

ANGIE KEEFER

1/18, 2/9, 2/22,
3/8, 3/22

Over the next three months, Angie Keefner will give five different talks. The talks are brainy, but Keefner is not an intellectual doily maker. She is a woman without a program. She writes, edits, and publishes, but through it all hangs onto the particulate phenomena of lived life. And the more evenings you attend, the more inclined you may be to see and hear again with demurrals, as mystery isn't something that evaporates as your knowledge increases. It grows along with explanations. Why doodle on the walls of the cave, why send mysterious messages, when one can speak directly? She asks the question not for wooden answers, but as a kind of implacable demonstration.

“Who, among thinkers, is interpreting the great world itself—landscape and culture together—in terms of human meaning? Is interpretation possible at all? We lock in asylums people who see meaning in clouds and rocks, but we heap honors on people who see meaning in children's jokes and patterns scratched on pots. Where do those of us who are not in asylums draw the line—by tacit agreement—between the humanly meaningful and meaningless? Is the search for meaning among the high heaps of the meaningless a fool's game? Is it art's game?”* Keefner inches onto these absurdly large questions without making a transparently ideological claim on the viewer, and without disappearing up her own ass, so to speak.

My advice to the budding viewer is to attach yourself to the formal decisions of Keefner's talks—the how, rather than the what. In doing so, I have come to the low-wattage epiphany that

her unadorned “Dick and Jane” sentences, her return of speech to art, is perhaps a pesticide to the claustrophobic cubby of intellectualism.† Her style drops the audience into easy acoustic rhythms, so that they may be taken out of easy cerebral rhythms. Some may see this as a simple affect, but I'm with Nabokov, I think that style is not a method, not a tool, not a choice of words alone. Being much more than all this, style constitutes an intrinsic component or characteristic of the artist's ethic.

A genuine interrogator, a real up-at-the-bow-artist who truly challenges authoritarian thinking, we need desperately. But an interrogative posture is easy and banal. The commitment to ask even one combustible question requires something other than knowledge, posture, and slogans. People who maintain their dignity as artists, in a small way, by being puckish in exhibitions, simply delight the public. True interrogation about form requires homework—thought and risk. It takes a lot of dissatisfaction and dissolution to worm out one good stumper. I am reminded of something Joan Didion wrote about her friend, the writer Elizabeth Hardwick and the willful transgression implicit in the written enterprise: “She knew that to express oneself was to expose oneself, that to seize the stage was to court humiliation, that to claim the independence implicit in the act of writing could mean becoming like the women [Hardwick] describes in *Sleepless Nights*, left to ‘wander about in their dreadful freedom like old oxen left behind, totally unprovided for’—and she accepted the risk.”‡

† The argument against intellectual decoration runs as far back as literary criticism itself, and was elaborated by Mary Karr in her essay “Against Decoration” (1994). Aristotle called metaphors of all kinds the mere seasoning of the meat, and believed that clarity resided instead in everyday words. Ancient rhetoricians admonished writers to avoid, among other things, excessive use of intellectual tropes. These elaborate figures of speech could, it was argued, over-decorate a work and deaden the reader. In fact, early orators had to justify the use of a limited number of tropes by demonstrating the extremity of their own feeling. In other words, unless the orator could convey the depth and sincerity of his or her own experience, the use of these stylistic devices fell into the realm of mere decoration.

Albers, Josef. *Interaction of Color*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963.

If one says “Red” (the name of a color) and there are 50 people listening, it can be expected that there will be 50 reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different.

Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future*. New York: Viking, 1961.

—. *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970.

Babbage, Charles. *On the Influence of Signs in Mathematical Reasoning*. Cambridge: J. Smith, 1826.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Carly Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Carlin, George. *It's Bad for Ya*. Eardrum/Atlantic, 2008.

There's a reason education SUCKS, and it's the same reason that it will never, ever, ever be fixed. It's never going to get any better, don't look for it, be happy with what you've got. Because the owners of this country don't want that.

I'm talking about the REAL owners, now. The REAL owners, the BIG WEALTHY business interests that control things and make all the important decisions—forget the politicians. The politicians are put there to give you the idea that you have freedom of choice. YOU DON'T. You have no choice. You have OWNERS. They OWN YOU. They own EVERYTHING. They own all the important land, they own and control the corporations; they've long since bought and paid for the Senate, the Congress, the State houses, the City Halls; they've got the judges in their back pockets, and they own all the big media companies so they control just about all the news and information you get to hear.

They gotcha by the BALLS. They spend billions of dollars every year lobbying—lobbying to get what they want. Well, we know what they want—they want MORE for themselves and less for everybody else.

But I'll tell you what they don't want. They DON'T want a population of citizens capable of critical thinking. They don't want well-informed, well-educated people capable of critical thinking. They're not interested in that, that doesn't help them. That's against their interests. That's right. They don't want people who are smart enough to sit around the kitchen table and figure out how badly they're getting FUCKED by a system that threw them overboard 30 fuckin' years ago. They don't want that.

You know what they want? They want OBEDIENT WORKERS. OBEDIENT WORKERS. People who are just smart enough to run the machines and do the paperwork, and just dumb enough to passively accept all these increasingly shitty jobs with the lower pay, the longer hours, the reduced benefits, the end of overtime, and the vanishing pension that disappears the minute you go to collect it. And now they're comin' for your SOCIAL SECURITY MONEY. They want your fuckin' retirement money. They want it BACK. So they can give it to their criminal friends on Wall Street. And you know something? They'll get it.

They'll get it ALL from you sooner or later—'cuz they OWN this fuckin' place. It's a big CLUB. And YOU AIN'T IN IT. You and I are NOT IN the big club. By the way, it's the same big club they use to beat you over the head with all day long when they tell you what to believe. All day long, beating you over the head, their media telling you what to believe—what to think—and what to buy. The table is tilted, folks. The game is rigged. And nobody seems to notice. Nobody seems to care.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland*. Boston: The Barta Press, 1897.

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Davis, Lydia and Ornan Rotem. *Proust, Blanchot and a Woman in Red*. Paris: Center for Writers & Translators, The Arts Arena, 2007.

It was with Maurice Blanchot's *Death Sentence* that I had my extended initiation into translating closely and exactly ~ it was my first experience of translating his work, and in the case of his words one would not dare to paraphrase, to normalize, to recast a sentence; every word and its placement had to be respected. In the years after, until 1991, I translated three more of his novels; a novella; and the selection of essays that went to make up *The Gaze of Orpheus*.

The experience of translating the essays was one of the most difficult I ever had, in translating. As though the experience were, in fact, a piece of fiction by Blanchot, the meaning of a difficult phrase or sentence would often become a physical entity that eluded me, my brain becoming both the pursuer and the arena in which the pursuit took place. Understanding became an intensely physical act.

It was during this translation that I experienced another sort of struggle with understanding: although, in a simpler paragraph, I might be able to follow the thread of Blanchot's argument from one sentence to the next, I found that I could not summarize, at the end of the page or even at the end of the paragraph, what I had just read. I thought this was my own weakness, some sort of mental deficiency; but when I described it to others, I found that it was true for them as well: it was in the nature of Blanchot's argument to resist summary. The experience of reading had to take place moment by moment;

one's understanding proceeded like a guide's flashlight, illuminating one by one the animals painted on the wall of an ancient cave.

The following description portrays a different kind of difficulty in summarizing Blanchot. I was once asked to summarize Maurice Blanchot's novel *The One Who Was Standing Apart from Me* for a publisher who needed jacket copy or publicity copy—in other words, to produce a summary comprehensible to a larger audience of a piece of writing very hard to comprehend. Being forced to summarize meant I was forced to identify precisely what was happening in the novel and what moved the action forward. This was not easy in the case of Blanchot's novel. Here is one perfectly accurate summary, though a brief one: “In a house in the southern part of some country, a man goes from room to room being asked the question ‘Are you writing now?’ by another character who may or may not exist.” This summary would not be appropriate for commercial release.

‡ Didion, Joan. Introduction to *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature*, by Elizabeth Hardwick. New York: Random House, 1974.

* Dillard, Annie. *Living by Fiction*. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.

Euripides and Anne Carson. *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*. New York: New York Review of Books, 2006.

Frampton, Hollis. *Lemon*. 16mm. 1969.

Keefer, Angie. “Duck, Rabbit, Etc.” In *Dot Dot Dot 20*, 2010.

—. “From the Toolbox of a Serving Library.” The Banff Centre, 2011.

The spinning pinwheel—and its other incarnations: the tumbling hourglass, the cycling wrist-watch, the progress bar—isn't an implement, it's a show. It appears intermittently, without warning, to signal a state of preoccupation, so that you, who were formerly in charge, but are now temporarily relegated to the audience, may be gently assured that any further inputs will be moot until the spinning wheel fulfills its distractive function, then disappears, whereupon the simulation of your tool-wielding agency may re-commence. If there is one element in the digital software user experience that cannot be avoided, this is it; you will encounter the pinwheel and its ilk. They are meant to persuade you that your computer is taking a moment to think.

—. “No Brainer.” In *Bulletins of The Serving Library*, 2012.



—. “An Octopus in Plan View.” In *Bulletins of The Serving Library*, 2010.

—. “On Onions.” In *On Onions*, by Elad Lassry. New York: Primary Information, 2012.

—. “Polite Terrorism.” In *I Like Your Work: Art and Etiquette*. New York: Paper Monument, 2009.

—. “Why Bother.” In *Bulletins of The Serving Library*, 2011.

Keller, Helen. *Teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy: A Tribute by the Foster-child of Her Mind*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955.

Exceedingly I regret that in *The Story of My Life* I was careless in what I wrote about the progress Helen made in language and in learning to speak. The narrative was so telescoped that it seemed to ordinary readers as if Helen in a single moment had “grasped the whole mystery of language.” What misunderstandings I must have created by my artless account of what I am sure a critical, mature person would have presented with a proper sense of perspective.

Since my development as a human being was Teacher's lifework, perhaps I had better, at the risk of repetition, dwell on little Helen as she really was after losing her sight and hearing at the age of nineteen months. With appalling suddenness she moved from light to darkness and became a phantom. The wind ceased to have a voice for her, silence swooped upon her mind and lay over all the space which she traversed. Mental drought seized her being. Her few words wilted. The sunlight that had kept her running with a sense of direction was extinct. Her eyes that had fed upon smiles received naught but unchanging blankness. Spring could not capture her with its violets or fruit blossoms, summer passed unheeded with its fruits, and she knew not that autumn brought its wealth of harvest. The birds in her heart ceased to sing because she could not echo back their joy. Her body was fair, but oh, the distressful absence of real childhood that was a desolation to her parents—the unresponsiveness of tone and look in place of the smile that used to gladden everyone, the seeming death of all that had promised speech, play, and spirit! Helplessly the family witnessed the baffled intelligence as Phantom's hands stretched out to feel the shapes which she could reach but which meant nothing to her.

Phantom did not seek a solution for her chaos because she knew not what it was. Nor did she seek death because she had no conception of it. All she touched was a blur without wonder or anticipation, curiosity or conscience. If she stood in a crowd, she got no idea of collective humanity. Nothing was part of anything, and there blazed up in her frequent, fierce anger which I remember not by the emotion but by a tactual memory of the kick or blow she dealt to the object of that anger. In the same way I remember tears rolling down her cheeks but not the grief. There were no words for that emotion or any other, and consequently they did not register. She did not know “shadow” because she had no idea of “substance.” For her there was no beauty, no symmetry, no proportion. It was all want, undirected want—the seed of

all the wants of mankind that find their fulfillment in such a multitude of concrete ways. It was not until after the episode at the wellhouse that Phantom felt an impulse towards something definite—learning the names of objects she desired or touched. Even then it was only a rudimentary impulse.... She did not reflect or try to describe anything to herself.

Kharms, Daniil. *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings*. New York: Overlook Press, 2006.

There lived a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily. He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He had no nose either. He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, he had no spine, and he had no innards at all. He didn't have anything. So we don't even know who we're talking about. It's better that we don't talk about him any more.

Krane, Susan and Bruce Jenkins, eds. *Hollis Frampton: Recollections/Recreations*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985.

I didn't find it a picnic to be a photographer, through the sixties, not because photography was disregarded, although of course that was true, but because my predicament was that of a committed illusionist in an environment that was officially dedicated to the eradication of illusion and, of course, utterly dominated by painting and sculpture. At that time I didn't understand how luxurious it was to find myself alienated in that way. Nothing is more wonderful than to have no one pay the slightest attention to what you are doing; if you're going to grow, you can grow at your own speed.

Kripke, Saul. *On Rules and Private Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Law, Bob. “The Necessity for Magic in Art.” <http://www.dialspace.dial.pipex.com/town/close/kcb60/boblaw/artmagic.html>, accessed Jan. 11, 2003. Originally published 1964.

Lucier, Alvin. *Music on a Long Thin Wire*. Sound installation, 1977.

Masterman, Margaret. *Language, Cohesion and Form*. Edited by Yorick Wilks. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Murdoch, Iris. “Against Dryness.” *Encounter*, 1961: 16–20.

Tolstoy who said that art was an expression of the religious perception of the age was nearer the truth than Kant who saw it as the imagination in a frolic with understanding. The connection between art and the moral life has languished because we are losing our sense of form and structure in the moral world itself. Linguistic and existentialist behaviourism, our Romantic philosophy, has reduced our vocabulary and simplified and impoverished our view of the

inner life. It is natural that a Liberal democratic society will not be concerned with techniques of improvement, will deny that virtue is knowledge, will emphasize choice at the expense of vision; and a Welfare State will weaken the incentives to investigate the bases of a Liberal democratic society. For political purposes we have been encouraged to think of ourselves as totally free and responsible, knowing everything we need to know for the important purposes of life. But this is one of the things of which Hume said that it may be true in politics but false in fact; and is it really true in politics? We need a post-Kantian unromantic Liberalism with a different image of freedom.

The technique of becoming free is more difficult than John Stuart Mill imagined. We need more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with. We need to be enabled to think in terms of degrees of freedom, and to picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality. A simple-minded faith in science, together with the assumption that we are all rational and totally free, engenders a dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world, a failure to appreciate the difficulties of knowing it. We need to return from the self-centered concept of sincerity to the other-centered concept of truth. We are not isolated free-choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention.

Musil, Robert. *The Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2006.

Nabokov, Vladimir. “Good Readers and Good Writers.” In *Lectures on Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.

In reading, one should notice and fondle details. There is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization when it comes after the sunny trifles of the book have been lovingly collected. If one begins with a readymade generalization, one begins at the wrong end and travels away from the book before one has started to understand it. Nothing is more boring or more unfair to the author than starting to read, say, *Madame Bovary*, with the preconceived notion that it is a denunciation of the bourgeoisie. We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge.

Phillips, Adam. *Side Effects*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006.

Pinker, Stephen and Marion Long. "Why Has Stephen Pinker Studied Verbs for 20 Years?" In *Discover Magazine*, September 2007.

How do you account for how a little kid, who has no prior knowledge of how a particular language works and who isn't going to get explicit lessons about how to use which words in which circumstances, figures out what words mean and what sentences they can be used in? We adults, for example, will say "Fill the glass with water" but not "Fill water into the glass," even though it's perfectly clear what that means. We will say "Pour water into the glass" but not "Pour the glass with water." And you know, "Pour the glass with water" is perfectly sensible, but it just doesn't sound quite right. But with a verb like load, we can say either "Load hay into the wagon" or "Load the wagon with hay." So you've got one verb that takes the container as the object, one that takes the stuff as the object, and the third that can go both ways. How do kids figure that out? Do they get it right to start with? The answer is no, not a hundred percent of the time. They do make some errors; they very occasionally say "Can I fill some salt into the shaker?" or "Stop pouring me with water." But the errors are fairly rare, and most of the time they use them correctly, and they grow up to be us, who use them correctly.

What are they latching onto?

It turns out that they're latching onto different ways of framing the same situation. So if I go over to the sink and the faucet and the glass ends up full, I can think of that one activity either as doing something to the water (namely, causing it to go into the glass) or doing something to the glass (namely, causing it to change state from empty to full). That was the key insight to figure out why "fill" and "pour" behave differently.

If the simplest action, like putting some water into a glass, can be mentally framed in these two ways, with different consequences in terms of how we use words, that suggests that one of the key talents of the mind is framing a given situation in multiple ways and that a lot of insight into human thought, debate, disagreement, can come from thinking about the ways in which two different people—or one person at different times—can frame the same event. "Pouring water" versus "filling a glass" is a pretty mundane difference, but to speak of "invading Iraq" versus "liberating Iraq" or "confiscating earnings" versus "redistributing assets" would be more consequential. I think it illuminates the same aspect of our minds. This is a pervasive power of the mind; it's seen in battles over perspective on all kinds of issues. It makes us capable of flip-flopping on a course of action, depending on how the action is described. It suggests limitations on our rationality—that we might, for example, be vulnerable to fallacies in reasoning or to corruption in our institutions.

Plato. *Phaedrus*. Translated by Stephen Scully. Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 2003.

Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Sirk, Douglas and Jon Halliday. *Sirk on Sirk*. London: Faber & Faber, 1997.

: there is no exit. All the Euripidean plays have this conceit—there is only one way out, the irony of the "happy end." Compare them with the American melodrama. There, in Athens, you feel an audience that is just as happy-go-lucky as the American audience, an audience that doesn't want to know that they could fail. There's always an exit. So you have to paste on a happy end. The other Greek tragedians have it, but with them it is combined with religion. In Euripides you see his cunning smile and his ironic twinkle.

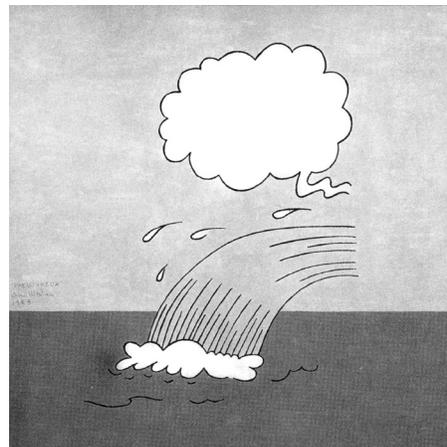
This is where the flashback comes in. In *Written on the Wind*, as in *Summer Storm*, we start with an end situation. The spectator is supposed to know what is waiting for him. It is a different type of suspense, or anti-suspense. The audience is forced to turn its attention to the *how* instead of the *what*—to structure instead of plot, to variations of a theme, to deviations from it, instead of the theme itself. This is what I call the Euripidean manner. And at the end there is no solution of the antitheses, just the *deus ex machina*, which today is called the "happy end."

Themerson, Stefan. *Woof Woof for Who Killed Richard Wagner?* London: Gaberbocchus, 1951.

Whether any particular thing is a work of art or not, that depends on you the reader. You, the author, say what you have to say, and then it all depends on you, the reader. Everything written, if you say in it what you want to say, has its ideal reader. But it may happen that you, the author, are living here and now, while you, his reader, may live far away, or may have died a hundred years ago, or may not have been born yet.

Walser, Robert. "Response to a Request." In *Selected Stories*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1960.

Wesley, John. *Phenomena*, 1983. Gouache on paper. 18 3/4 in. x 18 3/4 in.



White, James Boyd. *When Words Lose Their Meaning*. University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: MacMillan, 1953.

—. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig and Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelinda Valentina Di Lascio, David Levy, and Ilse Somavilla. *Lecture on Ethics*. Macerata: Quodlibet, 2007.

ANGIE KEEFER

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