

Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

GENERAL ISSUE VOL: 8, No.: 2, AUTUMN 2018

UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

BLIND PEER REVIEWED

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“Inscription in[verse]”: Marjorie Welish, Interpretative Indeterminacy and The Praxis of Iteration

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Abstract:

This study meditates upon the conjectural property of inscriptions and its meta-theoretical grounding in Marjorie Welish’s poetry to contest ontological, epistemological and representational fixities and aims to understand their affects in meaning-production through the practice of iteration. Here, the process of iteration provides a space for interpretative differentials in order to revisit the anxieties of linguistic autonomy, monumentalization, hypermediations and ideological consensualities attached to the generic and historical use of inscriptions. Drawing attention to different modes of inscriptions— letters, picture postcard, mathematical notations, graffiti, epitaph, calligraphy and public ephemera — I show how Welish’s poetry from *Handwritten* (1979) to her latest collection *So What, So That* (2016) propose a postmodern theory of reinscription in which content and form, erasure and residuality and appearance and depth of inscriptions are counterintuitively left to repeat, replace and resist each other for the suspension of meaningful closures.

Keywords:

Inscription, interpretation, iteration, reinscription, postmodernity, readability, Welish

As early as 1855, Walt Whitman announced in the “Inscriptions” of his *Leaves of Grass*: “The words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything” (21). The fact that the book begins with the word “Inscriptions” does not necessarily restrict its presence as a formal or dedicatory superscription, but the statement within this piece of introductory poem extends a principle through which the reader of the book might approach it. The status of these “Inscriptions” is ambiguous; at the outset, they cancel out and distance the poet’s proposition as the reader repeats this “drift” in the process of interpretation to arrive at new references. Whitman’s poetry — in the poet’s own subsequent revisions and its attendant diversion in the reader’s perspective— then stands as an anecdotal beginning to understand the indeterminate nature of inscriptions: a polysemic and palimpsestual signifier that extends to encompass as various categories as language, value, orders, laws or cultural truisms and their broader implication for theoretical, empirical and representational domains.

Inscription as a poetic subject— of the kind common to commemorative lyrics— were subjected to a different mode of treatment at the hands of the Modernist and Postmodernist poets in America. In Wallace Stevens’ “Inscription for a Monument” (1916), the poem though referential, negates earlier traditions on monumentality; the minimal abstraction of language adopted by this poem peruses erasures and underwritten associations to unveil the silences of history in public utterances (Kremborg 129). This focus on self-referentiality and criticality become less immanent in comparison to the more radical experimentation of postmodernism; in that,

inscriptions could now be either left to succumb to their own state of innuendo or be immersed in their ontological speculativeness to resist the normative trajectories of interpretation. For instance, in John Ashbery's "The Wrong Kind of Insurance"(1985) and Barbara Guest's "His Jungle"(1962), inscriptions become intransient; the labor of ingenuity is directed to an interminable procedure – in the undecidability of the decipherable. We observe that the language of process sustained in Ashbery's lines "...I think/ About what the archaic meanings mean," ("The Wrong" 238) culminates in a tone of endless futility in Guest's: "Difficult inscriptions will be lost/ in the whirl" (Hadley Guest 52). A much explicit handling of this idea encapsulates David Shapiro's "After the Lost Original" (1994); here, the poet plunges into the turf of theory by beautifully enfolding the inconclusiveness of inscription within his terse lyric. In dealing with the status of the original and its translation, Shapiro disturbs the tendencies of symbiotic reciprocity in inscription under transference where reproduction in meaning and its use submits to a process of dissimulation: he writes, "The original feels lost like a triple pun/ And the translation cries"(Thomas 56). Translation as a special case of repetition is projected, in Shapiro's words as "dream deferred," a process of both engendering and transcending the ends and ongoing beginnings of an untranslatable origin. This instability, however, comes with a certitude of liberty because it establishes the claims of interpretative differentials and untold latencies; the advantage being leaving it at the service of an operational field of competitive meaning production. For Marjorie Welish, — the younger New York School poet, of whose writing, Shapiro refers to as "destabilized or folded poetry *in extremis*"¹— inscriptions assume a meta-theoretical enterprise and find a more serious extrapolation.

Marjorie Welish is the product of the 1970s, an era when reading and writing poetry meant a formative stage for creating a theory of interpretation that invested on contingencies and critique. In one of the proceedings of the Cambridge Reading Series (May 2011) on Welish and Ian Patterson, her poetic art is described as one that is "about the conditional intensity of the 'contemplative endeavour'" where inscriptions are primarily imbued with a process of decoding and encoding themselves again and again to usurp their static value from being merely perceived as message or medium. Inscriptions by nature are curious materials of engagement that operate within past, present and future assertions based on ideological consensualities; and that, they simultaneously subject themselves to specific and broader frames of conditionality. Inscriptions take their function from absences, from the already constructed statutes. Welish hypothetically works to emphasize this speculative space of meaning making by disrupting presentiments of texts (historical, cultural and so on) through a process of iteration. Iteration constitutes both the idea of repetition and othering for meaning making (Derrida 7). Herself a theorist, Welish takes a brief sojourn however from this poststructuralist attempt at confining meaning within the limits of readability. For Welish, "An inscription/ asks for a delayed verdict— /a stumbling block" (*Casting Sequence* 27). In this state of suspension, the inscription's blurred logic of half-formed meaning constantly switches position with other possible meanings without attaining any arbitrary or autonomous legitimacy of its own. Pauses inherent within these blurred meanings are unavoidable as disjointed conclusions temporarily gained from them as remainders tend to evade rapidly from the shifting differences encountered through the act of repetition. As a result of this repetition and its fluid transformation therewith, readability of inscriptions too becomes an exercise of frustration when multiple

¹ David Shapiro's review (which forms the blurb) of Marjorie Welish's book: *Casting Sequences*.

theoretical notions about multiple modalities of discourses are intentionally made to engage with each other in a rather tenacious way. Interspersed with paradoxes, non-sensical forms, disjunctions and at times experiments in lipogrammatic structures, the processual poetics of Welish demonstrates the possibilities of differences affected upon old texts, principles of composition and methods of analysis.

Welish uses inscriptions both as a material object and as a concept to reflect on issues as diverse as that of the assemblages of self; of the practices and transference of meaning through exteriorizations; of inscriptional logic, fractality and iteration; of interpretative indeterminacy; of variation in modes of inscription and their rhetoricity; and the critical lacunae that produces need for reinscription. These very many trajectories reappear in Welish’s poetry without so much looking for comfortable habitation. They displace the stable relation between content and form, between erasure and residue, and focus on the interchangeable function between surface meaning and deeper truths that can be at best, always contingent and counterfeit to any universalist presupposition toward meaning-formations.

In her maiden collection, *Handwritten* (1979), an early formulation about inscriptions can be witnessed in her engagement with the subjective and its material exteriorizations. The title poem of the collection, “Handwritten” induces a phenomenological question concerning the birth of inscription and its foregrounding in the residual and redemptive agency of “the forgotten, broken,[and] blurred” (Welish, *Handwritten* 35). “Inscriptions,” an eponymous poem, specifically deals with this fixation of constantly marking the void, to appropriate and test the past for the present. As result of a sustained desire for retrievability, inscriptions become our subjective excess; of a longing that has to be realized through exaggeration; and this exaggeration is the product of repetition that in turn produce dissatisfaction and thereof, non-finality in meaning making. She writes: “Today we have added the tendency/ to exaggerate, to commemorate new damages, each containing/ its own God” (Welish, *Handwritten* 59). Though the poem has a confessional tone, it never stops being an invective of the personal; in the sense that any possible search for objectivity or singularity becomes a lost cause as self- fashioning mires into illusion. Similarly, in “Greenhouses and Gardens”, the letter is likened to a greenhouse, a vessel that contains and produces pseudoscripts for a fantastical recalling of the absent and distant. Describing letters as a space where language is “strangely and undramatically put,” Welish confounds the inventive nature of autobiographical text to expose the disassembled subject’s volition to play with incoherence (*Handwritten* 46). The tactility that makes handwritten letters personal and “authentic” can also be susceptible to forensic exploration as it captures the sediment of the subject’s intention. The same thought informs “Souvenirs,” in which the interpretation of our “interiors” generate from our *eros* for “the possibilities of another life/ or of several lives lived concurrently” (Welish, *Handwritten* 54). The tone of despondency and nostalgia in this collection are mutagenic to the way inscriptions intertwine subjectivity with time and instantiate the desire for otherness and proximity to something which is not immediate but resides as a secretive future.

This argument continues in her next volume, *The Windows Flew Open* (1997) but here Welish shifts her attention to the logic of possibility and the contingency of inscription’s future propositions. The poem, “AND NOW SUCH A SHORE ” uses “sunset” as an abstract concept and as an object of reference to understand the efficacy of inscriptional dissemination. Welish overturns the hierarchy of meaningful predicates

by transforming subjective investment into a certain form of objecthood such as a reproduction of sunset on a picture postcard that involves mediation and therefore results in differential continuity. Assuming that the inscription “sunset” also forms the content of the picture on sunset we gradually observe how the concept of “sunset” lacks an accurate extension even when its denotation has iconic equivalence. Welish perhaps shows that problems of nominalism issue when inscription meant for representing via repetition limits interchangeability between abstract and concrete appropriation. The mere ineffability of this idea exceeds its representation; it’s “surfeit of muteness” and “ostentation,” as Welish phrases, challenges condensation of any kind and presents an infinite number of contexts upon which the semantic validity of “sunset” depends (Welish, *The Windows* 55). Inability to express what exactly is “sunset” draws us within its fold and has as consequence, an appellation to reflect and complete its meaning by going beyond the moment of inscription. Even when the postcard encodes the property of the sunset, it does so with an uncertain immediacy: “and what is thought is newly helpless and shining./ Then it goes out” (Welish, *The Windows* 58). Probably this short-spanned existence of the sunset and its analogous participant (the post card depicting sunset) kindles a reminder of many things gone — the end of origins, relationships, their meaning and transparency. As much as the present, interfered by “exhaustive guesses” and “parallel departure[s],” drives a way out to make the significance of today’s “sunset” meaningful, it can only make its enactments possible by moving away from its event of actuality and toward an anterior future which nonetheless still corresponds to the past. Therefore, the “printed page” of “sunset” may be a reading of history and yet fall short of this history which is due “for mailing” our future as “legends,” as “transcript”. Because of its inscrutable nature of determination, this inscription of “sunset” and the “postcard” upon which it anchors would be a “job” of investigation that would continue to espouse a “work-in-progress” through perpetuity. Here, the reality that is demanded by printers for a future audience has to be one that may essentially not attune them to the exact context, but allow them to enter into a synthetic world of invented solipsistic reverie. And if we go a little back to understand the economic purpose of post-cards in late nineteenth century tourism industry[when printing press and photography were already being experimented to herald the art of advertisement], it becomes all the more pronounced how the rhetoric of iteration circumspectly informed production ethics to foretell the rise of consumer society. But this idea again exists as a tip of the iceberg among several other possibilities when the surface of this inscriptional idea of “sunset” resists offering any depth or direction, and thereby, leading the reader’s attention elsewhere.

The printed page is a transcript

awaiting the future,

but how else am I to know you?

In preparation for our reading

we consent to future,

but what comes back from printers is too flimsy

for mailing — a sunset — and we have to redo the announcements.

Or perhaps he thought I meant “postcard- like.”

It is a postcard- like and layered,

but perhaps the printers would like to hear us read

so that future jobs will be more real.

It seems he thought I meant “sunset.”

And then I suggested you name it “sunset,”

feeling the sense of its proportions.

6

I received your postcard.

A semi-close-up of legend on the reverse

of your note shows the vivid aftermath of sun

to be a work-in-progress unfinished yet forever scrutinized.

(Welish, *The Windows* 59-

60)

A similar and yet distinct practice of inscriptional logic can be found in the poem, “Fibulae Iterated” from *The Isle of Signatories* (2008). Welish uses the term “fibulae” to encompass multiple strands of meaning it genealogically denotes and works with these variants to show how it inhibits clear sense when all operate within a given situation simultaneously. The word “fibulae” in plural form equips Welish to bring different isomorphic elements together— like “bolt,” “pin,” “clasp,” “probably,” “equivalent to,” “to fasten”²— that diverge meaning through their identities and concurrently converge at the same source of relationship, requiring readers to probe into their iterations, even when it appears to be self-evident. In anatomical study, “fibula” refers to an underlined bone attached to the frontal knee bone. Welish borrows this conceptual shape of the “fibula” to exhibit the internal relation of the inscriptional structure and thereupon weigh the strength of its validity “claims”. Similarly, the lexical use of the word, “tabby,” has its own pre-disposed variables: the OED refers to a heterogeneous class of reference such as a “Cat,” a “Silk cloth,” “String,” “Concrete,”

² “Fibula.” Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper. <http://etymonline.com>. Accessed 30th November, 2017.

or “Winged insect like moth”³. The word “iterate” as suggested in the title, when seen in its noun form— “iteration”— approximates its relation with the noun “itinerary”. Within the poem, they are lodged in their performative acts of expression: words such as “adventure,” “roaming,” “escape,” “set out,” and “ingress” initiates these acts. Welish uses a fractal method⁴ as she tries to integrate with and disintegrate from the visible meaning structure of inscription— both through changes in their internal order, as in word inflections, and through changes in the external order by moving out of the parabolic structures of meaning patterns and without confining its direction to an end or origin. Application of the fractal method constantly amazes one with the changing architectural forms of images that this inscriptional space conjures. For her, “The End” is the beginning or “advent” of “time after time” (Welish *The Isle* 15). Inscriptions, in this case, pose as impediments, having bearing upon those which are directly ascribed to a shared form of reality and to those which are absent and yet made visible in quick passing through allusions or appearances. Welish gives a poetic instance here to explore the probabilities of meaning that one can encounter. While making no strict adherence to the facticity of these emergent meanings, she upholds the space for endless possibilities that could be arrived at by introducing little adjustments within language structure. She combines the discrete concepts of “fibulae”, “tabby,” and “iteration” by reshuffling and interchanging them with their underlined paradigmatic relations to construct hypothetical instances of counterintuitive meanings. The resultant state appears to be syntactically correct but refrain from conceiving propositions of any fixed nature:

Yet another possibility lets drop the distinction between
doubting and doubling ingress, as though “between two”
itself undergoes a fold as it drapes. Drop distinctions on
taut string. String taut. Take up, repeat.

They decided to set forth from genesis, to set forth
genesis. A good thing.

³ “Tabby.” *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, Oxford-Dictionaries.
<http://en.oxforddictionaries.com>. Accessed 30th November, 2017.

⁴ Here, I bring in the concept of fractal theory as used in mathematical logic, which, I insist, can be coupled with semantic theory by re-evaluating the formulations proposed by Quine, Nelson Goodman and R. M. Martin. The only reservation in assimilating these two recondite epistemological fields is to gather a framework that instead of proposing rules of finitude, works toward understanding the infinite dimension of conceiving a displaced poetics. Welish categorically does not affiliate to any single tradition of philosophical thought and this practice of approaching earlier methods/ theories of compositions act as a leverage in bringing novel ways of engaging with theoretical boundaries and their consequent pragmatics in poetic language.

The reader peers at the word “Unclear.”

(Welish, *The Isle* 15)

The parsing of syntactical shifts happening between and within the stanzas corresponds to the concatenations made with different descriptive variables that creates meaning or invert the meanings concluded before. And these overlap temporarily, given that this concatenation, as Welish suggest, “escapes” or relates to a different language which is other than linguistic, containing the same conceptual shape but are of different denotation⁵ (*The Isle* 17). They have the capacity to keep multiple other worlds in equilibrium; for instance, the string that weaves a cloth, the catenary that supports a bridge or as mentioned before, the “concatenation” infused in a microchip (Welish, *The Isle* 16-17). These formations in return evoke other auxiliaries, or— in terms of visualization— the coming into being of scalar formations and thereafter, in the process, leading to new meaning systems: “They decided to set forth from genesis, to set forth/ genesis” (Welish, *The Isle* 15). The reader stumbles upon this “unclear” meaning all the more insofar as the meaning gets intricately transformed in points of irregularities, escapes and folds. In offering this type of conceptual eccentricity, Welish identifies herself with the Oulipian tradition of Raymond Queneau, or for that matter, the labyrinthine semiotic forays of Jorge Borges, or to the post-referential aesthetics of the language poet, Ron Silliman⁶.

In the poem “Unfolding Yes,” Welish grapples with the indeterminate character of zero, an inscription used to understand the symbolic logic of signs. It constitutes a primal position within arche-writing, having contained within itself a spectrum of other meanings — as absence and as the nominal position of something absent (hence trace). Much of the story behind zero, she demonstrates, is the struggle over inscriptional legitimacy; as to which age, civilization or experimental rhetoric could lay claim to its origin. Indeed this battle of primacy over zero, fought in the discipline of mathematics, had largely been sort through the armature of the abstract, and from assigning names to it from various analytical viewpoints. Welish calls this practice of reckoning the history of zero as one that “accrue points/ but which nevertheless is iterative” (*The Isle* 18). She journeys the reader across different time periods when the concept of zero emerged on play tables, from the shape of pebbles or dice, moving on to the pre-history of alphabets when zero could determine the highest number possible, “as fit our diaspora”, “polyrhythmic[aly]”⁷ explained (Welish, *The Isle* 18-19).. Left still “unclear”,

⁵ For further information on inscription and concatenation refer to R. M Martin (277).

⁶ For instance, the structure of the narrative in Raymond Queneau’s *Blue Flowers*; the design of the labyrinth in Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths”; and Ron Silliman’s “The New Sentence”.

⁷ While proposing his geometric proof on the highest quantifiable number, (which was supposed to be more than the grains of sand collected from all the lands on earth) Archimedes, in his correspondence to Gelon, King of Syracuse, uses a tone so sonorous as to have never been exercised by any mathematician or present day musician. He writes:

“And let the last number of the first period be called a unit of numbers of the first order of the second period. And again, let a myriad myriads of numbers of the first order of the

nomenclatures stretch to exponential degrees—the zero as “figure” in Greek Geometry, or the dot of the “pin”, or the “cipher” provided in the “alternative endings” of al-Khwarizmi’s algebra or for that matter, the counting of time itself as and from zero (Welsh, *The Isle* 18-21). Zero, apart from being a subject of singular inspection, qualifies as an irreducible object to be transposed onto the perceptual framework for other knowledge. Long addressed as “empty” or “naught”, it could also be an image in understanding the institution of philosophy⁸ and the philosophy of mind, possibly because of its enigmatic nature of accommodating nothing as well as something; this being exemplified in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, and quite invariably in Locke’s theory, of the mind as a “Tabula rasa” [Welsh omits the alphabet “u” and gestures at the Indian side of the history of zero by writing “TABLA RASA”] or yet in Leibniz’s monadic metaphysics of interiority. Mathematics in turn had to trace the antecedents of zero across cultures to testify the claims of its authority—in things like tokens, glyphs and ancient scripts or sometimes syllabaries—for which experiments on and through calligraphy⁹ became imperative. And perhaps, the knowledge assorted from the curve, algebra, and geometry—establishing the apex of seventeenth century mathematics—gave to the world, zero’s potent place in calculus and the theory of motion. However, in this act of giving, zero [and hence inscription denoting zero] superimposes upon the arena of mathematics and the everyday material world by surpassing the history of totalities. That being said, zero prevails not as a noun, but as a practice, and a verb. This recalcitrant nature of zero, of submitting against mathematical formalization makes itself an entity of becoming, forever active and changing its meaning in relation to change in its co-ordinates.

“Zero” circa A.D. 870

She said “antecedent”

See subject-verb-object

Clarify: to which

second order of the second period be called *a unit of numbers of the second order of the second period*. Similarly—[...] And let the process continue up to a myriad-myriad units of the myriad-myriadth order of the myriad-myriadth period” (Kaplan and Kaplan 32)

⁸ Alain Badiou in his book *Conditions*, writes; “I call philosophy’s inscription everything that turns the void of the address into a subsisting mark... Inscription is the marking of this void, the interminable procedure of a subsisting suture with the subsistent, the effectivity, the void. The inscription is open to all...” (Badiou 28).

⁹ In an interesting and comprehensive study on the history of zero, Kaplan notes: “... letting the pleasures of doodling lead us to writing as decoration rather than to the peculiarly abstract sort of representation it [zero] inclines toward: the making of signs to look through rather than at” (Kaplan and Kaplan 16). Here, indeed, he is considering mathematical investigation of different inscriptional forms of zero (across civilizations) along with the practice of calligraphy. Since the difference in representation of zero was largely dependent on the use of writing tools available to specific cultures. Here, both the writing tools [the surface of inscription as well as through which instrument it is inscribed] and handwork become determinants of the creation of different symbolic forms.

Community, by which

Authority, for what

Purpose, why?

See verb, see it be exalted:

Then she said antecedent-permitting

Scarcity about zero might well indicate

Sets of at least one derived consequent closest

Zero's insomnia

(Welish, *The Isle* 23)

The mode of inscription upon which it affixes and assigns undergoes a reversion in Welish's poetry. The material support of inscription is not as Lessing had said, entirely that “we ascribe to the inscription alone,” or in Saussure's structuralism, that which is “irrelevant,” or in Ricouer's discourse of meaning, the overlapping “spatialization of language.”¹⁰ Welish addresses this issue in a rather tautological manner by taking a case of comparison between inscription on a tablet and that of graffiti on the wall in the poem “From Dedicated to”(section 36 and 37). The tablet exists as a misplaced object, and stubbornly imposes upon a future by using “its superassertibility” as an economic value. It is commemorative in its state of conspicuously upholding power of certain stature or era. Graffiti, on the other hand, never vows down to such power and therefore follows an “aesthetic of ground” as opposed to the tablet's order of “the aesthetics of the backbone”(Welish, *The Isle* 36). In both the cases, differences accrue from similarities; the word “ground” and “support” are synonyms but differ in terms of their power of rhetoricity and the verticality of that power across time. The tablet circumscribes limit, it claims to be exclusive of its own kind in terms of value and thereby congeals its content, and this not only implies its historical use for marking out territories of rules but also, by digression, hint at entrapment of freedom under such rule. Though similar in practice, graffiti pervades by marking on every surface of a landscape to assert freedom through an anarchic way of place-making. We encounter here how the order of meaning changes as inscriptions switch from one mode to another. This has been further stretched to inscriptions on Mylar and Welish substantiates this anomaly in the prose-poem, “An Ordinary Evening Plus or Minus”, published in her more recent work, *So What, So That* (2016). The peculiarity of Mylar, being transparent, and one that depends upon another substrate

¹⁰ See, Lessing's remark quoted in Geoffrey Hartman's, “Inscription and Romantic Nature Poetry” in the book, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (1987) ,p 33. See Roy Harris, *Rethinking Writing* (2000), p 49 . See Paul Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and The Surplus of Meaning* (1976) p 33 and 43.

for support, necessarily performs its rhetoricity not alone, but with and through the substrate upon which it is affixed:

return is no simple story: to turn a leaf of Mylar is to encounter interference from graphic [/]overlay upon lexical intention to return fruition here. Multiply. Coincidentally, to turn a leaf [/]of Mylar is to encounter interference from lexical overlay upon graphical intention to return [/] pixelated back and forth yet opaque pages create a studio.¹¹

(Welish,
So What 90)

The interference that Welish suggests here does not possibly rest its performativity to overlapping or text wrapping but perhaps advances a competitive interface happening simultaneously between sensorial and cognitive ascendancy; of inscription seen and receiving meaning as word contra image. The opaqueness is not in literal sense. It is the change of transparent medium into a metaphorical translucency that makes both its components— the graphic and the lexical— equally assertive and foregoing in displacing the “fruition” of meaning. The case of the Mylar, also forms the genesis of Welish’s collaborative art project with James Seina, namely *Oaths? Questions?* (2009). In this project, interference of the visual over verbal is not similar in logic as that of the ekphrastic traditions. The concern is more toward understanding how the *surplus* context or the multiplicity of the “surround”¹² could limit meaning than the premium directed on their rival-revivalist relations. Here hypermediation informs the pragmatics of inscription which, Welish claims, cannot be a provincial category for the epistemological ambitions of semiotics alone, but can act as a discursive tool across all human knowledge.

Welish’s works are iterable verbal artefacts where one poem exists as a cross-sectional intertext of other poems, and even if they resemble in tone, they settle on independent priorities. The poem “The Signage That was there” from the collection *Word Group* (2004) and the fourth section of the poem “From Dedicated to” in *The Isle of Signatories* (2008) start with the same sentence: “Are all contingencies in effect? Okay, Okay, Okay”¹³. Though they open with an illocutionary force, they seldom arrive at answers because the repetition of “okay” suggests hesitation and “fatigue” than assertion or approval of any kind. Both the poems dwell upon the art of inscription as a condition dependent on shifting predicates: of “if” and “then,” “of steaming incommensurables” that fall short of consequential obligations or overdo themselves by shooting queries at their own performances. In the first poem, the phrase “they say”

¹¹ Parenthetical emphasis mine. The font size is in accordance to Welish’s original format of the poem.

¹² Refer to the interview of the poet conducted by Judith Goldman, November, 2008- January 2009.

¹³ The page numbers have been indicated according to the sequence of publication history of each books: page 57 indicates the beginning of the poem “The Signage That Was There” of *Word Group* (2004) and page 54 indicates section “4” of “From Dedicated To” of *The Isle of Signatories* (2008).

appears seven times, followed by five “aftermaths,” three “detritus” which are in the process of “fermenting,” “convalescence,” “melting,” and “retreat”(Welish, *Word Group* 57-59). The procedural explication, in over-exemplifying its sense of explicitness through these quantifications, make the very corporeality of the “sensible object” overridden with meanings opaque, and thus, constricting the entity as non-functional. Welish, in this context, throws into sharp contrast the prescriptive and dedicatory intentions wrought in the practice of funerary monuments and epigrams and negates them to be “impressive wastes” because,

As soon as they leave, insofar as
they will have left, been apart from
and left alone as remainder, not sentence,
occupied the aftermaths
entered. Exist.”Where’s the exit?”
“See you later” sent for
slurred speech adapted to the art of inscription.

(Welish, *Word*

Group 58)

The “slurred speech” here demotes the status of inscription to that of a trace, or a mark devalued and alienated from its adjectival niceties; here, in the sense of honor, of propriety, of privilege, or of intelligibility. The object that was meant to be “sensible” exposes its vulgar materialism, of how the ideological preoccupation in the practice of inscriptions as dedications is overdetermined by economic superfluosity. Welish further explores these tendencies in the poem “Art & Language writes an Epitaph”¹⁴. The poem follows a mock-epic witticism reminiscent of public lampooning prevalent in seventeenth century satires. Unlike the *locus mortis*, “HERE LIES THE IMMORTAL REMAINS OF...” that distinctly formed the appellative tone in sacerdotal addresses for a certain powerful deceased figure, she employs the term “HERE” to the practice of elegiac traditions; the materials/objects upon and out of which inscriptions were/are magisterially incised: “walls,” “wood,” “glass,” and “steel”. The pronoun “US” comes from these objects as opposed to the subjective meditation of the lyric poet. In letting the objects speak about their exploitation, (“LET US TELL YOU HOW TO EXPLOIT US” (Welish, *The Isle* 38)), in bestowing speech to the materiality of the tomb [which Derrida¹⁵ in his book *Margins of Philosophy*

¹⁴ This poem appears in *Isle of the Signatories* (2008) and all subsequent citations are from this book, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁵ Alan Bass, the translator of *Margins of Philosophy* appends a brief insight on Derrida’s playful use of the word silence to develop his concept of *différance*; for he associated this silence to the image of the tomb and the pyramid, which again became a material manifestation as the death of the deceased tyrant, the way Hegel had earlier used. The Greek word “oikesis,” Alan explains, also

referred to as *oikesis*, the “pyramidal silence of the graphic”; and by and large one can extend to the surface upon which silence is imposed]; the poet obliquely critiques the culture of reified human consumption where means of production is based on the depletion of natural resources. The change from the natural state of thing (tree) into an object (wood) absorbs its mortality by offering itself as an artifact (in this case, the incised epitaph) for “savor of [man’s] immortality”¹⁶. Unlike the poem enumerated above, here the word “EXIT” shifts the scene of focus to the subterranean ways in which inscriptional art unravels understudied layers of meaning suspended within its surface, and also of one that demystifies the presumption of “THE GIFT” economy (Welish, *The Isle* 39).

Although rehearsing these complexities, the third and fourth section of the poem “From Dedicated to” is more specifically concerned with the installation of inscriptional art that aims to repurpose inscriptions from the lackadaisical traditions demonstrated above. Keeping as an aside, the sculptural art of Siah Armajani, Welish plots what she sees of the artist as “addressing the social symptoms” of an “unapologetic society” that has viewed politics as piety (*The Isle* 52-53). Monumentalizing the dead through mundane objects, Armajani counterpoises its surface with “antecedent future sentences in creases”(Welish, *The Isle* 54). These “crease” inscriptions, mostly of Persian poetry and not strictly adhered to calligraphic rules, overcrowds the surface so as to be illegible for the audience. Legibility gets accentuated only as densely folded rites of personal and communal history. For instance in fig 1, his *Songs* (1957) incorporates a folk Persian poem that elucidates upon the dignity of human labour in a society thriving on the basis of mutual coexistence without any symptom of class struggle. But in his later works, shown in fig 2, of those of the *Tomb Series* (1976-2016), the inscriptions that were legible and conveyed meanings of utopian utilitarianism, appear infinitesimal and sometimes completely disappear. They exist only in the titles and serve as cautionary remains of “wishful thinking”¹⁷. On the

refers to a tomb, a house and economy. My treatment of the Derridian concept is removed from what he proposed about the inscription of the word *différance*; in that I extend and reassign the act of “silent play” not to the dead but upon where it seeks to exercise its presence— i.e., the structure and materiality of the tomb itself that indirectly gestures at the world of economics and power. The materials used in the making of the tomb which are otherwise taken to be inanimate are made to speak for themselves through overturning the inscriptional subject from the tyrant deceased figure. This digression in Welish follows Derridian *différance* in a recursive and digressive way to bring to forefront through the same inscriptional legacy that is attached to death and materialities of commemoration. The materials play the role of testimonies against such violence. See pg 4 of *Margins of Philosophy* (1982).

¹⁶See Yi-Fu Tuan’s essay, “The Significance of The Artifact”(1980),p 462-472. Here, elaborating upon Hannah Arendt’s, *The Human Condition*, he writes; “Artifacts are thrust into the world. They have the power to stabilize life...the artifact has high visibility and permanence in people’s awareness and enables mortals to savor immortality” (Tuan 463). In her interview with Bob Perelman, Welish said, “... as a fruitful way of thinking about object— not in terms of their material properties but in terms of their cultural properties, the object in this sense being not the thing that has a morphology that can be traded and may end up in museums, but indeed that which does have a material form yet is, culturally speaking, text” (Aaron and Rabaté 41).

¹⁷ For instance, his work, *Sacco and Vanzetti’s Reading Room* (1987-94) includes chairs and a large desk upon which lay a number of open books pertaining to the American constitutional rights. Armajani uses these inscriptions of law to suggest the vacuity of its truisms against the

one hand, these “storied addresses” pervading the public space for social equity— even along with other “mercantile” signs— struggle to distinguish among themselves, and, on the other hand, they slip closely towards one another to dramatically “salvage” their position within the existing “pageant” of multiple inscriptions and feign an announcement for wholeness of meaning. But this wholeness stays unrealized as they compete to dominate one another in the process of directing us with a viable meaning. As a result, they cloud our perception. Yet through these carnivalesque superseding, Welish obliquely offers an insight into the contradictory nature of the restoration of past ideologies via inscriptional palimpsests.

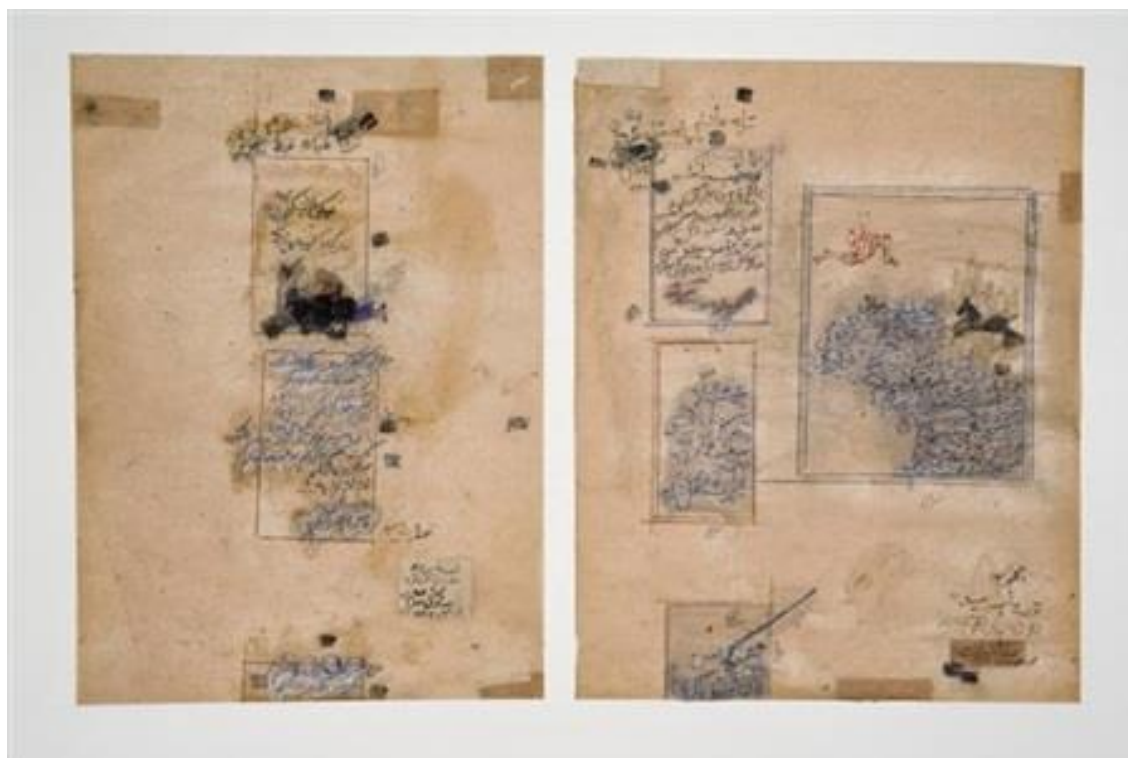


Fig 1: Siah Armajani's *Songs One, Two* (1957). Watercolor and ink on paper (57×88.3 cm (22 ½ × 34 ¾)). The poem is translated into English in the Rossi and Rossi art exhibition catalog. @ Ross & Ross art exhibition e-catalog, Hong Kong 18th Feb-15th April, 2017. Photo by Larry Marcus and Text by Xin Wang (p 14)

Lapis Lazuli

execution of the two Italian immigrants who came to America for better economic opportunities. His most recent works such as *Written in Berlin : Tomb for Bonhoeffer and Walter Benjamin* (2014-15) *Written Iran* (2015-16) inscriptions fill up the entire built environment, straining meaning in case of the former, and in the latter, attempts being made to resurrect the political exigencies of ancient Iranian revolutionary poets.

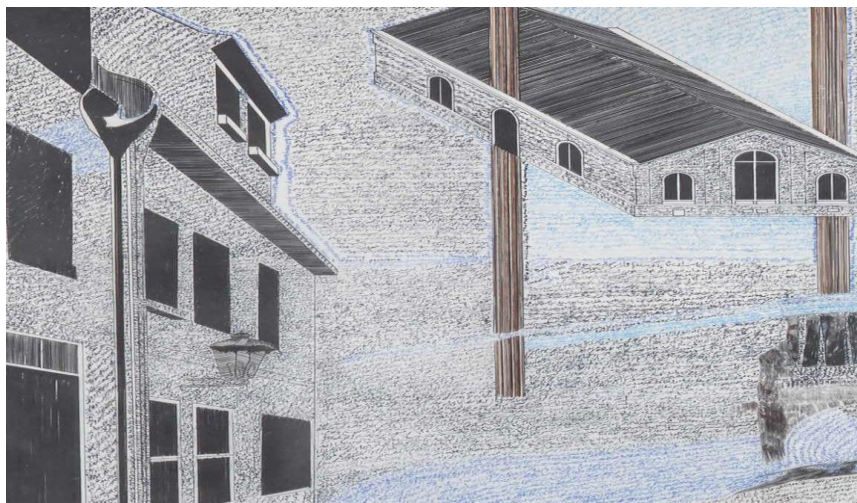


Fig 2. Cross-section of Siah Armajani's, *Written Berlin: Tomb for Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Walter Benjamin* (2014-16) which has been revised and later incorporated within the larger project of the *Tomb Series* (1976-2016). Graphite and Ink on Mylar (101.6×66.4 cm (40× 223 in). @ Ross & Ross art exhibition e-catalog, Hong Kong 18th Feb-15th April, 2017. Photo by Larry Marcus and Text by Xin Wang pg (44-46)

Welish attempts to introduce a practice where the conflict brought through inscription's slippery order is confronted with a persevering order of reinscription. "Historical Site," an early retreat to this idea, problematizes a historical place and the citationality of that history for present or future reinscription (Welish, *Handwritten* 44). The place attains an ambiguous position as a text that is already written and rewritten in the process of deciphering unattended minor histories dispersed in the ruins. These ruins call for the recovery of the lost; interred inscriptions have to be scavenged in order to retrace bodies of knowledge that may have been formally withdrawn from narration or crunched within cold statistical records. The evidence at the site seems minutely suspended; the sameness and the multitude wrought in the site speak of something else that makes the climb toward any resolution of the conflicted site, infinitely "thick". Of this, Welish writes that it is "impossibly mournful even as you say under your breath that you can teach [about these inscriptions] ¹⁸ since you've done it before" (*Handwritten* 44). This "stifling text" is the site's inflated retellings staged for an audience who are accidentally disposed off from its history. But, in "Statement (Some Assembly Required)" from *In The Futurity Lounge: Asylum for Indeterminacy* (2012), Welish looks at reinscriptions of stigma produced by the "realpolitick" of the metropolis. For her, "The *real politik* of inscriptions would indicate that we cannot take social speech for granted" ¹⁹. These are scrupulously manufactured insinuations; inscriptions catalogued for surveillance, signs engendering calamitous ephemera— of "Sufi calligraphy," "beeping..to cut an infill between stares and asterisks" in the western metropolis, or the clotted remains of "atrias disproportionate," of heavy "scuffs," of alleged "wayfaring strangers" resembling "eastbound" "diasporas" (Welish, *Futurity Lounge* 8). It ironically gestures at America's role in international politics to garner support of justification from all nations against the Middle East. Through

¹⁸ Parenthetical addition mine.

¹⁹ Marjorie Welish, "Inscriptions" *American Poets*, Journal of the Academy of American Poets, 2009. Originally posted on 20th February, 2014.
<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/inscription> Accessed 20 September, 2017.

inscriptions, she retraces the biopolitical and exceptionalist language of reinscribing old codes of xenophobia. Welish calls all these false alarms as a “sliver of invented speech,” as an example of figuring the controlled consensus of the public sphere, the tension plummeted by “peace” induced pogroms, and its deep-seated anxieties. The reader comes across the phrase “The real” in the beginning of each stanza, and this repetition itself contradicts the verity of the succeeding sentences. Hence here, the language of the built environment and the language of the power structures that influence public discourse look each other in askance. The want for solitude that modernity so dearly held close to the activity of liberation among the faceless crowd of the marketplace gets all the more inimical in Welish’s sliced up vocabulary where inscriptions cut across each other and promote an atmosphere of fear and ennui.

Welish and her deliberation on inscription, as elucidated throughout the paper, try to push the boundaries of a possible end and origin. They either work as residue or elicit interest at erasures and omissions, things whose pursuit are in no way innocent or easily comprehensible. Interpretation and inscription postpone the desire of finality and resolution. Therefore, the coming to conclusion, as Welish writes in the last line of *Isle of the Signatories* is to have said, “HERE WE READ WHAT WE (SHALL) HAVE WRITTEN” (98). The parenthetical “shall” poses a question on the “spaced up” nature of all thoughts and exercises, including this study, and consigns upon these practices to revisit what was left unattempted. Indeed, to follow this very poetics is to immerse oneself into the realm of inscriptions. And to go after and rescue those not enunciated involves the task of reinscription where the practice of iteration seems necessary as a theoretical principle to start with. Seen through this lens, the paper argues that interpretive determinacy is half-truth or relative and contingent upon the *here* and *now*. Perhaps, inscriptions also leave us with a note of caution that the espousal for interpretational openness does not and should not relegate to over interpretation and that meanings work in their subdued form as often as they continue to remain so. Of course, this possibly gestures an engagement with reception, and the contemplative visitations that makes inscription endearing to partake one’s own ethical positions, while not overseeing its critical poignancy to embark upon present and future commitments. And so are revisions necessary for enacting all cultural, political and literary voyages, of which, the most essential being the unveiling of what waits in these marks and ellipses.

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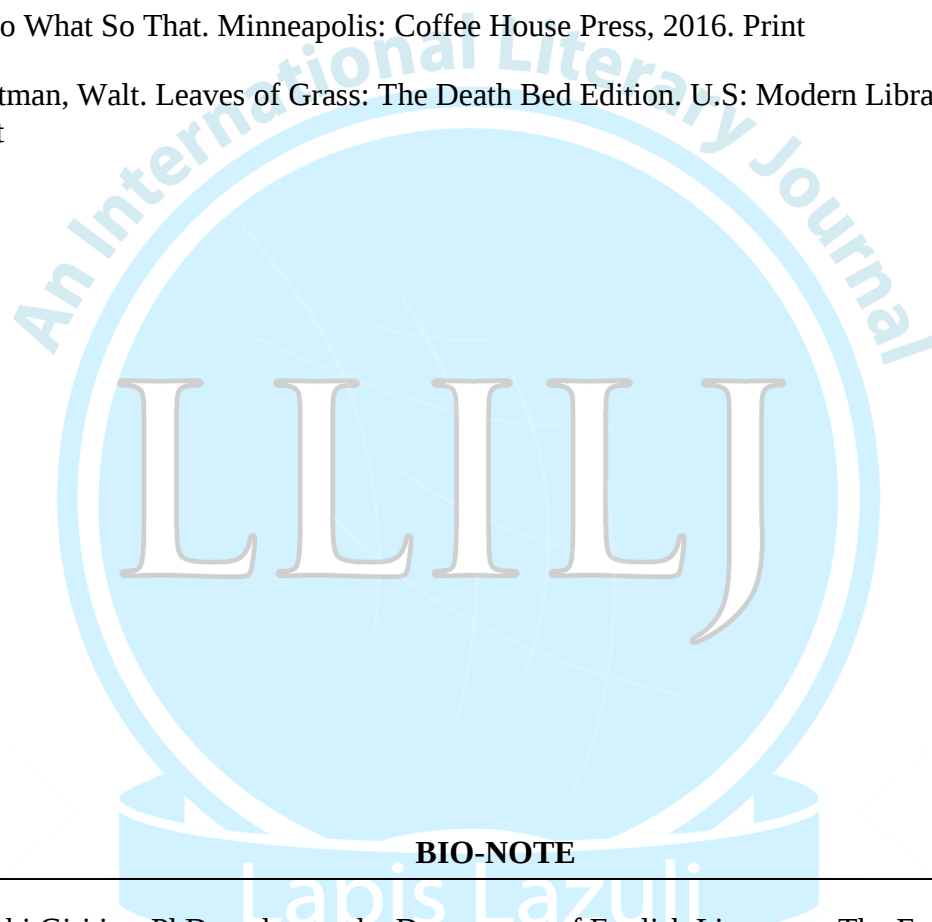
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