Sound As Thought
Notes on Clark Coolidge

When you can’t stop the words, the silence is / verbal.

1. Notes on Some of Coolidge’s Work from the Seventies to the Nineties

Collected in Space (1970), Clark Coolidge’s early work explored the possibilities of words as visual and sound structures, and using the page much as a visual artist would use the canvas, Coolidge examined the ways in which words give form to the blank page. The jacket cover of Space is by Jasper Johns: A ruler is placed at a slight angle upon a charred wooden background. Here, Coolidge’s poems function in the same way as the ruler; they measure the surrounding space of the page, give structure and substance to the otherwise formless void. A note on the book jacket says, “Coolidge’s structures are reductive. Syntax—the systematic connection between words which gives linear discourse its character of extended meaning—is simply removed.” The absence of any accumulation of inherited meanings leads to a consideration of the words as sound constructions, the poem as musical composition. The poems achieve this condition of music, abstract and subjective, but not with-
out meaning for the ear and mind. Meaning, instead, is a function of the syllables, sound as thought in motion. Understanding and misunderstanding alike contribute to an experience of the world. Already, in these early poems, the vector of Coolidge’s development is set away from history and politics. The gain of his poetry is a significant break with the lyric tradition in American poetry, the hauntings of iambic pentameter. The words, divested of their familiar positions in the grammatical order which generates conventional meaning, are launched into the open spaces of the page, where they draw attention to themselves as musical figures.

In The Maintains (1974), Polaroid (1975), and Quartz Hearts (1978), Coolidge shows an increasing concern for the syntactic possibilities in language. The Maintains, written with the use of a dictionary, expanded what Coolidge thought of as the limited vocabulary of the poet. The book also raises questions about the nature of the creative self and the possibility of external input in the creation of a poem. A vocabulary thought of as personal to the poet, to his/her individual style, was thought of as limiting to Coolidge. He writes, “There is no single vocabulary, poet’s vocabulary … the self as multitudinous, hence a vocabulary in flux.” For Coolidge, there was only a self in transit, fluid, dynamic, in a continual passage through the wild of language, a vocabulary changeable and determined to a certain extent from the outside. Coolidge writes, about the creation of a poem, “I began to see how it was really excitingly done: You wrote from what you didn’t know toward whatever could be picked up in the act. Poetry starts here.” Coolidge conceived of The Maintains as a “dictionary work,” created by looking into the dictionary and using those pages as a direct source for the poems. The realization that there was a kind of syntax at work in the dictionary, “phrases like ‘that which is blank,’ that sort of syntax,” helped give shape to The Maintains. The dictionary maintains the language, all the proper meanings of words are organized there. In this book Coolidge plays with the foundation of our inherited meanings and disrupts that to generate a different way
of seeing the world with language: “In back of everything is a barrier. We need to flood it all, really ram those photons.”

About *Polaroid*, Coolidge writes that it “was almost the reverse of that impulse. I mean, a backlash against so many nouns, so many descriptive words. I picked a set of words—prepositions, connectives of various kinds, which’s and that’s and conjunctions—and thought I would limit myself to those,” but eventually nouns and adjectives started to appear and determine the course of this work; the longer lines start about midway through the book. This gives *Polaroid* an “outer dimension,” which gets it away from “language as language.” *Quartz Hearts* overlaps with this section of *Polaroid* and the beginning of a longer “prosoid” work. Coolidge, writing about *Quartz Hearts*, says, “It is in very sense a hinge work, reflecting a fresh interest in sentence as axial structure, the final movement of Polaroid had pushed me toward, the prosoid’s lengths would explore in full.” Furthermore, *Quartz Hearts* constitutes a, “meditation on the state(s) of things, in other words words.” There is also list of books, music, and other personal items that were used in the making of the poem; these included Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, Gerry Mulligan’s earliest quartets from the early fifties, Kerouac’s *Desolation Angels*, Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, *Texts for Nothing*, and *Watt*, Thelonious Monk’s “I Should Care,” his solo on Columbia Records, and Beethoven’s late quartets. Notable here is the influence of jazz which has played a significant role in the way in which Coolidge determined the music of his line. He is a drummer, and in his youth played in a West Coast group called Serpent Power with David Meltzer. Jazz phrasing and improvisation are central to Coolidge’s poetics. Coolidge also notes the early Gerry Mulligan quartets which achieved an advance in counterpoint without the aid of a piano. They dispensed with the engine room. In *Quartz Hearts*, Coolidge writes, “I don’t sense I state.” The poem is not pre-determined, or based on a sensual apprehension of reality, but as if “received” from outside. The poet is the medium for the message. In this work, he continues the development of syntactical structures which resist linear exposition. No sense but in the sound.
The eighties and nineties yielded numerous and various works that display a more autobiographical strain in Coolidge’s work. For example, *Own Face*, published in 1978. This book was concerned with real-life events, with friends, and with observations of the past. The abstract quality of the early works gives rise here to meditations on the self and memory. But for Coolidge, “Your name is the precise settle of lights on anything spinning.” It is this work that determined the new arc in Coolidge’s writing. The *Book of During* (1989) and *Mesh* (1988) both examined the nature of the erotic and its relation to death and fantasy. *Odes of Roba* (1991) and *At Egypt* (1988) are books written as a result of various travels, in Italy and Egypt, respectively. *The Crystal Text* is a meditation on a colorless quartz crystal and the examination of the self in relation to the object, of the ways in which it may be possible to reorient cognition such that the outside world of the object would be allowed to articulate. Two major collections also appeared, *Solution Passage, 1978–1981* and *Sound As Thought, 1982–1984*, as well as an artist’s book entitled *On the Slates* (1992), the text of which is contained on a small scroll placed inside an actual shoe within a shoebox. *The Rova Improvisations* (1994) are a series of meditations on the music of the San Francisco based saxophone quartet, ROVA. Coolidge writes about his procedure:

These writings were begun in the process of preparing to compose the liner notes for ROVA’s album, *The Crowd*. They exist as two parallel surges of improvisation. The first written while listening to all the tracks of ROVA’s albums in the order of their recording. The second while reading through those initial writings. One written in the hollows of the music. The other in the silence of the words.

This book remains one of my favorite books of Coolidge. It is fascinating, knowing ROVA’s work, to see Coolidge create a sonic equivalent to their complex layers of saxophone sounds. As I mentioned already, jazz phrasing informs Coolidge’s line.
Kerouac’s bop prose was also a major influence. I’m thinking of this quote from Coolidge’s book on jazz, *Now It’s Jazz*: “Also, and at any rate, sound is movement. It interests me that the words ‘momentary’ and ‘moments’ come from the same Latin: ‘moveo,’ to move. Every statement exists in time and vanishes in time, like in alto saxophonist Eric Dolphy’s famous statement about the music: ‘When you hear music, after it’s over it’s gone in the air, you can never capture it again.’” Of course, with a recording you can play it back on a turntable or CD. For this reason Coolidge’s book is an interesting one: The first part represents the initial hearing which produces a text on the fly, “what was picked up in the act”; the second section is a writing through those initial writings, a second kind of improvisation which includes thought. Here is free improvisation and composition, not one or the other, but both, “To set in motion, contains its own stopping point.” In the collaborative work with Guston, *Baffling Means*, Coolidge delineates a poetics based partly on the modernist aesthetic: the problem of knowledge, self and the other, the sense of a lost Absolute (“Art looms backward / to the first mark (pre-history.) And not through enforced forgetting, but an excess for memory”), the elements of desire, poem as necessity. He writes, “Art is isolate … / At its deepest levels art is an attribute of / nothing else.”

2. Instead of a Conclusion: A Brief Sketch of Coolidge as Gnostic poet

Coolidge’s work creates energies in opposition to the inherited syntax and semantics of language. It is a work of boundless energy in flux that resists fixity in thought or sound. Rigid thought patterns are overthrown at the start. Mind moves freely over syllables generating heat in an endless wave. Coolidge writes, “I don’t link anything enough to stop it.” Not the point but the drift is what matters. Thought is sound, the poem an incomplete thought, the “sorts of motion,” incomplete for the sake of another thought, an accumulation of thoughts, that by their very incompleteness refuse containment. And by thought,
I mean sound. The poem is not ideological, “The vector of an artist’s personal development is away from history.” There is no unifying theme or structure. The poem speaks to the poem beyond. It is the poem in endless motion in stasis (“Nothing / can’t move”), the total work, the “unstoppable endless volleying Everything Work.” Coolidge writes, “Making any mark is to make a hole.” The poem is simultaneously a puncture, the word is a rupture in the silence. Coolidge’s work posits a beyond toward which it strives in endless motion, it rides the outer curve of all, as energy generating forms from nothingness: “To create is to make a pact with nothingness.” It is the curve of boundless postulation sans conclusion that resists assimilation and semblance. Coolidge writes:

The worst danger for an artist’s work: / assimilation …
To make like (how I hate that trait),
to leaven, make digestible, democratize,
ultimately strip of individuation.

And furthermore, “Criticism is divergence immediately.” It is the motion that matters, the urgency of the sound that pushes onward into new spaces of language. For Coolidge, “The world is not enough. I want something else to appear.”

Coolidge is often thought of as a Language poet, and to the extent that he works with the materiality of language, particularly in the early work, where the traditional “I” is absent, he is, but there is also a clearly gnostic element in his work. The light that weaves through the syllables heats them to a certain temperature which leads to illumination, the almost visionary quality of Coolidge’s work. He confronts the unknown, where “the road to excess leads to one’s own forms,” echoing Blake. Here is something that an alchemist in the Middle Ages might have written, while attempting the process of transmutation of the elements, by a kind of distillation to extract a pure element. Their purpose was to reunite with the divine or original form:
I want everything to come together,
   And then I want it to all go away,
Leaving behind one thing that was never
In the pile to begin with.

In Coolidge’s poems there is the sense of an immensity beyond the world of the senses, the edges of the poem drawing close to nothingness, to the rim of the unknowable, that which perhaps eludes the human: “But you don’t know till you’ve / got it all what’s not there.” And so the poet continues, fueled by doubt. But Coolidge is, “the poet reduced from totality sauce / to everything loose again.” This suggests the origin, the Cosmic Egg that was split and loosed duality upon the world, causing a prior unity to scatter into pieces, which manifest on earth as light and darkness, man and woman, human and Other. Coolidge writes,

But the celestial masses take our minds off
our own precious densities, the simple connection escaping us. I could give you the answer, but the aligned mirrors have yet to be properly stained.

Human subjective perception limits our ability to see beyond our senses, “In order to discover [the unknown] one’s self must first be made unrecognizable.” Coolidge writes, “One must become supersaturated in memory before one can recognize the unknown.” For Giordano Bruno, the Renaissance philosopher, memory was a key to the mind of God. He renounced Christianity and its emphasis on human imperfection and thought that man should instead refine his intellectual powers, by which he meant perfecting one’s memory. To accomplish this, Bruno created an elaborate system to map memory in the brain. Since Bruno believed that all knowable terrestrial facts were the mirror image of the mind of God, one would be able, being “supersaturated in memory,” to venture into the unknown or know the mind of God. But for this transgression against nature, Coolidge is aware of the price paid: “It’s the whole if not the walls that punish you.” Furthermore,
Perhaps it’s just that the words have all been said but not by me, and the process is a trial.

But all the while I eye you, demon, your bird hoards are clustering here. Sent for calm and brought crazy still.

The price is possible madness, but the poet must go on in his search for, “the mystery of everything that has always been written.” Coolidge’s venture into the unknown, the boiling luminous, to create “the unstoppable endless volleying Everything Work,” gives his work a spiritual or gnostic dimension that rewards repeated readings and makes Coolidge one of our most important poets.

Works Cited

—. *The Maintains*. Oakland: This Press, 1974.