ADAM PENDLETON

Poet Joan Retallack’s latest volume, *Procedural Elegies/ Western Civ Cont’d* (Roof Books), a collection of seventeen works written between the 1970s and the present, showcases her long-standing relationship to the procedural. The title of the poem “N PLUS ZERO” (2008–2009), for example, suggests that she will reduce to absurdity the famous Oulipian procedure N + 7, wherein every noun in a source text would be replaced by the noun seven words down from it in a dictionary. Then we read, “N plus Zero equals A to Z in what remains of this essay, with N standing, not for ‘noun,’ but for ‘next’ and zero for a certain degree of cluelessness; i.e., the familiar quandary, what to do next?” Retallack thus introduces “methodical doubt” into the Oulipian mechanical method. Abjuring any immutable point of origin (or N), her own “procedure” instead models an alternative and more contingent way of thinking—demonstrating, as she does, that “the more complex things are, the less certain the outcome but also the more room for play of the mind, for inventing ourselves out of the mess.”

*Procedural Elegies* also includes one of Retallack’s most memorable and important works, 1995’s “AIDS/SAPEARANCE,” an elegy for Stefan Fittman, who died in 1993 from an AIDS-related illness. The basic structure is outlined in a revealing section of notes at the back of the book. The poem begins with a seven-line stanza composed partly of language taken from physicist Niels Bohr’s theories of atomic structure. Then Retallack injects a virus: She removes the letters in AIDS from the second tetramer of the same stanza. Line 7, for example, goes from “7. disappear and there is no place to stand on and strangely we’re glad” to “7. pper n there no plece to n on n trangely we’re gl.” In the successive stanzas, the virus spreads to adjoining letters, until by stanza 8 the lines stand empty and mute. What distinguishes Retallack’s approach is the complicating role she allows intuition to play in her process, from determining her source texts to establishing the rules that her procedures will follow—part of, to my mind, the ethics and poetics underpinning her commitment to the experimental.

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