

And And And

Also by Cole Swensen

- Art in Time* (Nightboat Books, Brooklyn, NY, 2021)
On Walking On (Nightboat Books, Brooklyn, NY, 2017)
Landscapes on a Train (Nightboat Books, Brooklyn, NY, 2015)
Gravesend (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012)
Stele (The Post-Apollo Press, Sausalito, CA, 2012)
Ours: poems on the gardens of André Le Nôtre (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008)
The Glass Age (Alice James Books, Farmington, ME, 2007)
The Book of a Hundred Hands (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 2005)
Goest (Alice James Books, Farmington, ME, 2004)
Such Rich Hour (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 2001)
Oh (Apogee Press, Berkeley, CA, 2000)
And Hand (chapbook, a+bend Press series, San Francisco, 2000)
Try (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1999)
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Numen (Burning Deck Press, Providence, RI, 1995)
Park (Floating Island Press, Inverness, CA, 1991)
New Math (William Morrow & Co., New York, 1988)
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“...the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction
and... and... and...”

Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

To Biswamit Dwibedy

Ship

A ship is, by definition, something slipping out of fog, and oddly more visible than a vessel less veiled. More shored in dim windows, it's more nuance and happenstance, as if more of the story were buried in memory, and thus lit with it and trembling. A ship is, in fact, the shape of memory itself, and, remembering itself, suddenly thinks *what a long way off it seems*, and yet at every slight lightening of the fog, it deflects the thought and thus is still coming toward.

The fog extends into linguistics, making it difficult to say whether it's really a ship or more of a boat or a ferry or a yacht—the ambiguity embeds, even enshrouds, and the woman in the foreground shifts her shawl, thinking that all we are is largely veiled, though it may be more apparent in seaports, where the mist lifts the seawall that she's sitting on—which turns out to be a ferry after all, and already underway.

Dust

The importance of dust cannot be discounted. At first glance, it seems light—it seems, in fact, the very principle of lightness, which it is, of course, but it's also just that sort of lightness that, while unsettling, nonetheless settles. It's a precipitate, and that's where it intersects with language—language being those inklings just heavy enough, those that, out of the entire world of thought, can't quite remain aloft, and so they come to settle over everything until they slightly, though not entirely, obscure it.

Obscurantism

Poetry has always tried to capitalize on the productive potential of this tendency of language to obscure, maximizing it through impacted metaphor, curtained allusion, cryptic punning—there are any number of modes, including, and particularly popular in the past few decades, the fragment. Phrases so quickly clipped off. Snip. Ours is an age that likes sudden cliffs, leaving readers frantically treading air, like Wile E. Coyote in 1950s cartoons—it's the immanent free-fall that's the real thrill. They say that that's what's so addictive about gambling—not the irrepressible hope of winning, but the visceral drop, the mere thought of the shock of the plummet to utter destruction. Not a bad premise for a poem.

Except that it doesn't quite work like that. Our crush on the fragment has simply opened up an inquest on its nature. We instantly ask *a fragment of what?* Which in turn exposes the presumption of a *whole*. But isn't everything a whole? A fragment of a sentence is a whole phrase, and if it doesn't make it that far, it's at least a whole word, etc. It's hopeless; we're completely surrounded by completion—everything filling itself perfectly to its brim.

And

It's the principle and the foundation of insubordination. Thinking about Deleuze & Guattari's writings on *and* as a non-subordinating conjunction, allowing elements to be connected while also retaining complete relational equity and autonomy. And as language constitutes the basic building block of society, the equity and autonomy of grammatical elements is essential for social autonomy. And autonomy is essential for equity—it doesn't guarantee it, but, in turn, equity cannot occur without it. But then, isn't social autonomy a contradiction in terms? How can the term be activated as a paradox rather than as a contradiction? Perhaps through and by the fact that *and* is, itself, at the heart of a paradox—it's what's behind the scenes, implicitly linking contradictory terms (such social and autonomous) in a way that allows them to insist on mutual persistence. A paradox is the impertinence of an *and* right where it's most conceptually inconvenient.

And

Regarding the political work that grammar does, our inequities are not only instigated in grammar, but they also store their masking mechanisms and maintenance crews therein. Above all, the fact that language seems rigidly set and always already in place before we, as individuals, arrive makes it seem inaccessible to individual intervention, and thus by extension, so are all the social orders that it supports, revealing grammar to be a blind that effectively blindsides us.