

Interview on *Isle of the Signatories*

Marjorie Welish/Judith Goldman

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Judith Goldman: Your poem “Isle of the Signatories” is an unbelievably rich and playful (not to mention incisive, gripping) meditation on (the fallacy of) lyric presence, on the mythic plenitude of the proper name, on “narrative” and meaning in painting, on drafting and creative process, on tradition, intertextuality, and palimpsest, on punning, homophony, and translation, on suspension, equivocation, and ambiguity, on materiality, abstraction, citation, and transmission, on the relation between the “languages” of text and picture – I could go on...

In our conversation, I'd like to delve into some of the poem's theoretical concerns and to create/discuss a partial inventory of the poem's intertexts and allusions so as to explore your creative process with regard to these figures.

You've mentioned in a number of interviews and essays that you are interested in a written-writerly-readerly-literary “lyricism” (if I may assert some scare-quotes here – not to signify a verbatim vocative quotation but rather citationality). “What if the lyric were not a voice, were not an utterance but written, hence construed through a presupposition of literature rather than through a presupposition of orality?” is one way you've proposed this alternate lyricity. Zack Finch puts this well in a 2004 review of *Word Group*: “Instead of presenting a voice that reflects on its own nature and what opposes it (as in the Romantic lyric), Welish presents a text that reflects on the nature of textuality and what borders it.”

Marjorie Welish: A true sample of the book, “Isles of the Signatories,” tries to construct a written voice, a written voice the nature of which is reading and writing. The thesaurus, as Pound would say, is presupposed as a treasury for such a project. If this poem has presupposed a poetics of inscription, it also assumes the responsibility of indeterminacy, or interpretive differentials, that comprise the written system. A post-structural approach to the thesaurus, then, is what is written.

JG: If we might return to your transformation of the Poundian premise of the thesaurus in a bit, I wanted to ask you first about Poussin's painting *Les bergers d'Arcadie*, a pastoral scene in which a tomb, inscribed with the multiply translatable phrase or motto *Et in arcadia ego*, is surrounding by shepherds engaged in interpreting it...

Do you have a long-standing relationship with Poussin's painting? When did you first encounter it / start thinking about it? There are two versions of the painting (1627; 1637); did this have some bearing on your thoughts as you were working on the poem?

Did you have in mind other related art and literature that thematize tombs or the presence of death in the midst of Arcadia (e.g. Virgil's *Eclogues*, Sidney's *Arcadia*, Guercino's *Et in Arcadia ego*, etc.)? I guess I am thinking especially of Ian Hamilton Finlay's public sculptures and prints (such as his print of a camouflaged Third Reich tank in a forest, using the inscription).

MW: As for the specifics, my experience as reader should not distract from the poetics, but, of course, it has informed the poem. The profound indeterminacy of the phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* has seized many imaginations, and continues to replenish itself. Although my first exposure was through Panofsky years ago in college, Ian Hamilton Finlay's political reading only proves the currency of thought that may be read there. The inscription *Et in Arcadia ego* is fascinating historically as well as mythologically tested, and proves itself resilient, because relevant, yet, owing to the interpretive indeterminacy of readings, oracular and, so, perennially true.

With regard to Poussin, much can be said about his studious mentality and that tendency of his to meditate on landscape, attitudes given to revisiting the topic and so to restating it in repetitions that differ, we would say. Yet his 17th-century inquiry may be other than ours. For Poussin, his paintings create prospects that are grounded in classicizing formula as much as they are his expression of that convention, in intimations of observed landscape of a sort that will not be named as such until later, through Constable. In two versions, Poussin's text is a pictural erudition modulating through skeptical queries that render the inscription a speculative feast. That Virgil was already addressing a commonplace, a given of authorship, makes recuperating an original sense of "I" an uncertainty which some would say is a true skeptical enterprise at odds with Panofsky's assumption of the instrumentality of hermeneutic knowledge.

JG: Louis Marin's idea that Poussin's painting "may be characterized as a theoretical caprice" (33), one that deconstructs itself – is it yours as well? Marin's argument about *The Arcadian Shepherds*, laid out in *To Destroy Painting*, notes that, following the classical conventions of history painting, Poussin was generally "translating" a text, knowledge of which was necessary to interpreting the logic of the painting. The viewer is specifically to, "Read the painting as the text of a story told by painterly means, but also as the representation of the story's text" (31). (Already here we have a fundamental literariness as referent, rather than an actual scene – though, of course, classical formulae also demanded a familiarity with painterly, not just textual, topoi, in that paintings were to draw on other paintings, not just texts.)

In *The Arcadian Shepherds* in specific, however, Poussin has less created a history painting than a meta-history painting that sets up a parallel between the structure of enunciation germane to a *discursive* narrative history and the structure of representation in a *painted* narrative history (29).

With regard to history as discourse, Marin states that, "A narrative (history)...is characterized by a specific mode of enunciation that consists in effacing or excluding all signs of the enunciative process from the resulting utterances: in a narrative (history), the act of enunciation is not itself enunciated. A story [recit], in short, is a discourse without a narrator, a discourse whose narrator is absent" (24). As Marin elaborates, the frieze of figures pointing and gazing in Poussin's image offer "signs of ostension [that] refer to the structure of enunciation" (35). In a way, then, "Poussin... seems to occupy the 'metalinguistic' and theoretical position of the linguist who constructs and makes known his basic model of communication" (38). Yet the enunciation at stake, "*Et In Arcadia Ego*," is only interpreted and ventriloquized by the open-mouthed shepherd – while it is originally "voiced" – that is, in silence and in writing – by a tomb. Thus, Poussin simultaneously illustrates the denial or suppression of the subject of the enunciation in

the act of narration: “In *The Arcadian Shepherds*, it is less a matter of telling a (hi)story than of recounting the representation of (hi)story in its dual relation to writing and death” (26).

The suppression of the narrator in historical discourse – allegorized by the fact that “Ego” is nobody, or a tomb, or writing itself which produces the subject of discourse who is thus only its effect – is echoed in the disposition of the figures in the painting as well, such that the painting points to a correlative structure of denial of the point of emission of a painting. One sign of the painting’s effacement of its own point of enunciation, Marin argues, is its self-sufficiency: it takes neither the painter nor the viewer into its illusion (32).

One correspondence I see between “Isle of the Signatories” and Marin’s interpretation of Poussin is the motif of omission in your text, which begins:

The following lines were omitted.

Even in Arcady I exist.
e-signature in whose writings
lies the body
or its facsimile (3)

[I wonder here whether the lines omitted are in the empty space or whether “Even in Arcady I exist” stands in for that omission, or both.]

Later, on the same page, you write (in an extremely funny passage):

Attempting to think henceforth
As a text though ex temporare
All were reprinted
With the lyric effect
His and “there is”
By adverting to the effect.

And further on:

To think as the corrected typescript would think
through the lyric effect
incited to rhetoric where structure had been.

Followed by an additional line:

I, writing.

You are playing not only with the deferred rhetorical/lyrical effects of writing, but also of mediated forms of writing – the standardized, mass-produced text and the “e-signature.” Do you agree with any of this? Or do the motifs of omission and the “thinking text” have other functions here?

MW: Where to begin?! Yes, the speaking voice of the lyric Ego is one already written. Certainly the condition of the voice in the discursive repertory we call “speaking pictures” is of the sort that would animate the meaning of the words’ sense (or, in our terms, animate the cultural treasury through use). But not only are cultural truisms already written. The written speaking voice is common enough in literature, and, in this way, “Isles of the Signatories” is making that state of affairs explicit. These matters of literariness I take for granted. Most relevant to my immediate compositional concerns, however, was maintaining the immanent textual register, in writing through a lyric of the written voice.

JG: Another thought about the deconstructive “lyricism” of “Isles”: your textualization of voice has a parallel or correlative in Poussin’s painting – in that he seems to be textualizing his visual narrative, not by pasting words on a picture (to state the obvious) but more forcefully and fractively by including the textual register within the fictional world of the painting, by means of a motto that, in its office as auto-epitaph, speaks from beyond the grave as can only be done by text (thus pointing to itself as letter) and also thematically enjoining text/Death itself to Arcady, rupturing it. [I’m thinking here of Derrida’s premise in “Signature Event Context” in *Limited Inc*: “To be what it is, all writing must, therefore, be capable of functioning in the radical absence of every empirically determined receiver in general. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence, it is a rupture in presence, the ‘death’ or the possibility of the ‘death’ of the receiver inscribed in the structure of the mark” (8).] Poussin himself seems aware of this rupture (or maybe you would disagree?), he’s playing on a theme that has already become conventional and thus seems to be indicating the codedness of a message about code-as-text.

Yet (again, yet) it would also seem that by portraying the shepherds in a scenario not just of discovery, but of interpretation, perhaps he is also featuring the problematic of animation, the way the dead letter is always a missed encounter with death (or never altogether dead), since it is instantaneously spiritualized by a reader who enlivens it...

MW: Derrida is talking about the iterability of writing – the intention of language to be construed as language and cultural code, whatever it may mean. As already inscribed, the epigrammatic phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* finds itself written into 17th-century or 20th-century art to be read again. That paintings were meant to be read for their teachings until the Impressionists redefined the innocent eye is what makes Poussin’s paintings doubly inscribed. Literary theory of a post-structuralist sort complicates the reading of such visual works, however, by interrogating the registers of written and read functions in art, and such theory finds didactic art of the 18th century especially amenable. This is where Louis Marin joins the post-1968 revolt against structuralist and other formalist art criticism. (Note, however, that Yve-Alain Bois does not; staying the course, he, as *Painting as Model*, resists the “French-afflicted” literary belletrist approach to art criticism but continues the project of formalism by other means: through a reading of the plastic sign, not the iconic sign.)

Commemorative inscriptions lend themselves to the expanded field of textual studies, if only for capturing a condition perpetually tantalizing, wherein writing and reading remain

problematic. Authorship, readership, literature – all have become the property of a literary theory that takes liberties with art historical discourse.

Marin's narratological analysis of Poussin's later version of the theme – why does Marin ignore the fact of the first? – tests how a history painting (as he calls it) reads under the auspice of the semiotic framework. (Actually, Marin does not entirely ignore the earlier version but dwells on the later version because it demonstrates a structurally configured scheme of reading messages being transmitted.) The historical painting informed through Neo-Classical aesthetic theory takes its mandate to represent a unity of time and as co-present space, Marin maintains, the diachronic cast on the synchronic screen that is also the painting itself. This can be done, Marin writes, thanks to LeBrun's mandate to depict the telling moment or crux of a story that is usually about an ethical dilemma (I am thinking of David's *Oath of the Horatii*) or recognition scene (Greuze), but not always so dramatic: as Diderot's coverage of the 18th century Salons indicates. It is no wonder that post-structuralist and post-modernist literary theorists alike find case studies for their work in the premodernist art.

So, were that to be translated in a poem of a modernist sort, the continuous present tense having been attained through Mallarmé's compositional musicality and spatialization, an inscription *Et in Arcadia ego* sustains a reading that suspends historical and mythic pasts in thought. Meanwhile, as you say, a metahistory makes evident the discursive character of such a represented thought: discursive critical readings that continue to accrue, Panofsky's and Marin's included. What is the poem in relation to all this? An answer might be that it is a reading that presupposes a perspectivism of frameworks, say, hermeneutic and semiological, as plausible through an imaginative construct of a critical poetics, that the poetics of difference constitutes the object. (A poem or painting is not a thing; despite all projections onto it as a commodified thing for those who cannot read the cultural nexus. The art object is a set of cultural functions yet also the locus of interpretive engagements in time, and this perhaps is the reason that semiotics of text finds familiar ground in legal studies that acknowledge legal precedent as culturally specified and historically negotiated.) Beyond the incommensurability of interpretive frameworks that constitute a poetic object pointed at, another answer, more directly related to your question, might be that if for the Neo-classical narrative the chiasmus of "reading – enunciation" marks the crucial ethical moment, then what does the post-structuralist find here but a rhetoric of such a logic. A rhetoric and an indeterminacy of differentials for the inscription, the inscription that would impart its wisdom.

JG: Could you say, in regard to this, a bit more about how this book/poem takes "a post-structuralist approach to the thesaurus"?

MW: Perhaps we read the thesaurus – Pound's term – for the treasury that is culture and our cultural capital.

JG: And about how the epigram *Et In Arcadia ego* has been "historically as well as mythologically tested"?

MW: A framework not discussed by Marin is literacy. The advent of modernity begins with written – as it distinguishes itself from oral – culture, and this re-ignites interest for the post-structuralist who would contest the primacy of speech. Getting back to Poussin’s later version of the inscription, note that the shepherd’s finger points beyond the penumbra of his shadow cast and so beyond the image inscribed on the wall, to the written precept. A salient socio-linguistic reading of this gesture would note the orality of culture for shepherds (as for most everyone in Arcady), and would maintain that the representation of this situation warrants the shepherd’s appeals to the mythic mediator inserted “there” for interpretation.

“Isle of the Signatories” tries to construct a zone for the written enunciation, certainly. Included here would be the documentation of documentary speech acts, such as testaments, as well transcripts of enacted testimony, yet also the archive of this in modern literature. My poem “Epitaph” incorporates Pound’s citing of Villon’s citing his illiterate mother, for another instance of enunciation, i.e. the re-presentation of writing – through translation, no less – the perfect problematic for displaced difference. Although Poussin encrypted meanings and so provided the opportunity for the hermeneutic interpretation of the painting, Panofsky actually orders his essay as a intellectual history of ideas and does not superimpose a hierarchy on the historically accumulated interpretations of the oracular phrase – up to and including Flaubert’s incomprehension of it. My interest in textual strategies leads me elsewhere.

JG: Along these lines, in “Isle” you seem to be staging, rather frontally, a confrontation between voice and letter or text – while you may also be set on undermining the self-presence of voice as such, both literally and figuratively textualizing it, especially by referring to the voice of Marni Nixon, “The Voice of Hollywood” who dubbed the singing of Natalie Wood in *West Side Story*, Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady*, and Deborah Kerr in *The King and I*. As Section 8 of the poem reads:

I, too, am in Arcady
(signed) Marni Nixon
the unpaginated voice (7)

For one thing, this mention indirectly points to a disjunction in the medium of film, between its sonic and visual components; likewise, to a disjunction in fictive character, who relies on differing voice- and body-props to realize and sustain itself within the diegesis. Here, too, is the idea that a voice has “signed” itself, is a “signature,” to which pertains (*pace* Derrida) the structure of iteration and non-self-identity (which in turn spoils the propriety of the proper name, as it becomes signifier (and code)).

Yet, at the same time, in these lines at least, that the voice is “unpaginated” hints that it sometimes escapes the structure of text – that regardless of her ventriloquism of so many characters, Nixon has a voice that bears its own inimitable grain, is the locus of a singular embodiment... (Marni Nixon and/or her voice are modified as “unpaginated” three times in the poem.)

MW: Nice way to put it: “staging, rather frontally, the confrontation” between voice and word. What about this? The sign of the voice is reallocated (as Goddard, Fassbinder, Wenders, Syberberg – certainly as Brecht does) by constructing literariness. Acknowledging the artifice and making the sign of the voice conspicuous establish the directness you suggest. Scoring for voice does not go unquestioned with the above auteurs of theater and film; neither does it go unquestioned in jazz, where the resources of vocalese not to mention skat continue to teach poets who choose not to write concrete poetry. Modern composers such as Berio and Ligeti, not to mention the electronic composers, have made a point of the voice as sign by rendering expressivity as conventional code or by exaggerating the signifiers of such expression. The materials of the voice or the voice as written or voice as designated through literary theory can be pushed into the foreground or assigned unaccustomed positions. Voice-over and ventriloquism are merely obvious post-modern instrumentalities for enhancing the already written register of the spoken word.

As for the unsung (!) role by Marni Nixon’s vocals, a peculiar division of labor takes place for “I”: authorship is composite, with the auditory and the visual compiled from different persons here unequally credited with creative presence. Indeed, the actor gets the credit for singing but the singer does not get credit for performance.

JG: Do you see a continuity between this poem/book with other of your interrogations of lyricality – or does it represent more of a departure?

MW: *Isles of the Signatories* demonstrates an ever more concerted attempt to create a lyric poetry from critical and theoretical instrumentalities put in place early on, as early as some of *Handwritten*, although each successive book is ever more explicit in its tactics. Certain approaches like deploying revision to construct the absence of originary texts and to suspend or delay thought processes have been in place from the start, however. Difference and differentials within repetition constitute the themes yet also the procedures from the outset, only these commingle with diverse subjects in earlier poetry of mine. With each book the textual strategies announce themselves as object more clearly, more consistently.

JG: In an interview with Matthew Cooperman, “Diagramming Here: An Interview,” you suggest that the speculative element of your work involves “rhetoric”: “My poems investigate and organize words and sentences as such, yet also the rhetoric posed through propositions in asserting, denying, and questioning in conventions we have learned to call discourse...poetry I write brings attention to the speculative gamut.”

In conversation with Bob Perelman, for the conference on your work, you define the process of “rumination or speculation” that occurs in your work as a kind of recursive revisiting of initially posited frames in order to get at the “probabilities of poetry.”

Do you see the form of speculation you are engaged in in “Isles” as akin to these rhetorical and iterative investigations?

MW: Several kinds of speculative activities are involved. Repetition can be an instrumentality for germinating thoughtfulness, if only through a process of permutation, which does not measure but changes the textual substance of the poem. Revision lends itself to this process and outcome. As does note-taking of all sorts. As does the performative return through teaching. The grammar of thoughtfulness is one thing, but the grammar of theoretical speculation may be another, at least it is to me, in allowing not only the drift but the algorithm, not only the free association but the array or a serial progression or a spectrum, to construct a theoretical framework – rational orders taken as modes of thought in themselves. Critical thought may merge theory and criticism but enhancing their difference is another source of speculative activity. Although post-structuralism demonstrates the rhetorical standing of logic, constructing potential poetry through textual strategies induces speculation on a theoretical plane.

Rhetorical and iterative investigations become more and more pronounced in my work. The sequence “Thing Receiving Road” in *The Annotated “Here”* speculates on Stevens’s choice of the word “place” rather than “found” in “Anecdote of a Jar,” but is not itself a set of landscapes; rather a consideration of Stevensian phenomenological diction provokes the critical experiment I conceive in response. If by “speculative” we advance a theory of the imagination in the name of an ultimate reality, mature and late Stevens would qualify; his earlier works are more various. As for my response to his poem, neither the formal games conceived in advance for the set nor the iterations dedicated to writing as a discourse are speculative in this sense, and do not concern themselves with ultimate reality, but, rather, through serious linguistic play they realize the potential of poetic discourse. In what sense can procedural poetics realize a reality? “The Logics,” from *Word Group* constructs a passage from rudimentary to sophisticated sentences informed of pragmatic questions, demands and descriptions. Similarly, for the prose poem “Fibulae Iterated,” found in *Isle of the Signatories*, several types of functional themes find expression in the pragmatics of questions, reductive narrative statements, and instructions – not sequenced but distributed throughout an operational field.

JG: Could you talk about the relationship between “Isle of the Signatories” and “Art & Language Writes an Epitaph”? Both poems are preoccupied with monumentality / encryption-inscription (or monumentality as encryption-inscription, the latter manifesting this in part through its sections in all caps). But the latter work also takes up the problem of marking the when of “modernity,” a ground “zero” that is also a fold in history, a fold that gives rise to derision/laughter through a structure of

1. A knowing, parodic citationality of the past;
2. A radical split from the past that forecloses decisive interpretation (laughter a subjective effect/affect of this asymptotic relation, the impossibility of knowing, which we can also turn into a form of mastery);
3. The continual question of whether modernity is over, or whether it’s even begun, coming to a *reductio ad absurdum* in the seriality of the interment of pasts (temporality of “eternity”) the poem alludes to.

Do you see this poem as a commentary on or continuation of “Isle?”

MW: Good question. Although not directly responding to a specific poem, it is a commentary if a deliberately plotted textual strategy can make us mindful of the expressive register. In three parts, “Art & Language Writes an Epitaph” is speculative in the sense usually meant, that is, occurring in the genuine question “When did modernity begin?” Posed as ontology, addressed to ultimate origins, the question is impossible to answer for certain, although answers are forthcoming. From a world perspective, modernity is said to begin with secularization; alternatively, it is said that from a European perspective modernity appears in progressive ideologies. Posed as epistemology, answers may issue in skeptical knowledge or in relative knowledge historically framed, such as: modernity begins with the invention of zero. In the first part, plausible answers as well as wild guesses are forthcoming, and accumulate as the problematic is addressed. With each iteration of the question another answer is added both revising and undoing the prior answer: a consequence is sedimentary rather than logical knowledge.

Perhaps that is too complicated. So, to simplify: throughout the book *Isle of the Signatories*, inscription is never very far from my mind, and is under direct consideration in “Art & Language Writes an Epitaph.” The first part constructs modern inscription in paratactic lines, each of which is functionally distinct and pragmatic; the functions repeat throughout the first part, conducted line by line, with phrased metaphoric and metonymic registers and with imperatives and questions, distributed equally throughout the stanzas. The second part asks “When did modernity begin?” – a question which, phrased as an ontology, cannot be answered except insofar as origins become posited genealogical hypotheses. The third part gives scenographic passage to modern figural language from a postmodern vantage – I was actually thinking of Syberberg’s *nature morte* with which opens his *Parsifal*.. All performed iterations concern modernity from a post-structural or post-modern perspective – or so this author says.

How does Art & Language relate to this? As a Conceptual collaborative comprised of artist/critics from the U.K. working as a post-formalist research group from 1971 on, it has asked certain questions: What is modern art? And has answered them – in praxis. It performs critiques, sometimes by reenacting art practices and querying them for underlying assumptions, or for unarticulated social protocols. My poem “Art & Language Writes an Epitaph” performs these language experiments concerning modernity’s inscription. Post-structural differentials and post-modern historicism included.

JG: Could you say a bit about the two recent artist book projects you have done with Granary Books? I utterly love the play with symmetry and the literalization of the fold in your work with Buzz Spector, *The Napkin and Its Double* – did you see a connection here between this book and your project in *Isles*? Or was there something you wanted to say about the relation between the visual and the verbal as germane to this project in particular?

MW: At the initiative of Granary books, two collaborative projects in art and writing have come about. When I spoke of my admiration for the work of Buzz Spector, Steve Clay showed me a cafeteria napkin on which Buzz had drawn a proposal months before. This then became the first step of our collaboration. Imagine this: his sketch, handed over to me, becomes the original for a copy, done by duplicating each phase of its unfolding

onto glassine folded in imitation of the napkin, now with a verbal element pasted inside. Buzz (who hadn't known of my intervention) then names the result. Constructing the proposal for a book rather than the book as such imports drawing into writing; working the napkin's double by unfolding it brings writing into drawing but does not return it to its original state. The semiotics of "The Napkin and Its Double" is indeed complex.

Another project initiated by Steve Clay became an undertaking two and a half years in the making, *Oaths? Questions?* was published early in 2009. For this I invited James Siena to be my visual and verbal interlocutor because both of us, each in our own way, think with rules and operations generative of worlds. The book is built of images and writing done by both myself and James Siena – the conception from the outset as I had envisioned it was the distribution of writing/painting and reading/seeing across pages, for which purpose opaque paper would be interleaved with transparent pages (mylar) which would allow superposition of text and image such that as turning pages demonstrates the text, legible as writing but not intelligible for sense, becomes both legible and intelligible (yet not entirely disclosed). Our shared tactical approach, not the specific decisions, makes our shared project coherent from the start even though as the project evolved we consulted each other relatively infrequently and pursued our own ways of doing things. Initially, I did theorize the relation of words to image and construct a distribution of writing/painting and reading/seeing back and forth across the pages, left to right and right to left. Ultimately, what I'd envisioned was realized. Fortunately!

JG: What seems important about *Oaths? Questions?* is not only that its elements – text and image – work together, but also that the material construction of the book imposes limits, as you put it, on the "distribution of writing/painting and reading/seeing" – its particular material format is essential to it. As you note, when text is superimposed on image, it is legible as writing (or print), but not yet entirely sensical (because not yet wholly intelligible as determinate language, as on pages where the color of the painting blacks out portions of the text or where lines in the painting/drawing seem to cross out the text or cancel it out). As the pages of the book are turned, text is lifted off image and thus becomes legible and intelligible, but is still nonetheless, as you state, "not entirely disclosed." What impedes this disclosure, as you see it? Is it that there is no way for the reader apprehend the text in a plenitude of meaning or state of completion in this piece, since by seeing it with the image, one can't really read it, while seeing it alone deprives it of its context within the work?

In your artist's note on the Granary website, you put this slightly differently, stating that with the superimposition of text and image, what the reader first encounters is "the obstructed construct of art seen through a verbal screen." I am interested here in two things:

1. That per your description the "art" below or through the text is already (merely?) a construct, which is obstructed by what we might more usually understand as a construct, the language that inevitably – and here literally – imposes an interpretation on what we see.
2. That while, as you note, by turning the page the reader shifts to reading "language excavated or broadcast from the surrounds," you seem less concerned with the state of the image now denuded of text. How exactly do you see the reformatting of your painting in

the book as "deform[ing] its own grid"? And further, as the text now stands on its "own" as poem, does its being broadcast from the surrounds of art – from or past its margins – deconstruct the original sense we get of the verbal obstructing the visual? Are you showing (contrary to what I suggest above) that excavation of layers is possible?

MW: In the most general sense you're inquiring about the poetics of the book, the illuminated or illustrated book in particular. As I have said, first came the decision to distribute word and image by interleaving transparent and opaque pages – all to create an interference of the word's graphical, formal and cognitive aspects, even as the image is impinged upon and also changed in the process. How one interprets this depends on one's theory of modern literature: difficulty, deemed a positive value in the modernist scheme of things and in poetics as different as the Symbolist Mallarme, the Vorticist Pound, and the Objectivist Zukofsky. To read for text, then, is to acknowledge difficulty as providing the potentiality for not being able to see, not being able to read, as well as being able to see but not read, read but not see, and to see and to read. For instance once I determined that my images would derive from a certain painting from 1983-4 built of juxtaposing predetermined with intuited grids, I created several works without referring to the original because the conceptual envelope of given and improvised ordering was in mind and remained my salient point of departure. So while working off this idea – the conceptual envelope – I went on without yet knowing the particulars. To return to the interference – productive interference – between reading/seeing and understanding, I should mention that the original painting has made an appearance in the constructed book. By inserting a slide of the painting in its own page, an image identified as an image whether or not it is decipherable in its particulars, we make seeing something other than self-evident. Distancing effects in the creative manipulation of my formal logics were productive in engendering dissociated, occluded, and yet also coincident – what? – events. The experience of reading and seeing distributes differently for the reader than for the author, the one who writes and paints.

Meanwhile, I had begun the verbal compositions before I settled on the visual work. These poems, composed from a given lexicon (table/tablet/entablature; sign/signature; crease) were not written to specific images, although slight adjustments occurred later in the compilation of the pages.

JG: James Siena gives a beautiful gloss on the book's title in his statement on the Granary site: "And the words offer hints to the truth (oaths) and doubts about them as well (questions). Their very transparency evidences the debt they owe to the wordless visual." Do you agree with this latter point? In a sense, you seem to be saying that it is in their state of superimposition that the text seems transparent, while lifting the words off the opaque page so that they stand on mylar alone materializes them...

MW: But the book's construction tests the sign of reading: material transparency is not to be taken for transparency of sense. James Siena's phrase "wordless image" may be his way expressing a poetic truth of visual versus verbal arts conventionally. He certainly had been invited to explore the possibilities of image-making on his own terms. Although he delighted in the initial set of opaque/transparent conditions lent to painting/writing and seeing/reading, he adapted these to his style and, assuming his own practice as the point

of departure, created labyrinthine drawings developable from a deceptively simple procedural rule. James continued to do just that, but what interested him was to develop the labyrinth or maze-like form by augmenting the drawing in palpably incremental color-coded stages, each of which was to remain visibly distinct and in sequence. He was so engaged in a spatial display of the temporality of his image method. Moreover, to his real credit he did not stick to his own preset path but scrupled to revise and even cast aside image ideas until he was satisfied with the relation of the image to the page and book. James further accepted the challenge of writing words to his own images and my own – he becoming a respondent, as I had become a respondent to his images. Note that we do not identify who is doing what, except through style. Our authorship is not secret; it is in the work.

JG: Could you say a bit more about your description of both Siena and yourself as artists who "think with rules and operations generative of worlds" – worlds that are not, as you explain "ultimate realities," but rather operational fields or fields of poetic discourse whose various (even inexhaustible) potentialities you draw out through "serious linguistic play"?

MW: As the Granary Books website indicates, we largely worked independently and could do so given the similarly tactical thought that informs our creative work. Although not so radical as the independence of like minds informing Cunningham/Cage collaborations, *Oaths? Questions?* does presuppose that precedent. When James speaks to the distinction between the word and the wordless as though to assume a classical distinction between the modes of mark-making constituting verbal and visual work, I acknowledge the framework for which this is a statement, despite the fact that for post-structuralists the mark is the *arche*-writing through which the modes of writing and speech – or, for that matter, writing and drawing – split off. (Blake would conjoin them in his calligraphic books where writing and drawing integrate; indeed, Blake's poetic ideology insists on the truth of unified drawn and written modes.) Under debate is whether the visual and verbal can ever be utterly distinct. Although not in favor now, the structural distinctiveness implied in James's statement is not irrelevant. Certainly it is not irrelevant to the formalism that informs his artistic practice. Moreover, formalism is not to be discarded as merely aesthetic, as for instance the formalism of some mathematics proves. The poetics of maths and logics generative of poetic fictions still has something to teach us: a way of organizing the experiment that is potential poetry. Algorithmic moves link James' art with procedural poetics of an Oulipean sort. Coincidentally, my long-standing interest of pairing incommensurate orders, rational and intuitive, relates to Raymond Queneau's Oulipean concatenation of rational and empirical thought.

JG: Could you further connect this kind of speculative or indeterminate procedural poetic process to your concern for materialist history, as in your critique of Marin's failure to mention the fundamental orality of the shepherds Poussin depicts? In other words, you push beyond formal iteration of possibility because your composition process is recursive, always radically resituating or reframing the elements you began with – but also because you have a concern for the historical context (or maybe better put, the

speech-act context) within which the poetic discourse you isolate and work with is activated.

Further, there are so many references to pleats, folds, and warps in *Isles*...how does this figurative invocation of iteration or iterability (among other things) relate to speech-act (one way of thinking materialist context) as you see it? (This query seems related to the content of *Oaths? Questions?* as well, in that at least some of its text comprises a preoccupation with speech act and/as event, as well as the figure of the crease: "SIGN ACROSS THE DEICTIC"; "TO ESTABLISH; TO PERFORM, TO CARRY OUT TO FULFILL"; "utterance?/skat?"; "HAVING LEGAL FORCE IF INITIALED, IF CREASED/expel"...))

MW: The inscription being pointed to on the tomb [in Poussin's painting] compiles modes of the mark or of mark-making, including the shadow, epigraphic lettering – and to the delight of post-structuralists – the split in the tomb represented. Although Derrida might say “cleft,” why not say: A crease? A crease that has escaped notice? Interfered with legibility? A feast for interpretive activity, the sign that is the inscription in all its avatars, including misfires in communication, is being pointed to, and can convey the message: “What’s this”? Suspended here is the question, presumably oral, in the inscription that is in the painting. Put another way, within the fiction that is the painting, performative acts of asking (in effect) “Could you tell me the meaning of this?” conflate: saying and doing. (In the didactic painting which has a long tradition of displaying the sign: to show different signifying aspects of authorial intention and different signifying aspects of reading that intention, through the assembly of figures’ performing affect or gesture.) . Literary theory and speech-act theory are often in conflict about fictional discourses and the speech acts invoked. The poet-grammarian Emmanuel Hocquard has been devoted to finding a poetics for just this problematic. In a sense, however, as fascinating as this may be, the Poussin painting plays a more important role in our discussion now than it did in my concerns with “Isle of the Signatories,” for which inscription of writing and speech as writing, rather than a dedicated rendering of a particular inscription, was the pursuit.

For several years prior to writing poems that became a book, I had been reading and thinking about the issue of inscription in the following way: whenever we, collectively, are called upon to write a commemorative inscription, we tend to revert to classicizing or romanticizing poetics; what would a (post)modern inscription look like? It is this question that informed *Isle of the Signatories*, the book largely written at Cambridge University on a fellowship, but I am still thinking about the issue in these terms. While there I finished a commissioned chapbook for which I selected and verbally framed inscriptions that proved to be a testing ground for what follows.

JG: Could you say a bit more about the commissioned chapbook on inscriptions?

MW: Publisher Stuart Mills sponsored “Poets Poems,” a series of pamphlets distributed mainly through a network of poets in the U.K., a series that ran to twenty-one numbers before ending in 2006. Poets became guest-editors, each poet chosen complied by selecting about a dozen poems to be put in chronological order and published without comment. I both complied and violated the rule of no commentary. My own initiative

was poems that lent themselves to being read as inscription, starting with the (to us) anonymously authored “The Silver Swan,” to which Orlando Gibbons wrote music, and ending with Harryette Mullen’s “Why You and I,” for which the appendix listed for each of my choices key terms framing contextual significance. For instance, appended to “The Silver Swan” is:

Frame: elegy

Frame: epigram

Frame: English madrigal

Frame: secular vocal music

Frame: authorship

while listed for “Why You and I” is:

Frame: abecedecary

Frame: substitution

Frame: OuLiPo

Frame: signfyin(g)

As for *Oaths? Questions?*, the project that follows *Isle of the Signatories*, inscription is still the issue, with poetry derived in part from the adjudicating claims for damages in legal discourse yet also from transcribed speech in modern poetry, from the *Cantos* to jazz lyrics.

JG: It’s important that you bring up the difference between “inscription of writing and speech as writing” and “a dedicated rendering of a particular inscription.” Epigraphy is a study of particular inscriptions – whereas you are engaged in a kind of meta-epigraphy: a study of the post-modern contexts and fields of expectation and possibility for public inscription tout court. One way this interrogation could link the inscription of writing and speech as writing is through the status of public inscription in a digital culture, in which differentials between speech and writing [to my mind] have in many ways collapsed... Perhaps the remainders / revenants of such differentials are what you are mining in *Oaths? Questions?* as you thread modern[ist] poetry’s transcribed speech through legal discourse?

MW: You are right. If modern ordering involves analytic thought that gives pride of place to structure, what happens in legal discourse is that structure readily translates to function; and its narrative is the working out of functional relations as much as anything. So, with the language of contracts and contractual relations through semiotic and other approaches in mind, I created poems of the verbal possibilities, some of which may be read in *Oaths? Questions?* Contractual intention and volition being reciprocated in the signing of one’s name, with agreements are valid or invalid under certain conditions: especially regarding whether or not a signature appears or where it is placed on the document: on the same surface as the contractual text, on the outside surface. In effect also are deictic relations between “I”/ “you” and “we/they”; “today”(dated specifically)/ “tomorrow” is specified. Conventional as it is, the law can be proposed as a semiotic square comprised of duty and power and a model be built of functional relations between

“obliged” and “not-obliged,” “authorized” to do and “not authorized” to do. Adjudicating matters for specific situations, legal ambiguities, and disputed semantic territory, comprises the interpretation and its domain of indeterminacy. There is poetic potential in this. Yes, in a way the poem’s permutational tolerance for verbal play is productive of those remainders unattended to. Non-sense has its uses. Again, as we mentioned, tactics for generating interference patterns between the rational and the empirical scheme of things provides a framework for the Real in post-analytic terms.

JG: The poem “Epitaphs” plays even more explicitly with epigraphy than the poem “Isles” does – and it also uses a technique involving a kind of recursive fanning out from an epitaphic (or perhaps faux-epitaphic) phrase, in this case “*Pouvrette et ancienne*” as you say, a phrase Pound cites on behalf of Villon’s illiterate mother. (This is so interesting – certainly points back to the shepherds, no?) Is there a link you want to establish between your poetics of recursivity (versus repetition!) and epigraphy/inscription? How do you see recursivity and inscription working differently/similarly in these two poems? Is there a link...?

MW: Epigraphy in a traditional sense was certainly on my mind when I wrote “Epitaph” and the differences between epigraphy and inscription, which create if the “Unlettered a new archive” with its “imbricated spacing” et cetera. (By the way, here is an instance of what I mean by a crease or fold, with temporal situations implicated in categories of literacy)

Littering. Litter gravitates toward the spaced
Creases the imbricated spacing yet it distributes differently
Think of epochs and historical formations
Of courtyards: everything in its place may be an oath
A quarter turn?
Unlettered a new archive
I know I don’t other

In *Isle of the Signatories*, all the poems gathering repetitions through iteration do so in the writing process of returning, revisiting and revising the same materials. I’ve relied on a recursive creative process since my first book: yet here repetition becomes the explicit topic and domain of inquiry. Aside from “Fibulae Iterated,” which distributes differently worded but functionally repeating requests, instructions, et cetera throughout – that is, before performing an operation on the sense, other poems in the book rewrite given materials but so that words repeat but sense phases in and out of possible worlds – here, I’m thinking of “Of Henceforth (Instrumental Version)”; elsewhere, a patchwork of maxims and facts concerned to represent “No” and “Zero” construct a loose federation of lyrics. “Unfolding Yes” is the poem, a poem in parts and in contraries.

So recursive process is enlisted from the outset to be productive of sense, and, yes, productive of repetition – in its kinds and degrees of difference.

JG: And do you feel in *Isles* or in *Oaths*? that you've come to any sense of what postmodern inscription should consist in?

MW: Postmodernism, of which kind? Knowledge, a project and projection of modernity, is an object of a sort. Not a thing as such so much as an organization of cultural categories, according to a narrative or a plan, the object of knowledge some would call postmodern, under renovation in reference books and course texts, organizes material through networks of functions and categories with values other than those considered self-evident. In this experiment, educators work test discursive habits. Some poetic objects of interest come about in consequence of this with regard to writing and reading.