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ALAN GOLDING

READING, THE ACADEMY, AND THE “SOFT” AVANT-GARDE: TAN LIN’S HEATH AND HEATH COURSE PAK

Professionalism is no substitute for volatility
– Barrett Watten, Facebook

Professionalism is no substitute for volatility
– Jon Pareles, *New York Times*

Reading isn’t connected to a specific person but
to a gamut of players here, a kind of social
network that makes reading (i. e., the social
activity of reading), what I call the reading
environment, possible / visible
– Tan Lin, *Heath Course Pak*

I. LITERATURE / ACADEMIC WRITING

If poetry is the scholar’s art, as Wallace Stevens would have it, US American poets, and particularly American avant-gardists, have with surprising and increasing frequency used the scholar’s forms, even if in ironic and resistant ways. To examine their use of these forms—of scholarly paratexts as aesthetic material—enables us to complicate and rethink the historical opposition between avant-garde poetics and academic institutions. Within recent American poetry, such tropes are certainly not limited to so-called avant-garde practice: think of John Hollander’s *Reflections on Espionage* (1976) or Stephen Berg’s *Footnotes to an Unfinished Poem* (2001). At the same time, the poetic use of scholarly paratexts has a special force within

the history and ambitions of avant-garde poetics precisely because of the avant-garde's historically entangled relationship to the academy. That use represents variously a cooption of academic forms, an ambivalent address to the academy as potential audience, an acknowledgement of the institution's influence on poetry's reception, and perhaps most of all—in the terms most relevant for Tan Lin's work—an ongoing, multifaceted exploration of the boundaries of the poem, definitions of “the text,” the nature of reading and of “difficulty,” and the very concept of the avant-garde.

One approach to these issues can be made via Lin's *Heath: Plagiarism / Outsource* (2007) and its 2011 “revised 2nd edition, abridged, annotated,” *Heath Course Pak*, his ambient poetic mash-up of advertisements, text messages, internet searches, Project Gutenberg disclaimers, Google search links, code, and Samuel Pepys' diary. (At 155 pages, the “abridged” version is considerably longer than its 87-page original.)¹ How does *Heath* reconfigure what we mean by reading and the book, and especially institutionalized habits of reading? In particular, what is the status in this text of the wide range of academic conventions and discourse (and the thematics of its distribution): footnotes, prefaces, editorial apparatus, large chunks of apparently academic prose, links to theory texts for sale on Amazon? It invites a pedagogy of reading as skimming or scanning, “ambient reading,” as Charles Bernstein puts it, in which “concentration may be an obstacle” (47). Two of Lin's own interview comments seem key, and indeed the interview is reprinted in *Heath Course Pak* (130–46).² While we are apparently faced with a contemporary version of the time-honored avant-garde techniques of collage and montage, Lin says “the project is about a softer, ambient avant-garde that works against radical disjuncture or the montage/shock effect” (*Heath Course Pak* 133). (To use Sianne Ngai's combination of terms, if avant-gardes historically are defined by shock, perhaps a softer, ambient avant-garde is defined by boredom.) And he has also acknowledged “this is very academic writing!” (133). This essay, then, explores how one contemporary text reconceives “reading” and proposes a “soft avant-garde” in the digital age partly by invoking pedagogical contexts and incorporating academic tropes—by opening itself to and situating itself within one significant site for “the social activity of reading” (131).³ What does it mean for work that aspires to

any sort of avant-garde status to consist of—or at least prominently feature—what is avowedly “very academic writing”?

If *Heath* is literature, it is a literature of paratexts, foregrounding bibliographical over linguistic codes. Meanwhile the title of the revised edition, *Heath Course Pak*, makes that edition a pedagogical commentary on itself—it is even, in a term added to the previous title, “annotated,” and the revised title includes “entc 330,” the undergraduate course number for “Contemporary American Poetry” at the University of Virginia, where Lin taught in the mid-1990s. The first eight pages of *Heath* bring us a sequence of (apparently random) footnotes to quoted material, a complete bilingual citation for “‘The Rapture of Endless Approximation’: The Role of the Narrator in ‘Pnin’” in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, and a Google link to an essay in *Critical Inquiry*, “The Arts of Contingency,” that quite un-contingently turns out to use as its primary analytical framework Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory, which Lin himself invokes as one paradigm for thinking about *Heath*. Later in the book we find whole academic footnotes reproduced, and we get a mini-bibliography of Marxist theory, capital, and the distribution of information and wealth amid the passages of theoretical commentary and art criticism. At various points, this supposedly “non-literary project” (*Heath* 19)—a phrase obscured by a yellow Post-It note in *Heath Course Pak* but reiterated on page 89 of that work—alludes to or quotes T. S. Eliot, Quintilian, “Roman-style transparency” (22), Homer, Cocteau, Melville, Juliana Spahr, Wittgenstein, Charles Bernstein, Derrida, Lyotard, and Samuel Pepys. It features anaphora, isocolon, alphabetization, formal structures such as free-verse quatrains with three longer and one shorter line, and extended passages of what looks like free verse in a relatively consistent pattern of alternating shorter and longer lines, with the line breaks created by preserving the original formatting of text imported from the internet. It refers self-reflexively to the author’s other works, with the title phrase “disco OS” calling up Lin’s essay “Disco as Operating System, Part One,” and the reference to “a very soft index” (30) calling up his 2009 indexical text “SOFT INDEX (OF repeating PLACES, PEOPLE, AND WORKS).”

Repetition, reiteration: from one perspective, that’s a point at which the original work of art and the ritual citation of previous

scholarship in academic writing diverge.⁴ From a different perspective, it's where academic convention and the citational poetics of unoriginal genius meet and blur. On the one hand, what we might call "bad citation" involves a mode of mechanical repetition, of self-reiterating convention, reflected in Lin's formulaic syntax and diction: "as Homer recounts," "as Cocteau noted," "as the journalist and obituary writer Lawrence Wright noted" (*Heath* 23–24)—an academic trope at its most predictable. On the other hand, this repeated trope becomes one way to foreground the work's insistent citationality, and thus to formally instantiate and work through themes of secondariness, originality, error, accuracy and authenticity, to hybridize genre in ways that bring to the fore as a central theme the relationship between poetic and academic conventions, between text and commentary—between "avant-garde" and "academy" as mutually imbricated social locations with porous boundaries. No wonder Lin writes, with regard to the first day of the poetry workshop that yielded his co-authors for *Heath*, "I am confused by my role, my status and my institution" (74).

II. BIBLIOGRAPHY / INTERTEXTS

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III. READERS READING, WITH TYPOS

She: Several of the questions John has in the second paragraph of his paper were questions I had as well about how to read Tan Lin (though his are much more intelligently worded). The idea of "ambient poetics" was very intriguing, and the way in which his paper explored this idea gave me an in as a reader for how to deal with *plagiarism/outsource*. Thanks to John for being a resource for how to read this text. I was also interested in his idea of the "alarm clock embedded in the sleep sound machine" because I found the Mischa Barton line jarring as well and felt it offered some sort of commentary, though I wasn't quite clear on what Tan Lin or you, John, were saying its purpose was.

She: John, I am also hoping that you can elaborate on the function of the Mischa Barton reference in class.

I am most interested in the book's presentation of/discussion with the medium of the Internet. For instance, near the beginning of the book, when Tan Lin presents a passage describing the changes that must be made to a printed text in order to reproduce it on the Internet, I felt that he was utilizing this to comment on consumerism—on how things must be watered down for the general public, as Howe puts it in *The Birth-mark*, "for readability." That said, I also see the Marxist undertones in the book that John expressed in his paper.

She: I haven't read John's paper yet (I can't seem to find it in my inbox, so if somebody could forward me a copy, that would be much appreciated), so hopefully I'm not rehashing his discussion of how to read with this question, but I'm interested in how the differences in media change how and what we read in *plagiarism/outsource*. The internet no doubt has changed how and what we read: we produce

and distribute text at the same time as we consume it (facebook status updates, blog posts and comments, etc.), and we aren't required to read everything on a given webpage. But what do we do with the stuff that wouldn't be read online when it's on the page? Are we expected to look at every the text of sidebar link because it's printed in the book? Do Project Gutenberg disclaimers and technical text take on new significance when they're on the page?

He: If *Muse and Drudge* was a collection you could just "fall into" at any point, Tan Lin's "book" (and we might begin class by talking about hwo exactly we would calssify this text: book, novel, poem, etext, pastiche, etc.) is even more so. One thing I noticed is that there are no page numbers, so the only way to navigate your way around the book is by the visual images he uses in collage with his text ("Page number? Uhh, it's the page with the minotaur"). Like Mullen's work, it seems like it's hard to find a consistent thread of thought or story; thoughts and impressions surface here and there, but unlike the blues music that Mullen utilizes to guide her writing, it seems that the constant and overwhelming input and stimuli from the information age is what is guiding Lin's work.

Another thing I noticed was the conflation of people with products and vice versa. Products, text messages, internet searches, all of these items are used to describe or explain people or their feelings, situations, etc. Lin seems to highlight how all of this "clutter" becomes inseperable from the way we make sense of and navigate our world (I haven't yet read John's paper, but I gather from earlier posts that he tackles this).

I had a strange interaction with this book. I just got a touch phone, and while reading a section where Tan Lin had pasted a google search link, I found myself pushing my thumb onto the link as though a new web page would pop up. That was unsettling, and I suppose another point concerning Lin's work that I would be interested in engaging in class is how and why he works to keep us unsettled in the composition of his "book."

He: Forgive me if this post seems similar to the past five or six Blackboard inquiries I've made, but I've been wholly immersed in the

world of Language writing for the past fortnight or so and I couldn't help relating John's paper, as well as *plagiarism/outsource* itself, to the Language writers.

In reference to the, for lack of a better word, possibilities provided for writers by the internet, I found this quote from Loss Glazier's *Digital Poetics* to be quite helpful: "[P]oets are making poetry with the same focus on method, visual dynamics, and materiality; what has expanded are the materials with which one can work. Such materials not only make multiple possible forms of writing but also, in the digital medium, contribute to a re-definition of writing poetry itself" (1). Moving on, I couldn't help but think of Barthes's "From Work to Text" when I was reading John's paper, especially when I read that the aim of Lin's text was to "influence not only reading practices . . . but the way one authors books" (3). John's idea of "an erasure of authorial presence from an author-constructed text" seems to be an echo of Barthes's theory that "the *I* that writes the text is never, itself, anything more than a paper *I*" (4). With this idea of a "paper author" in mind, I'm wondering—could Tan Lin be considered a post-Language movement Language writer? Could *plagiarism/outsource* be considered a Language text (or Text)? How different is his pedagogical stance from that of Barthes, Perelman, or Bernstein? I ask this because I don't recall Lin's name being mentioned in any of my final paper sources (perhaps because he wasn't around during the actual "moment"). I'd be curious to see how everyone relates this text back to those we've covered in the second half of this semester.

He: I'm sending this via e-mail as well as posting it on the Discussion Board in the interests of—and in the spirit of Tan Lin—maximizing distribution.

One practical note: when I'm using an unpaginated text, I write in page numbers for myself for ease of reference. So I've made the page that starts "program text encoding / conversion" p. 1 and gone on from there.

All the questions about how to read the book (or whatever it is) seem exactly the right ones to ask, and really underpin why I chose it for the course: how does it reconfigure what we mean by reading, the book, etc., and especially institutionalized habits of reading? I'm

also interested in the odd status of academic discourse and conventions in the text: footnotes, prefaces, editorial apparatus, large chunks of apparently academic prose, theory texts on Amazon, etc.

Why Pepys? To what extent is Lin's book itself a kind of diary?

Since this is our last meeting, it might also be a time to raise/revisit any remaining questions from earlier in the semester, so please consider if you have any such.

She: I had a similar issue, Sutton, of not knowing exactly what I was supposed to read and not read. The book did help me to realize how much I've not been reading, though. I was discussing the content with a friend, and he asked me what the title of the book was. I repeated what Dr. Golding said about not knowing what the title actually is. Then I read off the words on the cover. Only then did I realize that the cover doesn't say "Untitled Heath Ledger Project." It says "Untilted Heath Ledger Project." I'm not sure what to make of the difference yet, or what to make of much of the book, but I realize now that this work deserves to be read a lot closer than I'm reading it. The book may very well be working against our tendency as a society to read over, gloss over, web-based texts because we think we already know what they say.

IV. JOHN'S PAPER

In the time remaining available to me, I will not have the time to read John's paper. Thank you.

NOTES

1. To raise a question that is typically not even a question: what is the title of the text under discussion? Is it the title on the spine, *Heath* (or in the revised edition, *Heath Course Pak*)? Is it the title on the cover and apparent title page of the 2007 version—*plagiarism / outsource, Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, Untilted Heath Ledger Project, a history of the search engine, disco OS*—which splices illegal citation, labor practices in a global marketplace, the high culture of T. S. Eliot, entertainment culture, paparazzi gossip, dated popular music, and digital technology? This title gives a possible self-description of the text; it gives us contradiction and

error (the typo of “untitled,” along with the misspelling of the publisher’s name as “Zaesterle” on the title page, and the fact that neither the book nor the “Heath Ledger Project” that it contains are actually untitled); it links questions of textual ownership with the poetics of high modernism (do we want to describe Eliot’s practice as plagiarism? as outsourcing?); it asks how value is generated via labor (and whose labor?). And who is/are the author(s)? Tan Lin, the name on the spine and front cover? Tan Lin and the list of names on the back cover, including the art designer Danielle Aubert and, presumably, a number of Lin’s students? The “second edition” adds Amazon Turk, three of Lin’s interviewers, and other names to the list of authors. Is the title of that edition *Heath Course Pak* (which appears on the spine), *Heath Course Pak RFC* (activating the pedagogical implications of “Request for Comments”), which appears on the first prospective title page, or the expansion of the first edition: *heath course pak entc 330 plagiarism / outsource Ed. Rev., Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, Untitled Heath Ledger Project, a history of the search engine, disco OS annotated?*

2. I have tried to indicate clearly where quotations are taken from *Heath* or from *Heath Course Pak*. Pagination in these unpaginated texts is my own, beginning with the first page of text following the title page and publication data, although what constitutes “the first page of text” in this context is entirely open to debate. In *Heath Course Pak*, the “Roman-style transparency” of *Heath* is rendered opaque by two Post-It notes covering most of the page (24).

3. The nature of that “social activity,” of the reading environment that *Heath* brings into play has changed over time with changes in the availability of the work. As far as I can determine, the 2007 Zasterle edition is now out of print. The 2012 Counterpath print edition, once \$17.95, is now priced at \$52.00. Practically speaking, then, the only format in which *Heath Course Pak* is available for most readers is the \$9.99 e-book.

4. Ritually but genuinely: for valuable commentary on or directly relevant to *Heath*, see Kristen Gallagher and Jennifer Scappettone.