

**Larry Price**

**AGGRESSIVELY PRIVATE:  
CONTINGENCY AS EXPLANATION**

In normative writing practice, intention, although mediated by the material process of production, ideally functions like a radioactive isotope, entering into combinations within the system while remaining photographically, which is to say critically, isolable. Once the production is complete, intention can suppress its mediation and assume a 'symbolic' status, its aura. Public exchange is constituted upon this symbolic base, and subjectivities are, ironically, founded upon public exchange more than anything else. Paradoxically then, 'private' texts that disrupt the public, symbolic basis of exchange threaten to rupture both subjectivity and literary aura, while reconstituting writing 'below' exchange, in its materiality as language.

Such texts, specifically here those of Peter Seaton, occupy a strategic position within a culture that structures itself as the private consumption of public meaning. For Seaton's aggressively 'private' intention is actually the sign of a negativity proffered in order to objectify me, the reader, as reactant, so that I too will negate and thus act to affirm the writer's act. Each enters the present through the other's act. The text then emblemizes a transgression, substituting for 'the writer writes' and 'the reader reads' not language as material but the sheer uncontainability of language, its ability to subsume limits. The text enlarges its scale into a viable public context in which the relation of individual to group is not that of one inscribed by the other but is, in fact, a 'material compact' in which individuals compose a sociality by transgressing the terms of the language contract outside given boundaries.

The social subject in Seaton's writing is broadly sketched, generally in negative relation to any supposed whole: "I had spies out." At the same time, there is initially little affective distance: "The spirit gets to talk." So in *Crisis Intervention* (Berkeley: Tuumba, 1983), the tension of group/individual is established in the first sentence: "The spirit gets to talk, but I had spies out," the two parts of the compound sentence hinged on a rebuttal. The individual reasserts an integrity against the totalized inscription of "spirit." Yet between the terms of this duel, the text still remains only a possibility.

Jean-Francois Lyotard says of language games:

Their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1984), 10.

But this applies to language as an illusion—of the surfeit of meaning (Olson's "Words, words, words / all over everything"). The issue Seaton's writing raises is who or what could operate as the fundamental unit of this contract. This throws open the reading, as in the first sentence of *Crisis Intervention*, defining it from neither the writer's nor the reader's perspective. But where Lyotard proposes a strategy of 'drift,' reinstating a balance of power through subsequent 'moves' in the 'game,' Seaton's method eventually goes much further, negating the possibility of a contract within the frame of writing and thus collapsing the conditions of the game.

This necessarily alters a reader's position. The poles of reader and writer are severely compressed so that my, the reader's, initial response is one of being closed out. To persist in my reading is to deny this denial. The private and finite text facing the finite and private consumer transforms both into an active negativity.

Lyotard's sense of contract proposes this solution:

Liberalism does not preclude an organization of the flow of money in which some channels are used in decision making while others are only good for the repayment of debts. One could similarly imagine flows of knowledge traveling along identical channels of identical nature, some of which would be reserved for "the decision makers," while the others would be used to repay each person's perpetual debt to the social bond.<sup>2</sup>

In order to clear the social debt that accrues from participation in the game, intention must be paid out. As a proposed public practice, this only displaces writing onto its already validated techniques of representation. But what is still in question is the specific form of public motivation, the values that inform the group rather than the techniques that reproduce it. Relative to this, Lyotard's notion of repayment is negative, the validation and reinforcement of an imposed order against which individual motives must be measured. That is, it is not the concrete token that draws the individual in and structures the collective, but the symbolic validation this token bestows as an aura, its inscription within a temporal certainty. And it is this certainty which motivates a group from one level to the next.

For example, an advertisement is not a simple argument directed at and intended to convince A that Goods G are the best goods that A 'ought' to buy. It is equally the case that the ad makes an argument to A by misdirection, arguing not to A but to the social group at large that G in A's possession bears significance. Thus A cannot, in buying G, buy directly into the social order without the social group's concurrence. The ad constructs a social dimension for G in which G is an operator, possessing the ability to enforce, symbolically, an order. A buys the operator that the ad creates via public broadcast. Against this, Lyotard proposes an 'alternative' model of dyadic conflict:

2. Ibid., 6.

Each language partner, when a “move” pertaining to him is made, undergoes a “displacement,” an alteration of some kind that not only affects him in his capacity as addressee and referent, but also as sender. These “moves” necessarily provoke “countermoves”—and everyone knows that a countermove that is merely reactionary is not a “good” move. Reactional countermoves are no more than programmed effects in the opponent’s strategy; they play into his hands and thus have no effect on the balance of power. That is why it is important to increase displacement in the game.<sup>3</sup>

This usefully describes a material practice of language. But while Lyotard insists that displacement ought to lead to new and “better” moves that reestablish power in the speaker’s favor (“knowledge makes ‘good performance’ possible”) and materially reconstitute a subject, in Seaton’s writing the horizon of the text, its ultimate intention of boundlessness, is precisely where performance and competence do not apply. If performance and competence imply a sender-addressee engaged at the level of the ‘move,’ then the interruption of that dyad through mutual denial of writer and reader blanks the ground of competence.

Further, the enforced application of social debt in the language game is dissolved.

I’ll get money to starve her in a better correspondence. She’s saving the disparity for a visit without pain and sleep all night, producing contents that cool the crust, fractures we can get from stripes, and each plausible anomaly sinks into the speed with which the speed of separation widens. (*Crisis Intervention*)

With discourse insistently blocked, what initially emerges is the private as a network of disjunct particulars in language, an atomized and incommensurate equivalent to “the words are my life.” But, having severely problematized local operations, Seaton exerts maximum pressure upon the reader to realize a virtual whole—a public text operating at the boundaries of social relations, reaffirming its material practice. In this sense of reading Seaton’s text, the individual writer’s drive into use value is compressed by the writing’s negations, and *Crisis Intervention* is specifically the narrative of the return of language’s repressed material base.

As such, Seaton’s texts challenge not representation as an act but, by being act, the representations we have of things. The text’s negativity forces each representation to account for the system of values by which it holds itself in experience. Seaton’s discomfort centers on the ‘total social fact.’ “Give me money” stands as the repetitive token of this resistance to the public in this definition. And against the singleness of ‘total social fact,’ Seaton’s work continually breaks open, establishing a value for the plural character of language and of time as we get it in *The Son Master* (New York: Roof, 1982).

For Lévi-Strauss, a contract defends the collectivity against the indi-

3. *Ibid.*, 15.

vidual's actual or feared withdrawal and isolation, so that, this thinking runs, by making a text or any mediating device the focus of a contract, collectivity is ensured. But even aside from the vulnerability to manipulation within a symbolic system (as with the soft sell above, in which the individual is cynically vaunted in order to mask the extent to which he or she is actually denied), it is more pointedly the limits of that symbolic system which are at issue. From within the game, the whole is given only in the contract. The private remains in conflict, in Lévi-Strauss's words, continually "denied a world in which one might keep to oneself."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the negativity of Seaton's text both affirms and disrupts the collectivity. By incorporating negation into the text, Seaton affirms the contract as an object and limit to be overcome; the objectified 'I' as a device ("I had spies out") conflicts with the contract whereby it is a device ("The spirit gets to talk").

However, this alteration of the public frame does, at least, free the private from its burden of lyrical subjectivity, and intention, in its point-by-point advance in Seaton's work, becomes textual rather than authorial. The poles of 'authentic self' and 'public persona' are eliminated by refusing to accept either version of subjectivity. The strategy is twofold: Seaton refuses to project an 'I' other than as a device ("I had spies out"), and then textually replaces subjectivity with the structures of reader and writer in conflict. The interruption of a public discourse actually multiplies its structures, with the reader initially in the privileged position as final mediator of them. Faced with being subordinated to the reader, Seaton is compelled to critique the structures of his text within the text itself. This is tantamount to an internalization of the 'reader structure.' Completing the reversal, the independence of the "spirit" now becomes equivalent to the private domain of the text, and the private consumption of the text by the reader threatens to reintroduce it into the public domain.

Meaning, now taking the form of an internal structure, must then be reproduced by the author in order to guard against its production by the reader. Meaning is displaced onto a temporary metastructure at the edge of its contract with the reader and is propelled past the reader toward the limit of the meaningful. The reader is instrumentalized within a communicative scenario, constructed only to be resisted, and this reciprocal differentiation and resistance cancels out any lexical effect. The text continually resides near and about 'zero,' where zero is *not* the index of an autonomy. Neither representation nor the free play of signifiers is at issue. Instead, 'zero' stands for the mutual dependence of writer and reader. In response to the writer's negativity, the reader must give back negativity or risk subordination (and isolation) in the language act.

The paradox is that isolation is collective, publicly and collectively imposed in the structure of this debt. Insofar as the individual's language is

4. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (London, 1969), 497.

already given in its exchange value, its exchange no longer threatens individual limits. Against this, Seaton's negativity must be read as a murder, in which the writer risks meaninglessness in order to rupture the isolation of the individual.

This 'risk of meaninglessness' actually takes the form of a progressive displacement of meaning from the local structures outward to the horizon of the text. Each paragraph in *Crisis Intervention* begins with a contractual gesture, an 'ante of production.' Yet each proves bogus, and its cash value is eclipsed in the negation it instigates. The result is that the reader must progressively displace concentration and generalize response, displacing effects further along the reading axis, and meaning onto increasingly inclusive structures.<sup>5</sup> Seaton's demolition tactic at the local level empowers an hysterical distribution principle. The reading mind, conditioned by its contractual obligations within a public domain—in this case, art—and having lost its temporal grip, now has only excess, which it condemns as waste and attempts to recycle through its categorical machinery. But with the middle terms emphatically missing, the only one left to motivate the text is the whole. What becomes evident is that the whole the text proposes is not a consistent one. Its unity is not discursive, although any reading of the present may attempt to account for every preceding reading, or at least subsume them to it:

$$n_0 + n_1 + n_2 + n_3 \dots$$

This is disorienting for a reader in the same way that rapid film shots of a telephone booth from the periphery of a 360° plane give the narrative of the booth's placement as (but do not resolve until) the final shot or freeze, against which all the preceding frames are read. Likewise, Seaton's language narrates, through negation and displacement, its irreducible exteriority to a reader. A reader is compelled to read this writing as a refusal to explain from anywhere except within contingency. The world and the present are accessed in its negations and displacement, forcing a quasi-denotative materiality of the whole text at its horizon. There the text signifies against the social chain. Seaton's privatized disruption of public language within the text ends by projecting a public form at the limits of it. Although meaning has been displaced within the text, its negations return it all the more forcefully as the fully enfranchised material site for the production of new meaning.

What had been at stake in the initial, mutual resistance of reader and writer was the degree of determinacy. Politics' similar dilemma: the state must determine and be determined simultaneously. Thus, a counterexample to *The Son Master* would be Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Snow

5. Ron Silliman, "Migratory Meaning: The Parsimony Principle in the Poem," *Poetics Journal* 2 (1982): 27–41.

falls. In any given production the mechanism is obvious. A handle is turned, and white flakes (paper? foam?) fall onto the heads of Grusha and the child. The inarticulate mass of nature is inverted and made public domain. Mechanical abstraction operates as a rite of cognition, paralleling the commune council. A spectator can conduct the scene from the perspective of what is missing. But in Seaton everything is missing; language functions as an infinite interval. The text condenses with tremendous acceleration and erotic intensity onto the single pole of the private, forcing the reader into resistance within the social present. So rather than seizing the means of production whereby his devices enter the historical fray, Seaton gestures toward the margin in order to determine himself the scale on which the present will be met. By moving to a scale of the whole, the 'game' is made obsolete; the text appears as a private language. Gesturally, it is. But reading and writing, through mutual resistance and the consequent rupture of isolation, project themselves out of private limits. It is this intersubjective desire of mutually motivated individuals outside the social debt that becomes the viable ground for a new public language.

In instigating this, Seaton opposes the "monologue of power" with the monologue of matter:

I then got stubborn for a statue. And the book quickly fit and the book that has stayed came back at night. I've written in English to get it out as a book and its relation to words I ever read. I write near the open window with words, because a word or crowd, and verb in an excerpt from sexual assault, stronger than more power and rich power because of specifics to predict what caught up with the reader. Magnifying physical reasons, he has to be awake to inhabit the mask of a refugee and something written into the rest. I kept everything one by one, one's step to be created steps to shore from every rock like a new place for a geometry upon it and flowers to let in some light. (*Crisis Intervention*)

The text is insistently 'what it is.'

Or in and on were in meaning when its and the it its and through of and and to its the and in a in the within the it's it's it of the and in it a at and is and in the and how how in is its into a of a on who is as to as of and is to of the to a and on of we've been on someone else of its or of using or to and and and in of the of the and and in... ("How to Read III," *Qu* 3 [1980])

Paraphrasing Wolfgang Iser, one could say that meaning arises out of the demand, which the text itself cannot fulfill, for the production of meaning.

Meaning and significance are not the same thing. . . . As Ricoeur has written . . . , "There are two distinct stages of comprehension: the stage of 'meaning' . . . and the stage of 'significance,' which represents the active taking-over of the meaning by the reader—i.e., the meaning taking effect in existence."<sup>6</sup>

Seaton's method is to resist resolution in order to force a showdown whose stakes are the limits of writing as a "take" on existence. As Barthes says,

6. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore, 1978), 150.

Hebert never began a number of *Le Père Duchêne* without putting in some *fucks* and *damns*. These obscenities had no meaning but they had significance. How? They signified a whole revolutionary situation. Here is an example of a mode of writing whose function is no longer only communication or expression but the imposition of something beyond language, which is both history and the stand we take in it.<sup>7</sup>

The public is transformed from a network of repetition (the Sign irrupting into general exchange and consumption)<sup>8</sup> into a public of mutually motivated individuals, whose relations *are* the materials of production. Use value, having been emptied, by the social debt, into exchange value, is reconstituted by throwing exchange value into a context (*The Son Master, Crisis Intervention*) that, in its local forms, makes transaction possible. What remains is the material base of language as an infinite potential for the social production of new use value in the present.

7. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York, 1968), 1.

8. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, 1985), 89