An Interview with Aaron Kunin

Tom Fleischmann

Tom Fleischmann: Could you talk about the notebook idea at the heart of this writing, and how that process might affect the work?

Aaron Kunin: The notebook is the deepest layer of my work as a writer. I don't remember exactly when I started writing in notebooks, maybe age nine or ten, whenever I read Louise Fitzhugh's novel *Harriet the Spy*. Before that, I tried keeping a diary, but somehow that never worked for me. Fitzhugh suggested a way of having a special relationship with a book that would be close to you, carried with you at all times, that wasn't a diary. Her character Harriet is a spy, which suggests that her writing is based on observation, but it isn't. Harriet is interested more in impression than perception. She does not accept the universe. She writes in her notebook to transform it.

My practice as a writer has changed completely since I was ten years old, but my notebook has been consistent. Most of what I write is carefully planned and worked over, and some of the notes I take are related to projects that I'm working on or planning. But the rest of the notes are not for anything. They are just notes representing something that interested me for a moment, written in the first form that suggested itself.

It's the latter kind of unformed or minimally formed writing that is represented in *Secret Architecture*. The title is taken from Baudelaire's dubious claim that a system of occult correspondences between levels of reality governs his decisions as a writer. For Baudelaire, both the architecture and the secrecy are important. This is his ethics as an artist: that there is a structure, that he knows it, and no one else does. Personally, I don't see the point of the secrecy; I like to be able to examine all the devices and decisions in a poem. So I use the phrase "secret architecture" a little sarcastically. It could mean, as in Baudelaire, that an unseen, intricate constellation connects these apparently formless language pieces. I prefer to think that the shapeless lumps *are* the architecture behind my writing. Or anyone's writing — the line "Building complicated machines to confirm your prejudices" is intended as a universal slogan, one to which any person, or any group, could honestly sub-

scribe. This is what writing has always been saying, and now it's finally saying it!

TF: Are you approaching this ["Awkward without w"] differently than with *Secret Architecture*?

AK: The notebooks in *Secret Architecture* are from 2001. Later I transcribed them, corrected spelling and usage, and deleted things that were written for other projects or that seemed unfair to someone or morbidly personal or boring. The final step was to lift a phrase out of each notebook to be used as a title.

    After we did *Secret Architecture*, Noah Eli Gordon, who published the chapbook, asked if I wanted to try putting together a book-length selection from my notebooks. So I did, and "Awkward without w" (a notebook from 2002) is taken from that manuscript, which is called *Grace Period*. Here the process was the same, with the addition of a new layer of consciousness and doubt. "How did I do this when I compiled *Secret Architecture?*" "Am I remembering my procedure correctly?" "Am I sure that the procedure I used before was the right one?" And so on.

TF: Could you talk a bit about your interest in negative anthropology and ways it might be reflected in your writing? Particularly, the way this essay seems to reject a traditional impulse to derive knowledge about character, scene, etc.

AK: When asked to supply a biographical note, I sometimes describe myself as a practitioner of negative anthropology. It's a joke that doesn't seem to get old for me. It comes from the Raul Ruiz film *Three Lives and Only One Death* (originally entitled *Three Double Lives and Only One Death)*, where Marcello Mastroianni plays six characters, one of whom is a professor of negative anthropology. In my case this imaginary branch of anthropology might suggest a slight skepticism about the reality of my academic appointment, which is in an English department.

    Negative anthropology could also be an unrecognizable name for misanthropy, and in this sense it is genuinely relevant to my work. I'm not really interested in the hatred of humanity, but in something more objective: the act of withdrawing from the world. What happens to the world when the misanthrope withdraws from

it is that it becomes two worlds. There's the human society left behind, and the new and potentially better society that the misanthrope projects.

If the misanthrope is a paradigmatic character, then I would say that my interpretation of character is traditional. It reflects an older tradition than the one that would locate character in irreducible particularity. As I understand it, a character is an expression of an ideal. This is something like what character means to the Girl Scouts, for example.

TF: As a reader, I find myself assuming your presence not only in the first person and in the role of observer, but in some of the "he's" as well. Is this a misreading on my part, or are you sometimes placing yourself behind that distance?

AK: I sometimes write about myself in the third person (masculine and feminine, singular and plural). Like the first person, the third person is a kind of abstraction, but it's a reportorial rather than lyrical way of generalizing. "He" also specifies masculinity, and thus comes with more of a context than "I." Is that a distancing device? I don't think so. To maintain distance between speaker positions, you need the distinctions between the intimate and formal modes of address that modern English has relinquished.

The autobiographical "he" in *The Education of Henry Adams* probably is a distancing device. "He" is an attempt to separate the Adams who survives into the twentieth century from the Adams who received an eighteenth century education. "He" allows Adams to treat his own achievements with bitter irony; for example, the chapter covering his brilliant academic career, including the composition of the *History of the United States*, is entitled "Failure." The book is also famously reticent about basic facts such as his relationship with Clover Adams. (On the other hand, Adams dramatically closes the distance in the hymns to the virgin and the dynamo.)

There's a line in "Awkward without w": "Same values, different suits." That might be a good way to think about the speaker positions. Unlike Adams, I don't consistently write about myself in the third person. I call myself I, we, he, she, they, you, and one. I even use thou and it occasionally. (Maybe not in "Awkward without w.") But I also use these pronouns to speak for and about other people. Also, I sometimes make things up, but I'm not very good

at that. So, to answer your question, you could be misreading. TF: The pronouns seem to conflate you with society in some ways, making the separation between you and other people uncertain, or at least hazy to the reader. How does this work with your interest in "withdrawing from the world?" Is it a forced engagement with society? Another move toward the invisibility of a uniform?

AK: Is my interest in the gesture of withdrawal from the world compromised by the worldliness of the speaker positions in my writing? That is a real problem. The solution is dualism. Where in the world can I go that isn't in the world? I can't. To get out of the world, I need at least two worlds. That is the paradox of misanthropy: in rejecting society, you project another one.

TF: Much of this essay seems to look at the things performance unintentionally reveals — "Their clothes seem to show what they think their bodies are," for instance, and all the false niceness. But you also say that you "feel more comfortable in things that conceal." In what ways do you see this essay's performance as revealing, and in what ways as concealing? Can we separate those two?

AK: The point about niceness is that acting nice is not just necessary but sufficient. Niceness means acting nice. Even to call it acting is too strong. It isn't action; it's merely behavior. The tone is probably ambiguous, and the argument is not developed, so I want to clarify that I am not inveighing against false niceness, or the falseness of all niceness. Even though they often feel to me like the rituals of an alien civilization that I must struggle to reconstruct, even though I often inhabit them ineffectually, I love all the forms of social graciousness. I love polite formulas. That's why I keep writing about them. What I most appreciate in these formulas is their invisibility, which is transitive. When they really work, they make the entire interaction invisible. I think that's what I want from clothing too. I've always wanted a uniform, so that I could wear the same thing every day and never have to notice or think about it.

Imagine the couplet as a response to an invitation to "slip into something more comfortable." "No, thank you, I'm more comfortable in things that conceal." That couplet could be a statement about the clothes themselves: that I need my veils, my sleeves, my layers, in order to be comfortable. Or it could be a statement about the com-

81

pany: that I don't know you well enough to be comfortable in your presence.

TF: You've mentioned elsewhere that you read a lot of philosophy. Did any particular writers or works influence your approach to this essay?

AK: I'm not a serious reader of philosophy; I lack the background and ability to get deeply into it. For "Awkward without w," the important models are aphoristic, paraphilosphical writings such as La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* and Lichetenberg's *Waste Books.* I have also learned a lot from reading Jalal Toufic.

A friend once compared my notebooks to R. D. Laing's *Knots,* which I take as a huge compliment. Laing made diagrams of relationships that look like poems, but he preferred to call them "knots." (That's a genre I like, the poem that doesn't want to insult poetry by association. Stephen Crane called his poemlike writings "pills." Maybe the word "essay" does the same work for you?) I wrote "Awkward without w" in 2002, and read Laing for the first time about a year later, but I still feel that his way of abstracting and elaborating is a retroactive influence.

In a sense, all of these models are retroactive. My original model is *Harriet the Spy.* That's where I learned how to write in a notebook.

TF: You've also mentioned that you admire the Russian Constructivists: Do you think ethics and social concerns need play an integral role in contemporary writing, or specifically in your writing?

AK: This piece is explicitly concerned with awkwardness, a social form discovered in the eighteenth century by Frances Burney, who writes in the novel *Camilla* that "awkwardness itself. . . is perhaps more interesting than grace." She means that it is a more interesting subject for a novel. Things might be more attractive when they are fully formed, but they are more interesting to look at when they are still in the process of formation.

Much contemporary thinking on ethics and poetics has been limited by the bad influence of the Levinasian ethic of face-to-face interaction, in which I am obligated to recognize the absolute otherness of the other in my encounter with the other's face. Michael Clune has diagnosed this ethic as an especially pernicious iteration

of the "recognition trope" (what Aristotle calls anagnoresis), whereby I am constituted as a subject through your recognition of me as an object. I agree with Clune that social theory desperately needs to get away from this trope and consider other kinds of association.

TF: There's a claim made here that your writing is in some ways autobiographical because "Everything I write is something I've thought." Would it be fair to apply this to your other work, for instance, *Folding Ruler Star?* How important is the distinction between poetry and essay in your writing?

AK: Yes, that's fair. For the purposes of biography, there is no difference between poetry and essay. I wrote them, and in that sense I'm responsible for both of them. (I should point out that "essay" is your word, not mine. My word is "notes.") On the other hand, considered as writing, "Awkward without w" is very different from the poems in *Folding Ruler Star.* The poems are carefully shaped, whereas the notes take their first convenient form.

TF: What's your favorite punctuation mark at the moment? What does this mark allow that attracts you to it?

AK: That's an interesting question. *Folding Ruler Star* has basically one punctuation mark, the parenthesis. The uniqueness of the parenthesis allows it to do the work of the entire set of punctuation marks — it can act as comma, question mark, period, etc. In that book, it would be pointless to embed a parenthesis inside another parenthesis, because closing one parenthesis turns out to have the same effect as opening another.

Lately I've been experimenting with a nonstandard use for quotation marks. I'm using them to track repeated words and phrases. Instead of telling you that another voice is speaking, the quotation marks tell you how many times a word has appeared.

TF: Does the notebook method of interacting with the world become a rule of conduct for you, with the distancing leading to an ethic? To put it another way, how does transforming the universe in your notebook allow you a more ethical relationship with the world?

AK: No. I'm sorry, it doesn't. I feel ambivalent about how unformed

my notes are. In a sense, that is their valuable quality. They are more interesting than anything I could make out of them, for the same reason that awkwardness is more interesting than grace. At the same time, I am defaulting on my responsibility to give the material a shape, which is the real ethics of writing.