the World* begins with “Fire.” “Fire” is perhaps the most Pongean of these texts and here, at the outset, marks an enduring aspect of this body of work, a certain overdetermined relation to words. That they are abyssal, and dear. It is finally only the thing, or the word as thing, that can be grasped, like a newel post, to conquer vertigo. But the thing is not the referent, it is the whole material world into which the word sinks, by which the word is distended.

Stuck here, a complaint took the form of an appeal, and I was advised to reread the first section of Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*. After that rereading, I can’t help but invest this text with metaphysical desire. “Fire enjoys reaching up,” toward the most-high. “And its reach means forever.” There is no destination for such desire, no totality into which it can be absorbed. “Fire is the riot of one being.” There is no transcendent other, no absolute other. “If I say we, you infer love.” The only other is the other person (*l’autrui*). “Fire can remember nothing.” But this other is, precisely, absolutely other.

“Grass” (“infinitely underfoot”) speaks of the “multitude, neighbourhood” in which “each human [is] a single event.” “Train” speaks of the “hair’s breadth, earshot” which separates us, of the “subtle pow pow pow of our selves colliding.” “Love” describes us as “arched each over the pitch of so great a distance to fall and wait and wait til we *can* fall.” “A bridge which collapses leaves two shores. Or is all this impossible. In which we both wake and sleep.” The acts which move against this binding (*religio*), which “distend” us (Levinas, or Clark), “the way out of what you are,” “are neither consumption, nor caress, nor lethargy” (Levinas). “It is impossible to ask this much” (Clark).

It is tempting to continue thus, to read Levinas into the “face to face” in “Age.” But I begin to feel a distortion, and a nostalgia for the other (*l’Autre*) finds its way back into the text. In the “face to face” with death, age “gives over, bit by bit” to “it’s next being.” But what is death but the absolutely other, and the other a re-

minder of our (eventual) not being? “Next being” then = proximal being.

With “Dust” I completely lose the thread of this imposed reading (not a close reading, but a forced reading, admitting its violence). Reading “Dust” I wish I had commenced this exercise with Kristeva rather than Levinas. Dust “by smutting wishes to illumine.” There is another, persistent, thread here, in the abject, the most-low.

Anyway, the point is not that *Believing in the World* is a gloss of Levinas – it isn’t. It is, however, a poetry that accumulates into an argument, as do the philosopher’s vertiginous but agglomerative sentences. It is, ultimately, reaching, tentative, essaying, but thetic. However, the thesis will remain always just beyond grasping, an “apparatus of impossibility.” In this its poetry outstrips its thesis and always will.

There are other characteristics of this first book that persist: a black humour, born of fear (“Husband in a brittle bed: snuff! *sparito*”); the unbound aphorism (“A woman is better than soldiers”); the apparent puzzle (“This cups hands around something just in front of the spine . . .”); the dire/comic apothegm (“If something is deadly poison, someone must’ve died”<sup>8</sup>); a classifying mania, which here is contained within the apparent larger structure of a reference work, but later becomes pandemic; an erosion from within the structure of the book (unanchored footnotes and cross-references); the hysterical, the phobic, the abject (“In their house everything is normal but the smell,” “The fresh green of vegetation in the water makes us queasy”); the disastrous, the irreparable, as in Dickinson (see “Love”: the collapsing bridge, the flood, choking, gynocide).

And the lyrical. The lyric is a miniature of the encyclopaedia. A small, contracting, but always complete universe. In this body of work, the lyrical is a rupturing, intrusive, echoic impulse, an interruption, like the lyrical in Braxton’s compositions – not an appeasement, not a demonstration, not nostalgic, but an homage to the impossible, past and future.<sup>9</sup>

The last piece, “Rain,” takes the form of lyric – or at least some of its sections have line breaks, caesurae (hardly any enjambment), and some of its lines make conscious use of number. Opening the book with Ponge, closing with Dickinson, one could speak of a lyric mastery binding the work. To give an example:

7.

I did not kiss but drank kisses  
The sky lies over so

Spent, given  
Any one word is too large

As you are minutes are gone from the world  
The buildup consists of deaths

And my house is of paper  
The rain smells of the other

*Repeat, repeat*  
*Exhausted, choose*

Surprise gathers, wept

And yet, the lyricism is overwhelmed by other cares. And still, reading “Rain,” I want to cling to the Levinasian vocabulary – the “voluptuous,” “‘Is’ copulates among us amock,” “The rain smells of the other.” And yet we are not compelled to the Levinasian conclusion of hospitality.<sup>10</sup> I think we will not arrive there, in spite of an increasingly ethical textual comportment.

In a sense *Believing in the World / a reference work* stands in a symmetrical relation to *as lit x: the syntax of adoration*. If one wished to tease out a larger structure, with these two pamphlets introducing and closing the body of this work, one would then have to contend with what lies between, the ruin of the book, its debris.



(THE TEXT'S NIGHTMARE OF THE BOOK,  
BURIED ALIVE)

*structure*

I thought this was the completion of my book, forthcoming, ever forthcoming, called *Suck Glow*. It seems to be turning into a book of its own. I thought it was going to be more in the vein of encyclopaedia and it seems to be turning into a play of some kind. This was going to be an article – so called – called “Topics of Mental Life,” with many sub-heads. It now seems to be something called “Theatre of the New World of the Time” with many “Characters” or “Situations.”

– Susan Clark, introductory remarks to a reading  
at the Kootenay School of Writing, June 1993

I'm going to read from a manuscript called “Tied to a Post,” which is in a state of wildness. “Tied to a Post” is subtitled “essay in abstraction.” It's the first part of yet another book. Actually, there may just be tiered books. It's part one of *Idiot Fit* . . . Idiot fit, in other words the idiot made, not born. And the idiot is from the Greek *idion*, which is the origin of our word “idiot.” The *idion* is a citizen who does not partake in the functions of the polis, does not fulfill the duties of a citizen.

– Susan Clark, introductory remarks to a reading  
at Robson Central, October 1998

A section from book two of *The Round* appeared in the first issue of *West Coast Line* (another, earlier KSW anthology),<sup>11</sup> where it was announced that a further installment would appear in *Motel*. This work, however, bears a closer resemblance, at least structurally, to subsequent writing than to *Believing in the World*. Perhaps *The Round* is morphing into *Suck Glow*, the first appearance of which occurs the same year in *Motel*. In particular, this “new” work mounts a more direct attack on the structure of the book. “Pages” become numbered units detached from the pages they necessarily inhabit. “Pages” are noted as “following” other sections of text in a very un-page-like manner. The text itself takes up a critique of the book:

I fall upon a book: it's flat, hard, only opens; is as though only one could feel.

This sense of the world as already articulate: past tense. Reality being not “the vain sexual ecstasy of an object,” but a book exploded to fill the shelf.

Every memory so quickly losing our feet,

vs.

the immense vertical concrete contemplation of the whole book, closed.

The books with which I say I have “a romantic and sexual rapport” sit on the shelf.

And yet the book always remains the intended, if impossible, armature of these writings. Books are announced, tables of contents are provided along with bewilderingly small and partial selections in numerous journals. At readings, everything is put in the context of its, supposedly, larger structures. *The Round. Suck Glow. Theatre of the New World of the Time. Bad Infinity*. The latter is shown as fragments of sections: “Tied to a Post,” “the Agglomerative,” which may themselves be imagined as books.<sup>12</sup>

These “books” seem to overlap, flow into each other structurally (“there may just be tiered books”). *Suck Glow* becomes, perhaps, *Theatre of the New World of the Time*. And the sections often break down into smaller embedded structures. “Gether” is published as “from ‘the Agglomerative’” which is described as “a classifying section of *Bad Infinity*.” But “Gether” consists of various “sections” (“Sticky, 0 / [the ontological section],” and so on) within which are small lyrical stanzas resembling the “pages” seen elsewhere in *Bad Infinity*, and similarly titled: “ontos I.. i.,” “ontos I.. ii.,” for example.

All of this amounts to a delirium of classification, a parody of structure. But in a certain sense it continues the careful de-structuring of the rational that began with the encyclopaedia work. The encyclopaedia is at once a dream – on the cusp of modernity – of containment, of an interwoven, bound whole, a totality, which reaches its apex in Hegel, and an utter impossibility, the fulfillment of which would embrace infinity. This is what the “structures” of Clark’s work tell us. These are “apparatuses of impossibility.”

### *syntax, or debris*

Proposal: Language contains many apparatuses of impossibility. It has to. Or, it just does.

– Susan Clark, “Notes towards a discussion of the Poetics of Impossibility” (Dec. 5, 2000, for a KSW seminar)

A primitive, super-sophisticated artificial intelligence: syntax.

– “Notes towards a discussion of the Poetics of Impossibility”

The writing takes the form of a series of propositions. Often syntactically peculiar, seemingly incomplete, undecidable. There are lyric elements, lyric shapes, but overall one is drawn to puzzle not to sing. However, *no amount of reasoning will untie these knots*. There is almost more delirium in the texts than in their structure, or

their delirium is also structural – “a delirium of syntactic destabilization.”<sup>13</sup> One is endlessly stopping over phrases. As if they would yield to a prolonged gaze. But, impossibility’s darlings, they won’t. And it’s really their *way* of not yielding that is interesting.

The subtitle of Clark’s thesis on Emily Dickinson refers to “syntactic and epistemological aporia as radical poetic apparatus.” She speaks there, and elsewhere, of “apparatuses of impossibility” and posits a poetic operation that attempts “what neither language nor the wind can attain.” This is not an uncommon approach to poetics, particularly after Mallarmé. One is tempted, immediately, to make reference to hermeticism, or back to the “romantic individualism” thesis of Barnholden and Klobucar. However, there is no gesture toward “the rosy world” of the sublime, the ineffable,<sup>14</sup> but rather an embrasure, a distention, within the wholly other, infinity, the abject, death, the impossible. The interesting thing to me, in this context, is the cohabitation of a heightened and omnipresent use of address, and a simultaneous opacity of discourse. The hospitable and the inhospitable.

“These poems,” she says of Dickinson’s work, “are not riddles with known answers, they are not the treasures of any system’s sales pitch” (7). Puzzles are a form of address, inhospitable to the extent that the puzzle-maker holds or withholds the answer. Does the unanswerable puzzle result from the madness of the questioner, the inhospitable Mad Hatter, or from an unbounded hospitality, a gift of diminished reference?

There is a sense in which this writing – what I’m calling the debris of the book, between *Believing in the World* and *as lit x* – constitutes a form of “phobic speech,” of language as the construction of a counterphobic object, “emptied of meaning, tearing at high speed over an abyss, untouched and untouchable” (Kristeva, 52–53).<sup>15</sup> This work, as it progresses, carries forward the contest with structure,<sup>16</sup> but more and more at the level of syntax, the structural apparatus becoming a joke that is no longer, in itself, puzzling.<sup>17</sup> That is, most often the line, or the sentence, gives the appearance of a thetic proposition, but its syntax breaks apart any such possibility. It is not a surrealist sentence, undoing itself through the marvellous, but a fractured sentence broken by its own lack of limitation. One has an overwhelming sense of being addressed, and of questions being addressed, but feels oneself, and the questions, endlessly displaced. One does not want to think this hard and come up empty-handed again and again. But it’s impossible

to leave it alone, to stop picking away at it, because it never offers itself as a simple pleasure, like tautology. This is not a generous discourse.

No sufficient reward in image, music, thought, only failed intellection. Is that a lesson?

### *didactics*

– the encyclopaedia is secretly modelled – like language – on the religio-romantic concept of Devotion which makes it all better by proposing then necessitating an infinitely postponed salvation to clean up the mess.

– Susan Clark, “Gether”

Belief, she says somewhere, throws us beyond knowing. “So, if adoration’s mind only wishes to drive our mind beyond itself, its best hope is this syntax – a machine only the mind obeys, and exquisitely, to death” (*as lit x*, 19). Belief. Adoration. Devotion. A delirium. Hysteria (“bursts along the stream of Blank’s [Blanche Wittman’s] memory banks” [“Gether”]).

But, Susan, belief *is* the structure of much of our knowing. Hence, believing, adoration, devotion, become cynical acts of knowing. No amount of reasoning . . .

Oh, I know that that “beyond itself” doesn’t exist. How many times have you told me? . . . (*as lit x*, 20)

Not a utopia, a dystopia. Here. No amount of reasoning . . .

Reasoning brings us only to a series of short cul de sacs. See, for instance, “wont I. iii. Where stolen heat . . . wells . . . the things then . . .” (“Gether”):

Poor mine dug, she’s in my hands  
and hands don’t see the apples out of reach

Sometimes it’s as if the word is the unit of composition, displayed so that they, the words, cannot accumulate into phrases. “Poor mine dug . . . .” One wants to put them together. Mines are dug. The mine may be what this writing is after. The impossible, abject in its presence, poor. But golden. “Mine” is also the interior. “Dug” also the exterior, the breast. My (mine) breast. Apples also breasts, also golden, out of reach. But one is left finally with a cluster of words: poor, mine, dug, and the pleasure of the unsayable, accented, heated (she does have an ear).<sup>18</sup>

But a yellow it  
 flicking 'round and 'round  
 its green button – oh darling  
 oh – suddenly – o'clock –

The “a,” *l'objet petit "a,"* is, of course, absent, silent.<sup>19</sup> The hands (of a clock) flicking round its button. Orgasm. (This is the “love” section of “Gether,” where the “to” is noticeably more absent.)

where lauded and harping  
 the little arms junct  
 any self in their midst  
 a mere and  
 (I'm / we're)  
 dissolute from study

And one wants to say “Masturbation!” or “Time!” as if responding to a riddle, like those poems from *The Exeter Book of Riddles* she appends to the Dickinson thesis, where, for example, the answer is obviously “penis” but really “onion.” (See the next poem in this sequence, “wont I.. iii / But [*that is*, aubade].”)

And you wonder, “Where do these poems come from, Susan?”

And she says, at the bottom of the page, “And of course these come / out of nowhere and I say / nothing every time has occurred / hotly. . . .”

After the “Anomalous Parlance” reading of *as lit x* someone told me that they found the performance unsettling. For that spectator it was like watching something unpleasant, involving another’s pain, an accident scene. The writing somehow anticipates this reception in its own phobic repetitions. There are, for example, the accident scenes (not always accidental). A woman struggling, trapped in a submerged car (“Gether”). A woman plunging from a rooftop (“Theatre”). “Like a person might blow up of their own accord, hmmm?” (“Theatre”). The bus bombing in the [blown] “Beyond recognition” section of *Bad Infinity*.

But for me this perception of the performance was simply a confounding of the writer and the text, an assumed specificity of addresser and addressee (“I was fucked by you recently”), a perception of the writing, the performance, as symptom. I remember feeling defensive and referring to Artaud: “To have done with the judgment of god.” But this, upon reflection, is an inept comparison. Artaud demonstrates that there is no dividing line between madness and reason, except the intensity of pain. One *must* not separate his

madness from his writing and observe it. But Artaud is hurling himself, from an interior pain, from his flesh, against a totality that is external and prevents his access to infinity,<sup>20</sup> against a totality such as nascent postwar American imperialism.<sup>21</sup> Whereas Clark throws herself (images of being thrown, stumbling, falling, occur frequently) outside herself and toward an infinite, an unknown, which is not on the other side of an oppressive totality, but right there in the other, the reader, the auditor. She displays a vulnerability, but also a pride that she is not pleading. Deaf ears hear.

She stood in that room and tossed a rope “across open water in high seas from boat to boat” – footnoted as “or this little gap between us, three feet of linoleum.”

I remember another occasion, a seminar announced as “The Poetics of Impossibility,” perhaps an attempt to open a conversation on the heels of *as lit x*. She offered questions in a long announcement. “Is abjection an infinity device?” “Is the transcendent a place of abjection?” “To ooze between subject and object in a place language has no name for?” “Are waste and the irrational . . . value?” An enormous reading list we were invited to add to. A *nota bene*: “This [the KSW] is a poetry environment (favours the additional), not an academic one (rhetoric as device).” This time, a long seminar table rather than the open space of a room. A large turnout. Her refusal to respond to inquiry, to instruct. I have a poor memory of the occasion. I remember that we talked, questioned. She abdicated responsibility to us. Or could not see any difference instituted by her place at the head of the table. An unwillingness to submit to interrogation, as if she were after a model of the seminar that did not yet exist – the seminar as psychoanalysis. A technique like that of the woman who falls into psychoanalytic practice in Chantal Akerman’s *A Couch in New York* – an empty affirmation that facilitates the cure, “Yes, yes, mm-hmm.”

The aim is not to answer questions, it’s to get out, to get out of it. Many people think that it is only by going back over the question that it’s possible to get out of it . . . It’s very trying. They won’t stop returning to the question in order to get out of it. But getting out never happens like that. (Deleuze, ppp??)

## AS LIT X

*As lit x* is a pamphlet, an “essay,” a performance. It is a gloss of *Bad Infinity* perhaps. Or it’s a part of *Bad Infinity*, very likely.

“Bad infinity” is a Hegelian concept. In translations of Hegel I find “spurious infinity,” “wrong infinity” and “negative infinity.” I find “bad infinity” in Marcuse. It’s probably in Althusser too. And in Lenin (perhaps the source of this translation), “Schlechte Unendlichkeit” is translated as “bad infinity” and glossed as “infinity qualitatively counterposed to finitude, not connected with it, separated from it, as if the finite were *Diesseits* [on this side], and the infinite *Jenseits* [on that side], as if the infinite stood *above* the finite, *outside* it. . . . In fact, however, *sind sie* [they are] (the finite and the infinite) *untrennbar* [inseparable]. *They are a unity*” (112).<sup>22</sup>

In Hegel bad infinity is endless repetition of the same – infinity is merely the other of finitude and hence itself finite. “Something becomes an other: this other is itself some[thing]: therefore it likewise becomes an other, and so on *ad infinitum*” (94). He also refers to this as “the infinity of reflection.” Or the infinity of understanding. “Good” infinity (true, genuine infinity) finds, in the fact of the other being determined by the same, a limit of a different sort. In this fact of sameness, something becomes other but in becoming other remains itself, an unbounded infinity. Levinas would see Hegel’s good infinity as, in fact, a totality, a false infinity. Hence one could say that Levinas (Clark) opts for the bad infinity in which the other is truly other, infinitely other, and our salvation, our humanity, can only be in this recognition, in the face of the other.

I was fucked by you recently.

It made me think about modes of pronominal address. (1)

This, as a beginning, in that small room, was felt as imprecation, implication. You damaged me, threw a spanner in the works, or, *not* taken metaphorically, his “engine” in her “furnace mouth” (“from *Suck Glow*”). One wanted to look around (“Who, me?”). But didn’t. “You” was us. Which she makes clear on the next page. “I wish you all lose yourselves [in sex].” And then we are, perhaps, cursing her: “Fuck you, Susan.” Which she glosses as “forget you.” An intricate dialectic of forgetting. Forgetting where we are. Forgetting our-

selves. And “she” is standing in front of “us.” “We” are sitting before “her.” I wants to forget you. Momentarily. And then, adoration. Fucking as adoration. But this is immediately abjected, falls into the gruesome, the impossibly other, which is beyond before. A *summa poetica*: “Impossibility is that which is adored: the delicate machine which is meaning but can’t produce it” (*as lit x*, 5).

This notion of adoration, this reaching after, which is a reaching toward the infinite, within a kind of abasement, makes my skin itch. There’s a Christianity internal to this discourse which, for me, is allergenic. When Levinas says that his philosophy can be summed up in the expression “Après vous,” I immediately imagine two such acts of generosity before the other (*l’autrui*). “After you.” “No, after you.” Then a *really* bad infinity ensues, à la Groucho Marx. Or: pursue a singular, relentless submission and you will get fucked (over) anyway. And perhaps want to. “It is use of the other as annihilation of the self” (*as lit x*, 11).

But then, again and again, I realize that this is a practice that sees its own foolishness, is self-annihilating.

Is there nothing unimportant on which I can wipe my hand? (“Not Not”)

It was so beautiful I fell over / and from where I lay could not remember why  
 (“Theatre of the New World of the Time”)

Shot by self after argument. (“Not Not”)

“As lit x,” the phrase, compresses, condenses this complex – but indeterminately, or interminably, somewhat like the “winging girls” she tries to unpack for us in *Bad Infinity*, becoming herself a bewildered reader:

*As lit annihilates. . . .*

[*tu*] *as lit x*, you have bed x, or [*tu*] *as lit x*, you’ve read x (*as lit x*, 8)

And one could extend this game, supported by the text:

as (if)  
 a slit  
 lit(eration) [*lits et ratures*]  
 lighted  
 landed upon  
 x [*sous ra(p)ture*]  
 ex (overexcited, inexhaustible, self-reflexive)  
 times  
 X (annihilates)



And so on, or, disseminated, as paragramme, as virus:

*as talk, it's*  
*as essay, it's . . . itself*  
 false alterity  
 as a *writing* practice after Levinas  
 Levinas says language itself  
 Absolute waiting  
 Lit which knows what's here, it  
 as *it* slows its content  
*all, that's it*  
 As lit the nomad

“‘my encyclopaedia’ . . . *look* at this mess! / . . . Achiastics, wrecked, ma” (12).

And all this pandemonium in the hands, in the grasp, in the embrace, of the idiot (one who loses rights), the “immigrant” (one who has no rights), of the nomad (20).

It is in this debilitation of the totality, of the encyclopaedia, that I am with her still. It is, yes, a “self-destroying [Tinguely] machine” called “my encyclopaedia” (12). But, in its endlessly coming apart it continues to work away at the given, at the structure of the whole, with a “delicate” wrench.

And its syntax must forever and forever be a syntax of adoration which throws itself and goes nowhere – passive, hopeless, overexcited, inexhaustible, self-reflexive and useless, of course – like the finest poem in Creation. (12)

Stumbling here, once more, I feel momentarily – perhaps it's the phrase “finest poem in Creation” that raises a welt – an enemy of this writing. As I feel an enemy, over and over, of so many poetic texts – and of poetry, which I nevertheless can't escape.<sup>23</sup> And then she addresses me, again, in this very predicament.

Oh, I know that that “beyond itself” doesn't exist. How many times have you told me? . . . And isn't the State – some dyad, a kind of mirror stage, made explicit, then denied – a model, too, of our amorous inauthentic indistinction, a place where ‘beyond’ doesn't exist? [This, literally.] The polis had one word for it: *not*. I'm learning. (20)

A response to the obvious, “political” critique – “romantic individualism.” The “state,” constituted in ideology (“a kind of mirror stage”) is figured as a “model” of good infinity, “a place where ‘beyond’ doesn't exist.” That is, being outside the state is non-being, the *idion*, the idiot. As language, “our language” comes to

us as law, “from us to us” (p. 20). We are, then, within it, as lit, standing here on the spot marked “x,” instituted. . . .

## *Notes*

1. See *Foundational Narratives: Proceedings from the Foundational Narratives Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference*, ed. Stephen Collis and Sharon Alker (Burnaby, BC: Simon Fraser Student Society, 1998), where an earlier version of the introduction appears as “The Wobbly Roots of the KSW” by Michael Barnholden, Andrew Klobucar and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk.

2. *Woodsquat*, ed. Aaron Vidaver (*West Coast Line*, Fall/Winter 2003–4).

3. She also chose not to participate in Anomalous Parlance.

4. I have no way of knowing this, being too lazy or dishonest to ask. The so-called “Giantesses” are left to be represented by Lisa Robertson and Nancy Shaw.

5. Obviously – I repeat – I’m being unfair to the anthologists by making all sorts of assumptions that may be unfounded. But I don’t care. Don’t anthologists set themselves up for this kind of treatment? Besides, I think it would be insulting to the editors of *Writing Class* to assume that their choices merely resulted from taste or other contingencies, particularly when they’ve written a fifty-page introduction for which the poems then become exempla.

6. Lisa Robertson, *Debbie: An Epic* (footnote to line 388); Lisa Robertson, Christine Stewart, and Catriona Strang, “The Barscheit Horse.”

7. “The encyclopaedia at first suggests embrasure then palls . . . (see also: ‘plute’)” (Clark, “Not not”).

8. Compare this with Levinas’ “The doctor is an a priori principle of human mortality” (234), although don’t ask me why.

9. This procedure is reversed in his “standards.” That is, the standard form gives an appearance of completion, stability, but is interrupted by moments – techniques, devices – drawn from the outside.

10. Or is this is really Derrida’s term? “Bien que le mot n’y soit ni fréquent ni souligné, *Totalité et Infini* nous lègue un immense traité de l’hospitalité” (*page number?*).

11. *West Coast Line* (Spring 1990), ed. Larry Bremner, Miriam Nichols and Lisa Robertson. *Raddle Moon* 17, “some Vancouver writers,” is also a KSW anthology, and a response to *Writing Class*.

12. It is suggested, in *as lit x*, that the book is really called *Pandemonium* (13).

13. The phrase is from in Christine Stewart’s “This Then Would Be the Conversation”; it’s attributed there to Clark, though it doesn’t quite appear in this form in *as lit x*.

14. *Writing Class*, 20–21. A more cogent critique than escapism – and one which I feel breathing down my neck at the moment – would be based on the figure of “impossibility” itself, and its manifestation in language as tautology. In *as lit x* Clark defines tautology as “pure meaning” (27). But see Tzvetan

Todorov on Blanchot, for example: “Blanchot’s writing itself confirms at each moment this desire to liberate ‘thought’ from all reference to values and truth; from all thought, one might say. It’s often been said of him that his ‘je parle’ is a way of rejecting all ‘je pense.’ His favorite stylistic figure is oxymoron, the simultaneous affirmation of something and of its opposite. . . . But simultaneously to affirm A and non-A is to put the assertive dimension of language into question and, effectively, take discourse beyond truth and falsehood, good and evil” (*page??*). I think that Clark feels herself on the horns of this dilemma when she responds, “*Tautologous but ardent!*” (*as lit x*, 27).

15. See also David Marriott, “Signs Taken for Signifiers: Language Writing, Fetishism and Disavowal,” in Huk (ed.), *Assembling Alternatives*. I am also indebted to Jeff Derksen and Lisa Robertson’s essays which frame that collection.

16. The encyclopaedia – Diderot and Alembert’s – is at once a manifestation of the state, a contest with the state, an impossibility, and a structure of patriarchy.

17. “The faux-rigorous, relentless, structuring devices – nesting, indices, supplements, footnotes, tables of contents, cross-reference – are to counter the fact that every successful page or poem self-annihilates. They’re the corpse of it. And I’m sorry but I think that all the earnest *apparatus* – is just funny and bit frightening. Like someone else’s sex toys. Evolution?” (*as lit x*, 37).

18. One definition of “agglomerate”: “clustered or growing together but not coherent” (*Webster’s*).

19. The repetitions across the time of the work are astonishing: “The moment round and around / . . . ‘a’ instead of ‘I’” (“Not not”). One could cite endless instances of unmarked cross-reference which reinforce the impression of one large structure (the book).

20. “C’est un mot / dont nous nous servons / pour indiquer / l’ouverture de notre conscience [le néant] / vers la possibilité / démesurée, / inlassable et démesurée” (Artaud, 48). That is, the impossible.

21. “. . . ils veulent à toute force et par tous les moyens possibles faire et fabriquer des soldats / en vue de toutes les guerres planétaires qui pouvaient ultérieurement avoir lieu, / et qui seraient destinées à démontrer par les vertus écrasante de la force / la surexcellence des produits américains. . . .” (26).

22. “Everything (human) passes beyond its bounds (*Trieb, Schmerz*, etc.), but *Reason*, if you please, ‘cannot pass beyond its bounds!’” (111). Lenin reading the greater *Logik* – this is how he spent his time in September 1914!

23. “The hatred of poetry is the proper material of poetry” (Phillipe Beck).

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