

Waterlings Among Us: Poetry, Intractability, and the Possibilities of Democratic Politics

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*When the Slovenian poet Veno Taufer endeavors in his ekphrastic book of poetry *Vodenjaki* (1986; *Waterlings*, 2000) to explore the work of Neolithic sculptors along the Danube River in Lepenski Vir, he excavates and animates for his readership the crucial figure of the Waterling. Carved artfully from stone some 9,000 years ago, these statues, termed “Waterlings” by Taufer, represent hybrid humanoid figures. This hybridity is fundamentally important to the statues because it imbues them with their aesthetic vitality. That is, their affective energy as made material objects derives from the tension between the distinct figurative forms combining to comprise each statue. More deeply, that carefully crafted hybridity also signals the makers’ understanding of the importance of art to mind. These physical renderings of hybridity inspire metaphysical reflection on it. They compel the audience to consider the limits of form(s) and the power of artifice, with each statue encouraging its viewer to reckon how she, too, is a hybrid creature in and of a hybrid world. In other words, the Waterling becomes a metonym for a phenomenology, which this article explores.*

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When the Slovenian poet Veno Taufer endeavors in his ekphrastic book of poetry *Vodenjaki* (1986; *Waterlings*, 2000) to explore the work of Neolithic sculptors along the Danube River in Lepenski Vir, he excavates and animates for his readership the crucial figure of the Waterling. Carved artfully from stone some 9,000 years ago,¹ these statues, termed “Waterlings” by Taufer, represent hybrid humanoid figures. More precisely, they appear to most people, including the editor of *Waterlings*, to be half-human and half-fish (ix), and that seems to be an accurate enough description in most instances, especially as these

¹ The editor of *Waterlings* cites these sculptures as 8,000 years old, but archaeologists now suggest the site to date to 9,000 BCE.

figures were discovered in the ruins of a riparian settlement. However, they also strike me at times as more of an admixture of humanoid and insectile features, reminding me, for example, of the Ancient Egyptians' scarab-people venerating Ra and the transformative power of the sun. It seems equally plausible, too, that these Waterlings might comprise a more fantastical fusion: of humanoid features with those of mythical creatures lost in time with the erosion of the culture of their creation. Regardless, or perhaps as such observations attest, what interests me most in the Waterlings is their formal hybridity.

This hybridity is fundamentally important to the statues because it imbues them with their aesthetic vitality. That is, their affective energy as made material objects derives from the tension between the distinct figurative forms combining to comprise each statue. More deeply, that carefully crafted hybridity also signals the makers' understanding of the importance of art to mind. These physical renderings of hybridity inspire metaphysical reflection on it. They compel the audience to consider the limits of form(s) and the power of artifice, with each statue encouraging its viewer to reckon how she, too, is a hybrid creature in and of a hybrid world. In other words, the Waterling becomes a metonym for a phenomenology. Each of these stone statues in all of its difference suggests how individuated creatures come into presence paradoxically through hybridity, and how existence writ large across the universe pivots upon this phenomenology of permanent transformation. Such is the power of the trope of the Waterling. He figuratively signals this struggle both to live and to witness the continuous transformation of forms. As such he reveals hybridity to be constitutive. It *comprises* him. He exists *between* forms.

To theorize this more fully, we might situate the figure of the Waterling within philosophical discourses on immanence and being. I am thinking here of the Waterling in relation to trajectories of phenomenological thought including Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and others. For example, along those lines, we might think the Waterling through the "transcendental empiricism" of the phenomenology of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who explores "something wild and powerful" in immanence, involving "the passage from one [sensation or form of presence] to the other as *becoming*" (25, emphasis added). In our case, that "becoming" is the wild and powerful emergence of the Waterling through and as hybridity. Accordingly, he is rendered figuratively in the statuary via the tension between forms. He is a figurative allusion to becoming, with his hybridity reifying the passage from one form to another.

Of further note, these statues are ovoid in shape, with the top third comprising the humanoid head of the creature, and the bottom two-thirds being the more piscine body. Thusly the creature becomes, with his human head and face seemingly emerging from his more animal trunk. As aforementioned, all of this is inscribed in the overall ovoid shape of the statue as a whole, lending it an egg-like form that accentuates the sense of the hybrid figure as radiating emergence, birth, and life as transformation. And a similar formal tension drives the poetry in *Waterlings*, wherein literary evocations of worlds of hybridity and becoming operate on multiple levels and in myriad figurations. These range from the formal hybridity intrinsic to the ekphrastic conceit of this book *in toto*, to its serialized meditations on the becoming of the Waterling's consciousness through hybridity as accreted in individual lyrical poems, which themselves can be read independently or in innumerable intertextual combinations and configurations, including in their given, enumerated order.

As in the statuary, the poetry² of the Waterling renders becoming without entrapping or enclosing immanence. The Waterling is always already between forms. Taufer brings him to presence via the paradoxical phenomenology of permanent transformation and hybridity. To build again upon Deleuze's work, we could argue, then, that the poetics of the Waterling "goes beyond the aporias of the subject and the object" (27), explicating instead how "[a]bsolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, *to* something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject" (26). Rather, the becoming of the Waterling demonstrates how "substance and modes are *in* immanence" (26, emphasis added). The Waterling is a spontaneous reification of it, and what he communicates is the irruptive force and irrepressible mobility of this transformative energy.

More specifically, each statue signals becoming. This emerges from its portrayal of being in transition between forms, which are in constant motion and fusion. A good example of this comes in the poem "6," which follows in its entirety.

the water has borne away
my mother and my father

² Whenever examined through close reading, the poetry under consideration in this article is henceforth the English-language translation by Milne Holton and Venó Taufer of Taufer's original poetry. At this point in time, Michelson can only dream of having enough Slovenian to read and analyze the original poetry. He also wishes to apologize to the Slovenian readership, including Taufer, for his ignorance of the language.

we have left our children
drifting downstream

we have flooded our love
with water

the sky drinks up
all our fires

water turns the pages
of our books

all our hopes
are washed away

we await the flood.
come, water,
flow up to our throats
(95)

Here we might coin a clarifying analogy from the poem: Waterlings are in water as substance is in immanence. Moreover, that incarnation of immanence hinges upon its transience. Presence is constituted of impermanence. In this poem, the Waterling's parents have returned from individuated life to immanence, his children have been swept off by it, and he himself is left longing eschatologically to be inundated to dissolution by it. Such is his ontological anguish in being. Such is the ardor of becoming.

Moreover, the emotional timbre matches its ekphrastic referent. That is, the tone of this apostrophic poem parallels the tone of the statuary, where the humanoid faces tend to appear strained and pained while looking skyward in beseeching, terrified silence, their mouths carved as gaping frowns and their eyes wide with dread. Theirs is the anguished astonishment at all that they feel and witness, which is the agonizing phenomenology of constant transformation. They are both witnesses and *loci* of continuous becoming. Hence the importance of the metaphor of water in the poem. In the simplest terms, that water evokes connotations of flow, connection, and change. It is time and transformation, and it conducts life in the poem. Life exists in it. In more philosophical terms, we could understand the water as metaphorizing "life as the immanence of immanence ... no longer dependent on a Being or submitted to an Act ... [but] an absolute immediate consciousness whose very activity no longer refers to a being but is

ceaselessly posed in a life” (27). It is the kinetic energy of the Waterling. It is the conduit of his becoming.

Importantly, too, we cannot help but note the natural register of this metaphor of water as the signifier of the immanence of being. It thusly emphasizes the organic materiality of presence. This links the poem, and the poetry in *Waterlings* in general, to a longstanding genealogy of masterful poetry voicing similar existential epiphanies across millennia through natural metaphors for becoming. For example, Homer writes in *The Iliad*:

As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity.
The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber
burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning.
So one generation of men will grow while another
dies.
(6.146–150)

Similarly, the nineteenth-century US poet Walt Whitman writes in an ecological register in “Song of Myself,” which is a kind of secular *Genesis or lay creation story, or meditation on (re)emergence and mortality*, that “I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass. // My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air” (5–6). And so, too, does the Waterling lean and loafe, noting that “through our mouths / grass pushes its tongues” (11).

This pointed emphasis on the tongue also reminds us that the Waterling, in both statuary and poetry, emerges from the material conditions of its articulation. As statue he has emerged from raw stone, signaling not only the material conditions of his emergence, with rock becoming art via the artist’s hand, but also the metaphoricality of form, with the Waterling being a hybrid creature. Thus the final statue, which itself transforms, whether weathered by time or handling, carries aspects of its maker, too. It conveys his visions of transformative performance, whether in transforming rock into art, or in rendering a humanoid figuration of embodied hybridity. Consequently, we might note how each statue represents a combination of artifice, material, and mind; it blends the maker’s craft with his stone and vision. Hence the final, hybrid figure comprises a fusion of not only taxonomical traits of humans and fish, but also subjective aspects of the artist in time, who comes to exist in and through the stone, too, and in relation to those twining and transforming special taxonomies, which he simultaneously reinscribes and challenges, inhering to and enduring with and through his art.

Through a similar logic the Waterling can symbolize a poetics. Like the sculptor, the poet is a maker who invokes the tropes of his artistic genre to reckon and influence our understanding of the continuously transforming world through his medium and mind. And like the Waterling, the poet gestures paradoxically towards muteness in so far as he struggles to speak because he aspires to articulate that which exceeds or escapes him. This is in fact Taufer's stated aim with *Waterlings*. As he explains in the introduction to the book, upon "[s]eeing these creatures [on exhibit in Ljubljana], I wanted to give their mute cry a voice" (ix). In other words, his poetic project is fundamentally impossible. He aims to animate ancient statuary from a vanished cultural context. How is Taufer to know the cause of the Waterling's cry, and how to give voice to it in all of his linguistic, cultural, and temporal distance from the statues' makers? Moreover, the Waterling statues are pointedly mute. By what paradoxical mode is a poet to evoke a language of silence? Such is Taufer's challenge as a poet, and it grounds the poetics of *Waterlings* in the impossible drive to enunciate silent and silenced speech.

In other words, Taufer's poetics is a striving to give voice to muteness. His book is a serialized disquisition on how to articulate the silent gape, and to testify not as but in place of the witness. He is between forms. His is reaching for a mode of representing the phenomenology of being of and in immanence. Furthermore, as evident in the exquisite poetry throughout the book, Taufer is well aware of the impossibility of his undertaking, and yet he persists in it, pushing himself beyond the philosophically plausible. In other words, this is an argument for the importance of poetry, particularly in so far as it can exceed philosophy. And this excess is born of hybridity. In short, it is not the analytical lucidity but the awestruck gaping at the instability of any analytic. It is in the human but not of his humanity.

Interestingly, here an antihuman insight into poetry from the contemporary English literary scholar Peter Dayan might help to clarify our newly configured understanding of this poetics of the Waterling. Dayan writes that "[p]oetry ... only comes into existence when humans forget to think in an exclusively human way, when they allow their voices and their ears also to be animal, to listen to the animal, to that which is not distinctively human; in a word, to forget to be philosophical" (2). And the poetry of the Waterling in all of his hybridity encourages precisely this. It exhorts us to exist beyond the philosophical via a reconnection with variegated animality. We are more than isolate, individuated humans, the poem tells us; we are hybrid creatures that transcend strict zoological taxonomization. We thereby can no longer abide

anthropocentric essentialisms, be they physical, temporal, cultural, or otherwise. And this is the political promise of the Waterling. He signals an opening to difference and change, which becomes a pathway to a fuller democracy to come, one born of change through commingling. As such the Waterling paradoxically embodies a plural singularity, or each is a singular plurality. Each statue materializes the existential vitality of the phenomenological, interpellating force of the intertwined, the community of communities. And this dilates time. The Waterling is forever becoming from, through, and in the immanence of being.

Moreover, he is mobile, both as trope and object. That is, paradoxically, this statue lost to time has resurged and is on the move. He is in flight in continuous transformation. He was not only rescued by archaeologists from his interment in Lepenski Vir, but also freed from stone by his sculptor, and by Taufer in lyrical poetry. Furthermore, thanks to Milne Holton's English-language translations, Anglophone readers can now discern the Waterling in verse transculturally, transhistorically, and translingually. And once apprehended through Taufer's poetry, that trope of the Waterling is indelible in the reader's mind, influencing her future readings in deeply meaningful ways.

For example, after reading Taufer we might recognize the Waterling in the poetry of Claudia Rankine. Of note, Rankine herself embodies a transformative poetics of mobilized hybridity. Born in Jamaica in 1963, she was educated in the United States, where she currently teaches poetry as a university professor, and she writes innovatively about the artifice of race. With exquisite control and creativity, she pays particular attention to the tensions between individuated and collective forms of being, tracing the fault lines between the ontological and the sociopolitical, which is to say their mutually constitutive imbrication. Her poetry is nothing if not an intensively anti-essentialist exploration of the violences conspiring to create and perpetuate the artifice of race. Here, then we might see a link to the poetics of the Waterling. She undoes specious essentialisms about race and gender, preferring instead to reposition the alien, the other, the abjected as consubstantial of presence, and not as a simple binary. Rather, she is unmasking plurality via a meditation on the multifocal plurality of immanence in being. And it is supra-philosophical, to recuperate Dayan's schematic.

Furthermore, via her poetic enunciations of hybridity (of thought, of language, of poetic form, of the self), she promulgates a radical politics of belonging and inclusivity. That politics demands a reformulated ontological and sociopolitical landscape privileging continuous motion, integration, and transformation, maintaining difference not

to excoriate, oppress, and exploit it, but rather to acknowledge and celebrate the complexity and beauty of emergence, however agonistic. In this manner she is poetically forging or sculpting new possibilities for being, both in one's self and in common with others. Such is the radical democratic possibility of her verse, and a good example of it can be teased from the following excerpt from her book *Citizen: An American Lyric*.

I they he she we you turn
only to discover
the encounter

to be alien to this place.

Wait.

The patience is in the living. Time opens out to you.

The opening, between you and you, occupied,
zoned for an encounter,

given the histories of you and you—

And always, who is this you?

The start of you, each day,
a presence already—

Hey you—

Slipping down burying the you buried within. You are
everywhere and you are nowhere in the day.
(140–141)

With its pronoun play, that first line alone launches a complex remembrance of how we come to be. And just as grounds are given to the reader, they are taken away. Rankine destabilizes precisely by meting out the artifice of poetry: she lays down line after line to form a structure that in all of its clarity and structure undoes any sort of easy apprehension of being. Rather, “you” are guided to new forms of mobility and exposure, to an opening outward to possibility. “You” are conducted by the diaphanous infrastructure of the poem toward a

multidirectional examination of temporality itself, which is the conduit of immanence. “You” slip both forward and backward along a temporal spectrum, given histories and encouraged to interrogate such temporal presuppositions as the “always” and the “start” of you, realizing through the poem the plurality of that pronominal singularity. You are a hybrid amalgamation of *yous*. “You” emerge from immanence “not in something, *to* something; [you] does not depend on an object or belong to a subject.”

With a similar focus, Taufer, too, reflects on this hybridity of being by exploring the precarity of an individuated human life. However, his qualifiers for marking the hybridity of becoming are distinct to Rankine’s. Where she unveils the violence of racialized taxonomies of being as a means of exposing the abridgement of subjectivity by subjectivation, Taufer examines the ephemerality of presence through an *ars poetica* on the impossibility of speech:

rising
 coming
 gaping
 or singing
 no voice no voice
 but all around us
 breathing
 breathing us in
 catching us overtaking us
 it breathes
 blazing cold
 smoke of the wind
 the tongue’s vapor
 (17)

Here the trope of repetition is especially important. It is instantiated not only in the repeated participles, but also the anaphora, as well as the variations, often pivoting on the collective personal pronoun “us.” In effect, all of this repetition importantly structures a narrative logic in this wisp of a lyrical poem, and it enacts that experience affectively for the reader. That is, through the participles, the poem conjures and conducts not only actions, but also a poetic rhythm that moves its reader through an existential meditation in protracted time. This is largely controlled by the trochaic monometer of the first three lines, which initiate a pattern of engaging the reader, of convoking his presence, from the first phoneme of each line. In other words, via its trochaic

form, each of those initial three lines begins with a stressed syllable, and with the monometer of each of those lines, the poem establishes its swift pace. Hence these crafty lines immediately invoke presence—the line’s, the speaker’s, the reader’s—only to dissolve it quickly, and this recurs across the quick, unpunctuated poem as the reader moves through it before returning to the silence of white space. This is the phenomenological metaphor of the poetic form. It is its “meter-making argument” (263), to develop an idea from the nineteenth-century transcendentalist US poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. But unlike Emerson’s philosophy, this poem is not transcendental, and here again repetition plays a crucial role.

More specifically, the only two lines of the poem containing multiple phrases are the fifth and ninth lines, which are “no voice no voice” and “catching us overtaking us,” respectively. To build upon Deleuze’s aforementioned logic, there is “no voice” because immanence is “a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness” (25); presence is in immanence, not of it. And immanence is always already “catching us overtaking us” because it “offers the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come and already happened, in the absolute of an immediate consciousness” (29). In poetic terms, it is the plane of white space in which the letters become, announcing participial eruptions of being that each trail away, dissolving to a-subjective silence. Such is the ontology of the grammar of the poem, and it interweaves with its meter-making argument. Both underscore the narrative of a voiceless voice that is “smoke of the wind” and “the tongue’s vapor.” The grammar, metrics, and narrative combine to audibilize the voiceless voice. They combine to structure the mouth of the immanence that breathes us in, catches us, and overtakes us all, our eyes wide as the grass pushes up through our gaping mouths, singing our transformation.

Of further note, that smoke and vapor of the poem symbolize material transformation, too. They conduct the song of being as sung by the Waterling statues and by Taufer’s ekphrastic project of transforming them into poetry. In both cases, the art embodies the hybridity it strives to reckon. In this manner, the poetry and the statuary alike undo the false binary of Cartesian dualism, consequently impugning its transcendental implications. In other words, the Waterling’s poetics of immanence configures via hybridity a paradoxical presence of form without form. The Waterling, whether in stone or poem, is the aforementioned in-between. He is the forever becoming. He is the generatively liminal, and he traces the “pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness” (25) of a Deleuzian transcendental empiricism. Or as Taufer writes:

where am i everywhere
 where am i a fiend
 where am i a god
 where am i a bird
 where am i a mouse
 where am i a fish
 where am i a stick
 where am i a hill
 where a flower-ball
 i am over under
 i am a hole
 i am here
 i am there
 i am over here
 and over there
 dancing everywhere
 where am i, song
 (57)

Following the logic of the poem, we are here and there, god and fish; we are song and dancing, and the singing dance is everywhere. We erupt in poetry just as we erupt in statuary, and this is the intractability of the creative force of the Waterling, who exists in the in-between. He is inextricable from the human, just as he is inextricable from the fish. He also is neither. He is over here and over there. His life is the immanence of immanence.

Thankfully, too, all of this can come to us through poetry. It is not philosophy but art that makes it present and appreciable, meaning we are reading Deleuze beyond Deleuze here. For example, we are reading the Waterling's phenomenology beyond philosophy in the famous rhetorical question from the Irish Nobel laureate William Butler Yeats, who asks, "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (217). In US letters, we can now read the Waterling at play in the famous lines of the canonical Chicana feminist poet Gloria Anzaldúa on life along the US-Mexico border, where she writes "To survive the Borderlands / you must live *sin fronteras*³ / be a crossroads" (195); we can read the Waterling in Aracelis Grimay's tender, existential intimation of our concomitant interdependence and ephemerality in life on Earth such that "This is the only kingdom. / The kingdom of touching; / the touches of the disappearing, things" (17); and we can read the Waterling in Gwendolyn Brooks's depic-

³ The words "sin fronteras" are in Spanish, and they mean "without borders."

tion of the potential of collaborative work to create unexpected beauty as when “monstrous hand on monstrous hand, construct, strangely, a monstrous pearl or grace” (448), to offer but a few brief examples. And we are of course also always already reading Deleuze beyond Deleuze in *Waterlings*, from which this mobile trope first emerges to affect us all forever after thanks to Taufer’s artful conjuring.

That is, through his majestic collection, we have realized a way to reckon how we read and live, and each in ourselves and in common with others in sentience. Perhaps more importantly still, such poetry offers a paradoxical understanding that understanding exceeds us; it is supra-philosophical. We can know by feeling, but such feeling leaves us awestruck, with our mouths gaping, voiceless and astonished. We are *Waterlings*. We think through affect worlds, which are implicitly more powerful than rationality. And they are the realm of the poet. They are accordingly the realm of her many, interwoven readers, too, who together combine and recombine into new configurations of being in common, thereby forever practicing a democracy-to-come whose freedoms inhere to its striving impossibly towards immanence. Such is the magnitude of Taufer’s work.

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Vodenjaki med nami: poezija, neobvladljivost in možnosti demokratične politike

Ključne besede: slovenska poezija / Taufer, Veno / hibridnost / imanenca / fenomenologija

Ko slovenski pesnik Veno Taufer v svoji ekfrastični pesniški zbirki *Vodenjaki* (1986; *Waterlings*, 2000) raziskuje dela neolitskih kiparjev v Lepenskem Viru ob reki Donavi, za svoje bralstvo izkoplje in animira ključno figuro Vodenjaka. Ti umetniško izklesani kipi, ki jih je Taufer poimenoval »Vodenjaki«, predstavljajo hibridne humanoidne figure. Hibridnost je za kipe bistvena, saj jih prežame z estetsko vitalnostjo. To pomeni, da afektivna energija kipov kot ustvarjenih materialnih predmetov izhaja iz napetosti med različnimi figurativnimi oblikami, ki sestavljajo vsak kip. Še več, skrbno izdelana hibridnost prav tako nakazuje ustvarjalčevo razumevanje pomena umetnosti za um. Te fizične upodobitve hibridnosti navdihujejo metafizično razmišljanje o njej. Občinstvo prisilijo, naj razmisli o mejah oblik(e) in moči umetnosti, saj vsak kip spodbudi svojo gledalko, naj premisli, kako je tudi ona hibridno bitje v hibridnem svetu. Z drugimi besedami, Vodenjak postane metonimija za fenomenologijo, ki jo raziskuje ta članek.

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