

Resurrecting the Dead Word: The Occult Poetics of Ariana Reines and CAConrad

Although it is no revelation that new media have completely redefined the reading and writing processes for the postmodern public (and the readerly and writerly consciousnesses too), a fascinating polyphony of reactions have emerged from a public that exemplifies the mass excitement and suspicion charged by the purportedly new experiences of language offered by new media in the digital age. However, for the American citizen, in a more recent time wherein the horrors of language's incredible plasticity have begun to more transparently emerge—as “bots” populate the digital interfaces that were once celebrated as the contemporary salons, and one's compositional voice is deduced to an algorithm by corporations that later sell this data for profit—literary and non-literary reactions to new media have made a stark turn to the cynical.

In *A Sand Book*, Ariana Reines's dizzying four hundred-page contemporary epic that takes on issues of new spirituality, consumerism, womanhood, and the occult, all contemporaneous to the deterioration of language by the new immediacy allowed by social media and the mass digitization of literary experience, Reines in “A Parital History” documents the difficulties of literary (or even linguistic) production in the late postmodern age. She writes, “We were lost in a language of images. / It was growing difficult to speak. Yet talk / Was everywhere.”¹ Although, to the effect of new media, the American reader is now experiencing the terrific (and subsequently terrifying) plasticity of language² on a mass level, the democratization of composition and the oversaturation of a contemporary public in an overwhelming volume of language has, in effect, brought about a mass deadening of language too; language in our everyday conversations, poetries, advertisements, and more, has lost its once palpable and primordial freshness that so excited readers and writers of the previous centuries. In its oversaturation, language has been reduced, as Reines puts it, to “talk,” and each word, as each too becomes another mass product to be consumed in its many possible variances, becomes just another image (an icon, even) that populates the contemporary consciousness alongside the constant images of the global marketplace.

This deadening of language, the impossibility of expression in the medium of word, is the crisis under which the postmodernists, most notably the language poets, write, and this crisis looms still over poets of the twenty-first century; however, it seems that this compositional anxiety has only further exacerbated for contemporary poets. Reines, in “A Partial History” continues, “The images gave us no rest yet failed over / And over despite the immensity / Of their realism to describe the world as we really / Knew it, and worse, as it knew us.”³ Here Reines summarizes the suspicions of the contemporary reader to the possible (and likely) deceptions of language: Despite an ostensible realism, despite its plasticity, there remains an irreconcilable distance between the accounts of a global consciousness documented in the “language of images” that the public consumes and within the individual consciousness.

¹ Reines, Ariana. *A Sand Book*. (2019, p. 10)

² Mass digitization and social media have transmuted language for the public from that drivel that was once mindlessly falling out of the speaker to a substance that speaker must actively manipulate to compose fragments of expression. One can think of the constancy of contemporary text messaging as an example. Some may feel compelled to resist this assertion on the basis of the once (seemingly) constant formal epistolary writing that dominated preceding centuries, and this a fair assertion about just how “new” this experience of language as a compositional substance is, but the argument here is about accessibility and mass experience.

³ Reines, Ariana. *A Sand Book*. (2019, p. 11)

Here begins the project of poets Ariana Reines and CAConrad.⁴ Both poets recognize and resist the dangers of language's plasticity that has been newly allowed by the proliferation of new media, and both turn toward occultism to restore that once-lost meaning to the contemporary word. Although both Reines's and CAConrad's poetics strive toward the autotelic and rely on occultism to achieve an ostensible autotelicism, the approaches Reines's *A Sand Book* and CAConrad's *While Standing in Line for Death* are distinct. Reines in *A Sand Book* strives to create a sacred text that documents her perceivably harrowing contemporary times. The poetry speaks directly toward a recognizable present, but approaches it as if it were mythological and as though it were a lost history that were divined directly to her. She maneuvers modes both colloquial⁵ and incantatory, and concludes the expansive collection with a poetical sequence that she attests was in fact divined to her directly from (a) God. *A Sand Book* is both God-marked and ostensibly commonplace. In a poetic landscape wherein so many post-language poets have abandoned their intimate, lyric I and attest that the confessional lyric has lost its once-celebrated potency, *A Sand Book* suggests that a speaker may need to channel a divine voice to restore to poetry its lost lyric intensity.

CAConrad, however, creates an autotelic poetics through ritual. Following the extrajudicial killing of a boyfriend, CAConrad suffered a seemingly impossible compositional silence until writing *While Standing in Line for Death*, and the poems of *While Standing in Line for Death* were the collective products of somatic (occult) ritual.⁶ Although all rituals maintain some elements of autotelicism, interestingly the formal devices of CAConrad's poems retain them too. Unfailing repetition and inexplicable geometric forms are constants in *While Standing in Line for Death* and beckon questions of how hermeneutics may be privileged over the literary-historical approaches that were championed by the New Critics and post-structuralists.

I propose a thesis that delineates a postmodern inheritance that contextualizes the literary landscape so populated by immediate media and a subsequent disillusionment with language, religious doctrine, and governing institutions. This analysis builds from the preceding scholarship that suggests a deadening of language amid a culture of mass digital publication. However, this thesis would emphasize the recent developments in new media and its devastations—the great expansion of social media interfaces, the now-commonplace selling by Internet moguls of personal data, the reduction of language to a series of algorithms, etc.—to underscore the special urgency and more specific contexts of Reines and CAConrad's occult projects. The thesis would also consider the occult inheritance of Reines and CAConrad, as both exhibit a nostalgia for medieval visionaries, a reiteration of the gothic supernatural, influence from cultural-historical occult traditions, anxieties about print publication that charge individual spiritual expression (not unlike those that followed the introduction of mass printing), interest in the occult modernists, and (in the case of CAConrad) an evocation of Dadaist automatic writing practices.⁷ This thesis is interested in the conditions under which one is compelled to the occult in literary expression; how occultism returns the possibility of meaningful expression to a public that is suffering from mass cynicism, disillusionment, and silence prompted by the rapid and

⁴ These poets emerge as an obvious pairing. Reines and CAConrad are friends and have poems dedicated to one another in their books. They write together often and frequently appear alongside one another in public readings.

⁵ Reminiscent, of course, of the New York School, of which she and CAConrad were late members.

⁶ These rituals evoke many long-standing ritual-cultural practices that scholars have deemed "autotelic," such as that of Yoruba performance. CAConrad, in a sense, expounds upon this long-standing cultural tradition, and these traditions certainly inflect our understanding of a contemporary iteration of autotelic ritual.

⁷ These only begin to account the myriad manifestations of occult, spiritual, and literary-experimental traditions in Reines and CAConrad's work.

constant digitizing of literary experience; and the ways occultism is formally embodied by the poetics of Reines and CAConrad. As CAConrad's *While Standing in Line for Death* was published in late 2017 and Reines's *A Sand Book* was published in June 2019, this thesis would be among the first works of (somewhat) substantial scholarship on CAConrad and Reines's work, and would further work to correct a dearth of scholarship on occult postmodernism.

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