

On Kevin Davies & the Disobedient Poetics of Determinate Negation  
by Steve Evans

Originally published in the *Poetry Project Newsletter* in 2004.  
This version is about 2200 words, or seven printed pages, in length.

Kevin Davies begins his brilliant long poem, *Lateral Argument*, with an epigraph from the historian of Buddhist thought and practice Paul Williams: "Persons exist / as practical ways of speaking about // bundles." One might say the same of poems, at least of the kind Davies has been composing since his dash-and-bracket dizzy debut *Pause Button* came out from Vancouver's Tsunami editions in 1992, followed eight years later by the five-phased guerilla exercise in dismantling the rhetorical tools of "the neo-feudal / info order" that was *Comp. Lateral Argument*, published in a striking chapbook edition by Baretta in 2003 after having been available online at Alterran Poetry Assemblage since late 2002, now joins these earlier works in proving that there is no quicker, subtler, or more grimly hilarious mind at work in poetry today, nor one more adept at arranging bundles of utterances into jagged, collapsible totalities that stage the dramatic undoing of persons and groups abandoned by or evicted from an absurd and unsurvivable social order.

Stitched together of asymmetrical sequences—some as brief as a half-dozen words, others extending to thirty or more variously-indented lines—*Lateral Argument* shifts scenes, subjects, and situations at a pace quickened by frequent enjambment right to the verge of, though without ever crossing into, cognitive blur. But for all that is fleeting, happenstantial, and radically alterable in this textual universe given freely to science fiction-like postulations of worlds that resemble while decentering and relativizing our own, there are a handful of dark constants: human subjects abandoned to merciless natural forces ("The plane a buzzing dot / against sub-Arctic mountains in the distance. / No bug spray even. / Not cold, but it will / be

cold"); the natural world besieged by human agency ("Hey, let's bury our radioactive garbage in the desert for / several thousand years"); the individual cast out of the social ("A familiar weight presses down on the shoulders // aiming you toward the receptacle"); the social order visible principally in the irrational contagions it serves to circulate ("Ledges of the pockmarked earth give way / to fog psychosis, a ringing phone / insider a solid crystal cube / Eager to fall in love, to retreat to the car barn / The amusements out of control") and the surveillance grid it continues to perfect ("a young-adult global / civilization, a meta-literate culture with time on its / prosthetic tentacles, at this point slightly more silicon / than carbon, blinking vulnerably in the light of its own / *radiant connectedness*").

If the *Heart Sutra* —which Davies only half-jokingly cites as a source text for *Lateral Argument* in a recent interview with Marcella Durand ("it's actually a very loose translation")— answers the direness of human existence by counseling the nullity of phenomena and the wisdom of abiding in an appearance-negating awareness that "form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form," this self-abnegating stance is, not so much offset or balanced by, as held in a state of irresolvable tension with, another, more politicized take on the social distribution of suffering in class society. By his own account, Davies is a "kind of anti-Buddhist Buddhist, plus a commie and the commie thing takes precedence." These competing orientations both imply a break with the immediacy of socio-political, physical, and psychological givens, but the seriously-intended (if humorously-phrased) assertion that "the commie things takes precedence" stands, at least as I read it, as an deliberate refusal of the political quietism often associated with the Buddhist tradition.

But this is not to say that Davies's participation in what I call the disobedient poetics of determinate negation—a term I'll try to unpack a bit in a moment—stems from any naïve illusions regarding the political efficacy of poetry. Asked by Durand whether *Comp.* should be thought of as a "political argument," Davies responds that he thinks not: "I'm reminded of

Ed Dorn saying something like 'You're handing me this piece of paper and telling me it's political? It's about as political as a gopher hole.' I'm totally agnostic about the ability of unpopular verse to effect change in the political world. I just don't believe it. I don't think for a second, oh, here I am striking a blow against capital. Political change is not made by the choices that we're making in verse. We're doing this so that certain possibilities can exist in the world. So that works of art can exist, temporarily, and they'll certainly bear traces of our political vision because if they don't they're no good."

The statement is very near to one by Lambert Zuidervaart, a commentator on Theodor Adorno's scandalously opaque *Aesthetic Theory* who lays out Adorno's position with admirable clarity in the following few sentences: "as reconstellations of what exists, the best modern works are determinate negations of contemporary social reality. They recollect what society represses, and they anticipate what society and its members could become if domination would really turn into reconciliation. Even though the prevailing relations of production continually thwart utopian possibilities, modern art gives a negative testimony for the possibility of the possible."

In building up a working definition of the disobedient poetics of determinate negation, something I've been intermittently occupied with over the past year or two, I've looked closely at the work of a number of poets—from Charles Reznikoff and Louis Zukofsky, through John Cage and Frank O'Hara and Amiri Baraka, to Gil Scott-Heron, Robin Blaser, Jayne Cortez, Craig Watson, Alice Notley, Bob Perelman, as well as somewhat younger writers like Heather Fuller, Dan Bouchard, Rob Fitterman, and Kristin Prevallet—in an attempt to identify some of the strategies that might distinguish a poetics of *determinate negation* from a poetics of *indeterminacy* that has, for all its continued productivity in many hands, shown itself conformable to the apolitical or post-political fabulations (wherein, typically, a weird thing happens to an isolated consciousness in an abstract space stripped of social coding) that glut the slick biannuals.

The primary strategies that I've been able to identify—stooping to assonance, they might ticked off thus: naming, framing, evaluating and position-taking, negating, and anticipating—all involve engagements with, within, against, and across limits. Some of those limits are textual, and the related strategies involve steering the hermeneutic process so that plausible interpretations of signs that are always at least potentially polysemous can be determined with relative confidence. Others involve the limits imposed on human subjects by the social order, i.e. the everyday determinations of individual and collective identity that stunt certain forces and overdevelop others. Where these latter limits are concerned, the process of determinate negation involves the second of a two-phase operation described in Hegel's *Science of Logic* (and henceforth updated by everyone from Frantz Fanon to Jean-Luc Nancy and Slavoj Žižek). "To negate the negation" means to cancel, undo, or transcend the category that repressively defines and delimits an identity, something Marx wished to do for the category of "worker," Fanon for "the wretched of the earth," and feminism for the category of "woman."

A dramatization of such an act can be seen in Jayne Cortez's poem "Rape," in which two rape victims of the 1970s—Inez Garcia and Joanne Little—are celebrated for responding with lethal force against their aggressors ("and once again / from coast to coast / house to house / we celebrated day of the dead rapist punk / and just what the fuck else were we supposed to do?"). As a powerfully-focused ideological intervention, Cortez's poem enters into and attempts to win a specific argument concerning the legitimate use of deadly force, likening the women to a "department of defense" in wartime and thus conferring the same legitimacy on their violence as is arrogated to itself by the state. Struggling to negate the moral argument that no matter how horrible rape is, it does not warrant the use of lethal force in response to it, the poem stages itself—using a gesture found also in Frank O'Hara's "Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets"—as an address, and more specifically as an

interrogative: "*and just what the fuck else was she supposed to do?*" This question, appearing at the close of each of the poem's two main sections (the doubling demonstrates the systematicity of misogynist violence and the necessity of responding to it at a structural level), is by no means rhetorical: it is aimed at determining what might be the real, socially-existing and socially-actualizable *alternatives* to this use of lethal force.

Cortez's poem employs many of the primary strategies of the disobedient poetics of determinate negation: it *names* particular human subjects and *situates* them in historical time and geo-political space; it *frames* the conditions these subjects encounter, *evaluates* those conditions and *takes a position* on them; the work of *negation* is not limited to the acts represented in the poem but manifests itself in the poem's counterfactual *displacement* of events from the strict economy of contradiction-riddled real time onto the plane of a symbolic address (the poem as a whole, and specifically the apostrophic "*and just what the fuck else was she supposed to do?*") that *anticipates* a future in which these contradictions no longer determine human action (just as O'Hara's "Ode: Salute" projects a simultaneously post-colonial *and* post-homophobic future from a moment in the late-1950s when each goal could be separately envisioned but hardly anyone could imagine them to be inextricably linked).

*Lateral Argument* employs many of the same strategies seen in the Cortez poem, but because of its extended duration (twenty-seven pages), and the extreme rapidity with which its frames shift, its staging of radically-counterfactual consciousness has an amplitude that puts it nearer to a long project like Alice Notley's book-length poem *Disobedience* than to Cortez's short poem using a smaller set of rhetorical strategies to address a more tightly restricted theme. The phrasal units of *Lateral Argument*, though often darting in unexpected directions, admit of a fairly high degree of semantic resolution, but local intelligibility is coupled to and troubled by strategies of non-narrative, non-syllogistic juxtaposition that create a jagged, striated

whole the coherence of which must be sought not in the events staged but in the staging and arranging consciousness operating out of frame.

If we track what Edward Said called "the structure of attitude and reference" operative in *Lateral Argument*—that is, its manner of projecting and populating a world—we find the attitude to be one of generalized disobedience (at one point matter itself is radicalized: "the load- / bearing walls composed of particles / who prefer not to, who strike against the conditions, / who saw nothing and ain't talking") to which a specific atlas and census-report have been matched. That census turns up—in addition to the many nameless and perhaps in the Beckettian sense unnamable persons in varying states of unsheltered duress—a large number of named historical and contemporary figures, and the atlas flips from Quebec to Langley, the East River to Kamloops, Mexico to Kyrgystan. On one page, Tito "dream[s] of access / to the Albanian shore," on another Franco feels his "ear hair" rustled by the breeze generated by "a moth / in New Zealand," and, towards the close, from the other side of the political spectrum, three members of the "Squamish Five"—jailed by Canadian authorities for the 1982 bombing of the Cheekeye Dunsmuir Hydro substation on Vancouver Island and other acts of "propaganda by the deed"—are referred to by their first names and celebrated for having very pointedly negated, with several hundred pounds of dynamite, an imminent ecological threat.

Mallarmé may have claimed that "the only bomb I am aware of is a book" ("le livre c'est le bombe") but in the book that is *Lateral Argument*, the culmination of radical consciousness in "Direct Action" (as the group called itself) establishes a standard, at least semi-seriously intended, for significant political intervention, even if a taste for politically irrecoverable destruction can also be detected in the lines: "But at least they can look back from old age and think, / yeah, goddamn it, we blew something up, we blew / something up, didn't we? The rest of us, what did we blow up? / A few hairdryers in domestic rages, correct? / Not really the same thing."

The brilliantly orchestrated acts of radical consciousness that crackle across every intricately-latticed page of *Lateral Argument* do not amount to "the same thing" as an *attentat*—as Dorn, Davies, or anyone who has given serious thought to the matter will rightly conclude—but these acts of consciousness do carry an indispensable truth content of their own. By their swiftness and acuity, their precise articulation, their cathartic humor, and their unswaying hostility to dominance and the agents of its reproduction, they serve to negate the distractions, delusions, and complicities of everyday life. Fucking with the structures of conformist thought, negating them on their own ground, these acts of "negative testimony to the possibility of the possible" belong more to a poetics than to a politics, but they are not not political.