

CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ

## The Immanence of Poetry: On Keith Waldrop's *Transcendental Studies*

*Transcendental Studies: A Trilogy*, by Keith Waldrop. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

According to Immanuel Kant, transcendental knowledge is not concerned with objects but with our mode of knowing objects. Keith Waldrop's *Transcendental Studies: A Trilogy*, winner of the 2009 National Book Award, explores the possibility of transcendental knowledge through poetry's mode of knowing the self and the world.

As the title suggests, this book is divided into three parts. The first, "Shipwreck in Heaven," moves between prose poems, serial poems built on the tercet, and verse poems projected through a series of single lines. Reminiscent of George Oppen in "Of Being Numerous," Waldrop examines the bright lights of thought and spirituality:

Intrinsic, your un-  
thinkability. Casts over all created  
things annihilating shadow.

An opening for possible  
storms, as a deity enters  
the world, a stranger.

The bed we are not in: can-  
not surprise it. What passes  
in the street? Pure picture.

In the world these  
limits, almost occult—only signals  
corporeal. To think of something.

There are no "pure pictures" in this work; images pass to signal the corporeal but ultimately "fade and flourish." Throughout, Wal-

drop is able to "Hear. Touch. Taste. / Translate" the sensual world into thought and a "new tempo" of poetry. In this section, we are confronted with the echoes of walls, gates, doors, windows, trees, gardens, and houses:

Where thinking ends, house and temple  
echo, possible objects of  
admiration. Will you go?

At another moment, Waldrop emphasizes: "We must reemphasize the complete independence of the author and his traces." The traces of the author—his thoughts and sensations—as well as the traces of objects and the world become independent in the study of transcendental knowledge. These passing thoughts and echoing objects ravel in the "cantabile" of poetry—a style of playing that imitates the human voice. Waldrop's tone is conversationally philosophical (à la Wallace Stevens), yet departs from any kind of embodied presence.

While the first section takes us on a journey into the abstractions of thought, the second section, "Falling in Love through a Description," more directly engages with the phenomenon of thought itself. Waldrop writes: "Sometimes thoughts / are cut off and sometimes they are the / blade which cuts." Whatever kind of thought emerges provides moments of contemplation for the reader. From the poem "Soft Hail":

If we look at similar  
coral reefs, the past location of the same  
precise environment can be traced. But  
there the comparison breaks. And from these  
relative motions will arise the relative  
motion of a body on the earth.

Another poem, "Plurality of Worlds," speaks to the relative movements of the speaker: "And I, I with / my various processes. I stumble, I / revolve." In this work, we witness the relative motions of the world through the relative motion of a body through the various revolutions of a singular consciousness. One of Waldrop's processes is the movement between lineated verse and prose poems. From a poem "Silk":

From what I see, see at this particular moment, I turn, bringing to mind everything invisible, the rest of the world, my small

view's vast remainder. I regard it all—as if by some strange geometry all lines crossed just at the point of my perception—not merely an unknown, but somehow, in its entirety, forgotten: an amnesia almost universal, its only flaw the small shard of my awareness.

These metapoetic moments provide the reader with insight into understanding Waldrop's poetic process. We can then better read the more intellectually challenging poems, looking at "all lines crossed" at the point of poetic perception.

The final section, "The Plummet of Vitruvius," is much more imagistic than the previous sections. The title, perhaps, refers to Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, a first-century B.C. Roman architect, whose *De Architectura* is the only surviving text on ancient architectural theory. Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing, The Vitruvian Man, is accompanied by notes based on the architect's idea that the proportions of the ideal human figure is the principal source of classical architectural proportions. The first poem in this section, "Altars," reads like an architectural manual:

Should be lower than  
the statues so that those praying must  
look up. Their height  
may be adjusted.

While this poem is straightforward, a single-line poem, "Baths," is more mysterious: "Clay mixed with hair." Because the first two sections so completely plummet into thought and abstraction, the imagistic quality of many of these final poems are refreshing and bring us closer to the world, even if that world may be an ancient one, or the imagining of an ancient world. From "Methods of Building Walls":

Smallest stones, puddled with  
mortar made of lime and  
sand, abundance of lime and sand. Lime  
and sand separate, dis-  
unite, and the wall  
becomes a ruin.

*Transcendental Studies: A Trilogy* echoes Emerson's insight about the impossibility of achieving a perfect transcendentalism. The world is

always becoming ruin; the body is never in perfect proportion because always in movement; and the mind—with its various processes and flawed shards of awareness—is constantly stumbling. One of my favorite passages from this book reads:

Not just because I opened my eyes, but  
because I tried to see—the foliage beyond  
imagining.

Beyond this attempt to see is the consequent attempt to articulate what is seen beyond imagining and thought beyond philosophy. Like Stevens's "Notes towards a Supreme Fiction," Waldrop's *Studies* employ poetry's own processes of perception to capture the tangled values of mind and body, of natural and built objects, of abstraction and the concrete. As readers, our own eyes are opened to the borderlands between the immanence of the world and the transcendence of seeing.