

Third Factory Policy Statement on Adjectives (Abandoned)
by Steve Evans

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In order to resume these Notes, after a long hiatus and a drastic change of circumstance, I had three obstacles to overcome—or more accurately, given their subjective character, three resistances.

The first was not so difficult to resolve: it was only the familiar resistance to poetry itself. There is a fatigue that everyone who devotes inordinate attention and energy to poetry knows. Peter Gizzi went so far as to claim in a poem that “the heart of poetry is fatigue” This not only seems, but is, true—until a poem proves it false. Those for whom that poem fails to appear themselves disappear into other interests and desires: Peter Schjeldahl into art criticism, Laura Riding into semantics, Rimbaud into nefarious trade in Africa. The people who refuse poetry without knowing it are a comfort compared to those who know it and refuse. Both “belong” to poetry as limit figures, but the limit of ignorance affords the solace (phantasmatic to be sure) of betterment and schemes for popularization; the other limit, the knowing one, is inoperable.

In any case, I came across the right poem.

The second resistance was equally familiar: the resistance to writing “criticism.” It is almost unfair to criticize criticism, its habitual poverty of mind, its zeal to promote, its immutable clichés, the stigma of derivativeness it bears: at least until someone proposes a defense, the prosecution is too smooth and undialectical. Besides, the Notes were never anything but a resistance to “criticism,” worked through in the company of patient friends. Such projects obey a logic other than that of failure and success. They

neither win nor lose. They simply work, which is to say: they just wage on interminably.

I can live with waging on interminably.

What I have a harder time with are adjectives, the lexical ruling-class of criticism's sad empire and of my three resistances the only truly intractable one. I know that you cannot say what my resistance drives me to say: namely that from now on, only criticism without the adjectives will be of any interest or use. It is absurd to banish a class of words from one's discourse. Not only absurd, but doomed, as this very sentence shows.

But the "concatenation of events" (to use the Baron de Charlus's pet phrase) that drove me to the assertion prevented me—indeed prevents me still—from seeing reason. These were: a slow, steeping, passage through the essays and books of Roland Barthes (a re-reading yes, but in many ways a first reading since until recently I lacked the language he composed in), a writer whose oeuvre is one long recoil from the repressive socialization performed by the adjective; a chance encounter with Brecht's war-time journals (to be exact, those of the 1940 retreat to Finland prior to securing passage to Los Angeles), where between accounts of Hitler's progress, the playwright records in lucid, light-handed detail his struggle with the conventions of "aristotelian" theater; and, even more randomly, a bookstore encounter with the word "frisky" applied to a literary object not otherwise associated with domestic pets or soft pornography (I cannot now recall if it was a journal or a book of poems).

It will be granted that "frisky" is not easily gotten over. Neither is it hard to see how Brecht and Barthes can be construed as counseling against getting over it, the one by his conduct against a more formidable antagonist, the other by his relentless antagonism toward the whole class of words to which this one, "frisky" (but also "relentless" and "lucid" and "light-handed"), belongs. The predicament can almost seem to have a logic....

Absurd though the consequences may be, and as inescapable the contradictions, the only solution to this resistance is an extreme one.

The Third Factory will manufacture only criticism without adjectives.

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These Notes to Poetry are written by Steve Evans and circulated among friends as they accumulate. The numbers in the heading refer not to consecutive issues but to the week of the year in which the works were read (or in this case, the reflections were entertained). Back installments of series I (1998) and II (1999) have been generously archived by Brian Kim Stefans on his web-journal ARRAS <http://www.geocities.com/arras_online>.

Peter Gizzi's poem "Pierced" is included in ARTIFICIAL HEART (Providence: Burning Deck, 1998). Kenneth Patchen's "The New Being," from RED WINE & YELLOW HAIR (1949; included in the New Directions COLLECTED from 1968) brought my genre fatigue to an abrupt end with its brutal invective. Bertolt Brecht's JOURNALS 1934-1955 were translated by Hugh Rorrison and published by Routledge in 1993. Roland Barthes's work is kept in print in English mainly by Hill & Wang. From ROLAND BARTHES BY ROLAND BARTHES (trans. Richard Howard, 1977): "He is troubled by any image of himself, suffers when he is named. He finds the perfection of a human relationship in this vacancy of the image: to abolish—in oneself, between oneself and others—adjectives; a relationship which adjectivizes is on the side of the image, on the side of domination, of death" (43).

The title for this year's Notes is borrowed from Viktor Schklovsky, who divided his existence into three factories: "The first factory was my family and school. The second was Opoyaz. And the third—is processing me at this very moment" (trans. Richard Sheldon, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977). My first two factories were located in San Diego and Providence; after some time out on strike, I am now occupied at a third, located in Orono, Maine.