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## On Beverly Dahlen's *A Reading 18-20*

*A Reading 18-20* by Beverly Dahlen. Boulder, CO: Instance Press, 2006.

Beverly Dahlen's latest book, *A Reading 18-20*, is the fourth installment in her lifelong project—"a work," she writes, "which is co-extensive with the literal limits of one's own life."\* Modeled on Freud's practice of free association, a process that explores the unconscious mind and is—in Freud's estimation and Dahlen's term—"interminable," *A Reading* ranges from personal letters, bits of movies and politics, to academic "digressions," dreams, reflections on San Francisco's neighborhoods, and, in short, all manner of integral and ephemeral experience. The project effectively maps Dahlen's thinking life.

Published by four different presses over the course of twenty years, *A Reading* has never been printed together as a single volume, nor has it been published in its entirety. Like the previous volumes, the new book is numbered in untitled, often thematically linked sections, themselves divided into untitled subsections; the subsections are accompanied by the date of their composition and, sometimes, the date of their revision. These dates effectively fix the poems to a time and, perhaps, a place; that is, though the poem's world is derived from the unconscious, the dates in particular tie the work to the material world. The work does not so much reassert the old adage that the unconscious mind *is* the world (or part of it) as it asserts that the unconscious mind has a tangible and recordable connection to the time and space it inhabits. And so the following passage, dated "*June 16–August 12, 1984*," takes on the character of a seismographic "reading" of the mind's topography, its surface movements, at a particular point in time:

terrorism out of context, a story of murder as light reading, *the*  
*civilized way to call it a day*. when people meet at the end of a  
workweek  
the content of their speech is the oppression of the boss. who  
was that

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\* "Forbidden Knowledge." *Poetics Journal* 4 (May 1984): 3–19.

masked man? the industrial décor of my favorite restaurant, the heating ducts painted red. it would be difficult to name the timeless values when gas pumps had become sacred relics. worshipping at a bowl of gelato. how do you do.

If this measurement of the activity of the mind sounds like a familiar tactic—one thinks of Philip Whalen's sense that the poem is a graph of the mind moving—that's because it is. Dahlen's *A Reading* is not unique for its tracings of the wending mind, but rather for the fidelity of those tracings to the mind they trace. Though Dahlen's project may mirror that of Whalen's, or Jack Spicer's, the materials fueling any mind, and hence the shape of that mind or the character of the work it creates, are also specific to changing exterior conditions. The mind not only reflects those exterior conditions, the mind *is composed* of those conditions. This is perhaps Dahlen's central point, and *A Reading* is able to achieve the effect it does primarily because of Dahlen's fidelity to it.

As the poet and critic Benjamin Friedlander notes in his book *Simulcast: Four Experiments in Criticism*, Dahlen "comes closer than any other writer, living or dead, to composing a poem in 'open form.'" Open form, as I take Friedlander to mean it, is that which rejects any final formal or ideological strictures in composition. Under this definition, Olson's *Maximus Poems*, for example, is about as formally "open" a text as one can imagine: though it maintains, in Barbara Guest's term, an invisible architecture, its pages are sprawling, inconsistent, freeform. While Friedlander may be overstating Dahlen's case, he reinforces the openness of her "transcribed" unconscious. The degree to which the text succeeds at being formally open and divergent is directly related to the degree it succeeds in dealing candidly with the mind's materials. You might even say, in this connection, that the text aspires to formlessness—that reforming the text into something it wasn't (when it existed only in the mind) is an assertion of power over the mind (and the text, and the world) with which Dahlen is uncomfortable.

Naturally, then, *A Reading 18-20* reflects a varied and divergent world: the surface activity quoted above is contrasted a few pages later with two brief paragraphs on Freud, Engels, and Barrett Watten, whose essay "The XYZ of Reading: Negativity (& Diane Ward)" Dahlen tells us she has been reading. Dahlen further complicates this assortment



