

## ANTAGONISM AND SUBJECTIFICATION IN THE POEM OF RESISTANCE

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**ABSTRACT:** This article offers a pragmatic and relational analysis of the controversial heuristic of cultural resistance and presents some of the problems that affect the production and distribution of the poetic discourses of resistance and emancipation. To that end, it focuses on the incorporation of the historicity and the historic contingency of conflict as key elements of the subjectification constituted by the poem of resistance as “poem for the political”. It also explores the applicability of certain notions common to the contemporary critical tradition, as developed by scholars such as Badiou, Mouffe, Rancière, Bal and Žižek.

**KEYWORDS:** Disagreement; Equality; Hegemony; Heteronomy; Poetry; Rancière; Resistance; Subjectification

The purpose of this article is to consider the production and reception of the poetic discourses of resistance in the light of a relational—and not universal—theory of the historical subject. The relational thought system, in its various orientations (Cassirer, Elias, Bourdieu, Even-Zohar, Calhoun, Bourriaud...), could be a suitable base from which to overcome blocks such as those caused by polarizations of the dominion-subalternity or power-resistance variety—this last being very persistent in the sociological debate to highlight the dependence on the nuclei of power and of their discourses that exists in every position of political-cultural resistance.<sup>1</sup>

### HEURISTICS OF CULTURAL RESISTANCE

Observing the practices and discourses of resistance with a relational mindset should help us further three tasks which are decisive at this point in time: 1) rethinking the connections between art and politics in the light of different disciplines and perspectives; 2) signalling the processes of ideological inversion in the critical tradition, which are

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1. This paper is linked with the research project *Non-Lyric Discourse in Contemporary Poetry: Spaces, Subjects, Enunciative Hybridity, Mediality*, which is funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Spanish Government (FFI2009-12746).

often integrated into the spectacularization and trivialization of public life as simulacra of resistance and above all as objects of consumption; and 3) differentiating between sociocultural performative effects and the immediate political efficacy of public intervention. The latter is with a view to overcoming, first of all, possible interventionist or propagandistic ways of thinking and their possible didactic-ideological concentration into a supposedly revealed referent: the world as a whole or one of its manifestations. But it also has the aim of better measuring phenomena that are difficult to contrast empirically (awareness-raising, complicity, indifference, or discursive mimetization, among others), to which I will hardly be able to allude here, despite their proven incidence in important dimensions of the social and cultural functioning of the poetics of resistance. As an example, take that of the not infrequent functional fusion between actors and spectators in the cultural practices of resistance and emancipation: the suspension of the exteriority of the spectator, analyzed so distinctly by Guy Debord and Jacques Rancière in books like *La société du spectacle* (1967) and *Le spectateur émancipé* (2008).

The objective, thus, is to gain a deeper pragmatic and not just semantic understanding of what we, based on Mieke Bal's reading of Chantal Mouffe's political analyses,<sup>2</sup> will call *art for the political*, and not political art. Therefore, our immediate attention will be on 'poetry for the political.' Below, we will outline the value of using this expression. Here I would like to simply offer a brief gloss on the phrase that we—like Bal—will not use. It is certain that 'political art' could be restored as a functional label only on the condition that we would be able to forget some of the notes that accompany it. I speak of notes and not of facts because I do not aim to document historical abuses of what was desired to be meant by the expression in question by powers or counterpowers, whose goal was often to accuse their counterparts of tendentiousness, manipulation, propaganda and proselytism. I aim rather to avoid some superfluous attachments that do not help and that in fact hinder a useful exploration of what I attempt to signify. First, the tendency to limit this category of production by applying as sole parameter its referent or theme (in rhetorical terms, its topic); second, the tendency to focus simply on some illocutive or intentional restriction. While these remain, it will be excessively difficult to describe something that is much more complex than these branches allow us to intimate. Situating ourselves within the old rhetorical episteme, we could say that the poetics of resistance and the "political poem" depend for their functionality and discursive success more on their enunciative adequacy and on the linked rhetorical *actio* than on their choice of subject and content.

The theoretical-critical distrust that a term with as many connotations as *resistance* has provoked in the last twenty years, particularly in the developed world and in prosperous societies, has something to do with the aforementioned three tasks and with the semantic erosion reviewed earlier. It is certain that it also comes from some previous theories developed by Lacan and Foucault related to resistance as immanent to power, to the ubiquity of the latter and, above all, to the impossibility of a social existence of the subject (resistant or not) at the margin of the socio-symbolic structure in which the very

2. Mieke Bal, "Arte para lo político", *Estudios Visuales*, no. 7, *Retóricas de la resistencia*, 2010, pp. 39-65.

subject acts (attempting or not to subvert it) and which certainly conditions its entire intervention. As Žižek recalls in his critical reading of Butler, ‘what Lacan calls “the big Other” are symbolic norms *and* their codified transgressions.’<sup>3</sup> This warns us against any ingenuous or maximalist attempt on the real entity of resistance. And it will help us to properly understand the social and political functionality of art, as well as its field of relations with what is considered contingent and what is considered universal.

Neither art nor poetry is equipped to replace, on its own, any previous order, any state of affairs, any metanarrative. Nonetheless, they are able to contribute to disengaging and subverting them. As Alain Badiou has observed, they can produce truth and differentiate between it and its ideological representations (doxa); thus becoming a condition of philosophy. Cultural resistance configured as discourse would thus be affirmation before reply, and foundation of reality before mimesis of what really exists. In any case, we can add intelligence and light against the opaqueness and the homologies of power. We are thus moving toward the enunciative frame of resistance, alluded to just now when we insisted on the convenience of transcending a semantic reading of poetry that informs about the world.

The adoption of a semantic-pragmatic point of view proves that the outcome hinges on the specificity of speech situations, exactly where Rancière situates *mésentente* (disagreement),<sup>4</sup> assuring us that ‘disagreement clearly is not to do with words alone. It generally bears on the very situation in which speaking parties find themselves.’<sup>5</sup> The semantic-pragmatic perspective therefore shows the multiplicity of discourses of resistance and the subjectivities and contexts associated with its enunciation. Enunciation is time and place, is deixis and situation, is encounter and interaction, is also a body that says and does.

If power is ubiquitous and the socio-symbolic determination of the Lacanian Other is equipped to anticipate any response to power, it is clear that resistance is equally disseminated and multiple, and that its battles take place in a very open diversity of stages and practices. Many conflicts exist around the axis of domination-subalternity. For this reason, Xoán González-Millán gave priority to the study of the *experience* of resistance.<sup>6</sup> Rancière speaks in consonance with this, saying that subjectification is the production of a capacity to enunciate, not previously identifiable, in a given field of experience,<sup>7</sup> hence the fact that subjectification always implies a change, or, as Rancière says, a *disidentification* that inaugurates a new subject space, a different relation between places and the bodies that had been assigned to those places by a pre-political logic that the French scholar termed *police*. Under these conditions,

3. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 2nd ed., London, Verso, 2008, p. 314 (emphasis in original).

4. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

5. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, p. xi. Hereafter to be cited as DPP.

6. Xoán González-Millán, *Resistencia cultural e diferenza histórica: A experiencia da subalternidade*, Santiago de Compostela, Sotelo Blanco Edicións, 2000, pp. 125-75.

7. Rancière, DPP, p. 35.

it is normal that empirical analyses on a micro scale of the different forms of social resistance in concrete communities gain pre-eminence. Here there is room not only for the public records of social resistance but also for the hidden transcripts. James C. Scott examined these in a well-known book.<sup>8</sup> In his view, it is essential that rigorous socio-historical research expand the scope of study and cease dealing only with the public and official interactions between positions of domination and subalternity. Obviously, the discursive corpus of poems of resistance associated at least originally with hidden transcripts is immeasurably vast.

When we read the work by Žižek mentioned above, we understand that the three main warring tendencies regarding the refutation of Cartesian subjectivity have their doubles in the field of artistic production and reception. Žižek focuses on the German idealist tradition, the post-Althusserian political philosophy and the postmodern models focused on the liberation and deconstruction of identities and subjectivities. For our current goal, and leaving aside the discussion of the suitability of the critical distribution proposed by Žižek<sup>9</sup> or his own defence of the validity of the Cartesian subject, the most relevant course of action is to perceive the way in which the poetics of resistance have conjugated and sometimes combined notions of subjectivity and historicity similar to those sketched out in the thinking of Hegel and Heidegger (idealist subject and reflexivity), Laclau, Balibar, Rancière and Badiou (political subject and universality), or Butler (emerging subject and multiculturalism).

One possible proof of the validity of this scheme lies in the fact that the arguments put forth by Badiou in ‘Troisième esquisse d’un manifeste de l’affirmationnisme’,<sup>10</sup> as a development of some of the key points from his *Petit manuel d’inesthétique*, show that the poetics against which the French scholar directs his invectives are exactly those sustained in the other two *political ontologies* described by Žižek. Badiou sees these alternatives—ones not shaped by Althusser’s thinking, we might say—as simply a spectacular exposition of desires and phantasms. They are, he adds, barely relapses into a didactic and formalist Romanticism subjected to the external imperative of the Idea through two possible protocols. Respectively, through the biographical or *moiïque* (from *moi*) particularity, centred on the I, or through community particularities (ethnic, linguistic, national, gender, religious, sexual...) that Žižek had grouped together as emergent subjectivities. In the face of all this, an anti-romantic universalism, abstract and impersonal, an unlocalized art, would be the best response, declares Badiou—and the only way we will be able to definitively enter the 21st century.

But in this argumentation—with which Žižek shows some important points of convergence—what is really worth noting is that, as much as a consequence of antihumanist action as of the desired universality of the poem or of the artistic object,

8. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990.

9. Who benefited from precedents such as the publication of a book of three-way debates: Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London, Verso, 2000.

10. Alain Badiou, *Circonstances 2*, Paris, Éditeur Leo Sheer, 2004, pp. 81-105.

the only subjectivity that remains is *the work*. The subject would be only the work. The work as événement, as happening and potentiality to found the new. As Rancière puts it,<sup>11</sup> as shaper of a new topography of the possible.

Mieke Bal's position is far from similar. Nor was, starting with the publication of their important work in 1985, that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.<sup>12</sup> Despite showing dissatisfaction with the very term *resistance* and with some of the elements of the conceptual web that normally surrounds it (resentment, morality...), Bal recognizes situatedness in the community as fundamental for analyzing the socio-cultural value of the poetics/rhetorics of resistance, which, as we have mentioned above, she prefers to rename *art for the political*.<sup>13</sup> And that is not all. In parallel with what we have indicated regarding the non-public (the hidden), she reaffirms the inconvenience of understanding that privacy and resistance—or, in general, politics—are discrete domains. Nor would art and politics be, in any case whatsoever.

The historicity that interests Mieke Bal is that of cultural memory in the present of the analysis. The dialogism thus activated between subject and object of the analysis is homologous to that which exists between artistic producer and work: the past is important as a part of the present of the analyst/artist/poet who investigates and produces. Naturally, this has repercussions for the subjectivization and subjectivity that interest cultural analysis, as we can clearly see—we need go no further—in Bal's studies of artists such as Doris Salcedo,<sup>14</sup> a lucid analyst through her artistic production of the conditions of violence in Colombia, her country. What, then, would be the shape of *art for the political*? Bal underlines the insufficiency of the attitude of resistance, its inefficacy even as a socio-political disposition. She does not seem to trust, either, in what Rancière calls the repoliticization of art,<sup>15</sup> despite the conceptual proximity between the opposites used by Chantal Mouffe (politics/the political) and by the author of *Le Mécontentement* (police/politics). I believe the fundamental point is her call for a reconsideration of the role in *art for the political* played by representation and its alternatives, and also by the dialectic of singularity/universality. This route takes her toward Adorno and toward negativity, hence toward the questioning of any dialectic of identity, of all annihilating synthesis, and toward a renewed interrogation of the possibility of an aesthetic metaphor of violence and barbarism, in short, of the history of domination itself.

11. Jacques Rancière, *El espectador emancipado*, trans. Ariel Dilon, Castellón, Ellago Ediciones, 2010, p. 52 (hereafter to be cited as EE). In any case, Rancière distinguishes three dimensions or regimes in art: the aesthetic, that of representative mediation, and that of ethical immediacy (EE 62 and 69-80). Regarding this, he asks that we not confuse aesthetic efficacy with the existence of specific effects on specific publics. This is the base on which he formulates, in a productive sense, the application to the artistic sphere of the political notion of disagreement, which was developed in his earlier work, *Le Mécontentement. Politique et philosophie* (1995).

12. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed., London, Verso, 2001, pp. 114-22 (hereafter to be cited as HSS).

13. Mieke Bal, 'Arte para lo político', p. 50.

14. The cited article is taken from the manuscript of *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, which is forthcoming in 2011.

15. Rancière, EE, pp. 55-85.

## REPERTOIRES AND CONFLICT

At this point, it is appropriate to observe the plural determinations of the social field in which conflicts and agency manifest themselves, to analyze the conditions of autonomy/heteronomy of historical agents in their individual and collective dimensions. The *I* and the *we* (communitarian or not), the *I as we*, the *you/they as the other*, etc., in a field of forces determined by different perceptions of reality and by diversified, even conflicting, interests, as any social historiography reveals. These interests and perceptions interdependently shape antagonistic subjects and discourses, precursors of different worlds/referents. All of this can be seen frequently in the declarative texts from which stems a socio-cultural intervention of resistance. These manifestoes are rich in a terminology of dissidence, fissure, the emancipated voice, and at the same time condemn submission, stagnation, blindness.

It is in this antagonism that, for Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, lies the political<sup>16</sup> and it is also there that I believe we must situate our understanding of the poetics of resistance in a general sense. An insufficient and not necessarily exact interpretation of these poetics could lead us to see them as a manifestation of counter-hegemonic practices in the political-cultural dimension. As Mouffe explains,

every order is political and based on some form of exclusion. There are always other possibilities that have been repressed and that can be reactivated. The articulatory practices through which a certain order is established and the meaning of social institutions is fixed are 'hegemonic practices'. Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony.<sup>17</sup>

At first this point of view does not seem so different from the one we find in the functional analyses of cultural systems by Itamar Even-Zohar.<sup>18</sup> The analysis we find, for example, in his work 'The Making of Repertoire, Survival and Success under Heterogeneity',<sup>19</sup> in which he argues that the substitution of dominant cultural repertoires by other alternative ones tends to incite social and political change. Nonetheless, Mouffe's position, and particularly her constant appeal to political agonism as the basis of a democracy that can overcome neoliberal—or post-political—paralysis, could lead to an almost absolute pre-eminence of focus on the individuals and groups involved. She certainly supports her arguments with intervention programs and with the institutional, but I would say that she has an excessive tendency to anthropomorphize positions and conflicts, or at least to centralize on individuals the struggles that take place in the public sphere.

In that sense, we could say that her adversarial model moves away somewhat from the categorical notion of the subject postulated by her and Ernesto Laclau in their 1985

16. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *HSS*, pp. 93-148.

17. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political: Thinking in Action*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 18.

18. Itamar Even-Zohar, *Papers in Culture Research*, Tel Aviv, University of Tel Aviv, 2010.

19. Even-Zohar, *Papers in Culture Research*, pp. 175-84.

book.<sup>20</sup> And something similar occurs when Rancière situates equality and dissent as defining axes of politics opposite the simple *police* and argues that something becomes political only when there is an encounter between police logic and equalitarian logic.<sup>21</sup> In any case, in Rancière, we are talking about something more than isegoria, or equal right to public statement for manifesting disagreement. He centres his analysis, as we have seen, on the change effected by this public statement when it is the fruit of a collective action. He focuses in particular on the consequences of this intervention *of equals*. The important thing here is to understand that in the poetics of resistance, there is usually provision made for the collective, egalitarian act that modifies a given subjectification and creates the conditions for altering a previously constituted socio-cultural field of experience.<sup>22</sup> I will return to this in more detail at the end of this article.

In fact, Rancière frequently bases his arguments on a parallelism between political enunciation as collective enunciation and literary enunciation, for which he uses notions of Bakhtinian lineage, such as dialogism and heterology, among others.<sup>23</sup> The poem, the artistic object, as dissent enunciated in conditions of equality.

The debate could be to clarify the elements that condition that agonism or that heterology. For example, the dispositions and habitus of agents or social groups (Bourdieu), the models or cultural repertoires activated and their situation with respect to institutions (Even-Zohar). Or even the incidence of the unexpected on the social and political dimensions, an energy equipped by its own unpredictability to create new situations and new historical subjects, according to what Alain Badiou and Yuri Lotman have argued from two very different epistemologies—political philosophy and the semiotics of culture—and with the respective support of the concepts of event (*événement*) and *explosion* (*vzryv*). Furthermore, although Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory recognizes the intrinsic heterogeneity of any social group, it ends up appealing to the immeasurable character of the (heterogeneous) whole: it is not possible to describe the whole, we are assured; the most we can do is conjugate the tension of equivalence/difference and from that describe the hegemonic.

Contrarily, Even-Zohar's model, like the whole systemic-relational paradigm to which it belongs, holds that the whole is the unavoidable object in any rigorous analysis of the cultural system. A whole interpreted as a network of relations between factors that in principle are not hierarchized, although the evolution of the model shows a clear tendency to give priority precisely to repertoires over the rest of the factors (producers, consumers, products, institution and market), including the individuals who produce,

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20. 'Whenever we use the category of "subject" in this text, we will do so in the sense of "subject positions" within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, be the origin of social relations — not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible — as all "experience" depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility' (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, HSS, pp. 115).

21. Rancière, DPP, p. 37.

22. For applications to the Zapatista movement, the Palestinian Intifada, immigration policies in Western countries, and other current situations, see Todd May's *Contemporary Political Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière: Equality in Action*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

23. Rancière, DPP, p. 59, and Rancière, EE, p. 67.

consume or regulate the cultural market. Thus, the systemic model—if we loosely apply Laclau’s perspective—would seem again to fall back on the illusion of immediacy into which analytical philosophy, phenomenology and structuralism also fell: that the system would be accessible as an object of analysis and description.<sup>24</sup>

There is one concrete aspect that I would like to highlight, because with it, Even-Zohar enriches the concept of repertoire and renders it much less mechanical and predictable. In fact, he sees as reductionist the idea that to each group or each position corresponds a unique repertoire that also identifies the group as unique:

In various current research traditions, the connection between repertoires and groups has been conceived of as an inherent relation, meaning that a certain identifiable repertoire is conceived of as built-in into the very ‘nature’ of a certain identifiable group. Such a view, even if not always formulated in such explicit terms, characterizes not only the earlier stages of anthropology, but even later parts of sociology on the one hand and ‘the history of mentalities’ on the other. In simplistic terms, this stand actually hypothesizes ‘one indivisible repertoire for one group.’ [...] In the field of culture research, what seems to me most important in dynamic systems thinking is the separation it can make between human beings and repertoires. This means that groups and repertoires are conceived of as maintaining functional multidimensional rather than inherent relations to each other; and that these relations are generated by historical and accidental circumstances, rather than by hereditary continuity. Such a seemingly trivial generalization is, however, neither self-evident nor universally acknowledged.<sup>25</sup>

For Even-Zohar, the heterogeneity of repertoires is the condition for the continued existence of a given cultural system. The competition between repertoires in fact provokes an implementation of activity that Even-Zohar calls *energy*. And this reaches not only the system as a whole, but also, on their level, the operative subsystems.

What impact might this have on the poetics of resistance that we are examining? First of all, we must outline in historical terms the time period to which we are referring. Speaking of a present marked by neoliberal hegemony and globalization, our time, the first doubt that assails us is whether cultural systems are actually oriented toward repertorial heterogeneity or whether the opposite is in fact occurring. The answer would probably be different depending on whether we approached the question from a micro or a macro point of view. Rancière would say that the latter is currently experiencing a period marked by the negation of politics (the political, in Mouffe) and the pre-eminence of an agreement that drastically reduces the space of critical art, the possibility of the poem of resistance. It especially restricts the acceptable degree of divergence between the goal of this type of production, as understood by its promoters, and the real level of efficacy attained.<sup>26</sup> The consequence is the reflexivity of resistance, its self-demonstration and its self-annihilation, as Rancière observes. In other words, its reduction to the testimonial

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24. As is the polysystem (system of systems), understood as the normal condition of any system, precisely because it incorporates the markers of heterogeneity and of plurality: systems integrate systems.

25. Even-Zohar, *Papers in Culture Research*, pp. 175-76.

26. Rancière, *EE*, p. 70.



and even to the ritual. Its body language and its metatextuality as well. The conflict is diluted, and parody as criticism and the parody of criticism become equivalent.<sup>27</sup> It is precisely in this sense that a macro perspective would reveal a multiplication of concurrent repertoires, neither perceived whatsoever nor proposed as real alternatives to the hegemony of repertoire assumed by the global macrosystem. Some of the latter can be seen in a manifesto pronounced publicly in 2001 and published in 2007 by the Spanish collective La Palabra Itinerante (*The Wandering Word*), which, among other arguments, presents the following:

How can we develop projects of action, diffusion and realization of *poetry in resistance* and reconcile them with social and cultural structures that are profoundly penetrated, contaminated, by powers and discourses that are deactivating, pacifying, emptying of meaning? The most common method among poets in resistance is the guerrilla method: rapid incursions into hostile territory to achieve objectives and then return to safe ground. As a jazz musician once said: come, play, leave. We are talking about using Spectacle in an attempt to inject life and negotiations into its discursive mould without settling into its logic. We are also talking about seeking and finding spaces, and places, that are favourable to work in. Beyond the complaint against the market, beyond resignation, beyond lamenting that power does not yield, does not concede, its places and times: to multiply fronts and possibilities, share and/or create new spaces, different spaces and times, foreign or peripheral to Domination, and to recover those that we/they believe they have snatched away from us. We are talking, then, about inventing forms and activities beyond inherited rituals.<sup>28</sup>

There may remain doubts about the reality of this appearance of the multiple and its capacity for interpreting our own historicity and for constituting subjectivizations, but there is one thing we can see for sure. I am referring to a progressive recovery on the part of the poetics of resistance of a consciousness—a consciousness expressed, said out loud—of the scales of conflict. For that reason, Jacques Rancière’s question is so relevant: for what essential reason are the modern location of poetic enunciation and political subjectivity linked?<sup>29</sup> His answer points us clearly in one direction. He refers again to the field of experience as the space in which a subjectification materializes, where an I/we product of a statement coordinated from (and by) a community of equals comes into being. Hence we can affirm that the link between poetic enunciation and political subjectivity consists of the emergence of a new political experience of the sensory. One of Chus Pato’s poems expresses this in not dissimilar terms:

the outside of the poem: its height, eye colour, the sex to which  
it belongs; when  
it eats, sleeps, walks

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27. Rancière, EE, p. 72.

28. La Palabra Itinerante, Colectivo de Agitación y Expresión, ‘Una manera de mirar pájaros en vuelo: una aproximación a la *poesía en resistencia*’, in E. Falcón (ed.), *Once poéticas críticas —11 01— Poesía y desorden*, Madrid, Contratiempos. Centro de Documentación Crítica, 2007, pp. 63-71; p. 66 (emphasis in original).

29. Jacques Rancière, ‘Transports de la liberté (Wordsworth, Byron, Mandelstam)’, in J. Rancière (dir.), *La Politique des poètes: Pourquoi des poètes en temps de détresse*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1992, pp. 87-129.

is it different than when we say: thought, i, consciousness?  
 does the poem have an inside / outside?  
 do all these words (intellect, mind, reason...) belong to the inside?  
 is it private, the language the poet uses when configuring  
 the inside of the poem?  
 is there an outside?  
 is it private?  
 language is a labyrinth of pathways  
 a traffic<sup>30</sup>

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