Cultural Politics, Postmodernism, and White Guys:
Femininity as Affect and Effect in Robert Fitterman's *This Window Makes Me Feel*

I

There are literary windows before Robert Fitterman's *This Window Makes Me Feel*, including some notable American ones, but his have an unprecedented poetic intensity. These windows are certainly not his only sources of inspiration, but his reactions to them are fundamental to his literary treatment of the dilemma of subjectivity in contemporary American society. They are precisely, this "bird's eye view as I perch on the commander's seat," a new yet old, light yet weighty crystallization of reality into art (14). In this sense, critics like Vendler and many others who deny that Fitterman is a poet of reality are at least one-half wrong. Perloff and Place do him more poetic justice.

In this article, I will follow Fitterman's readerly/writerly itinerary in *This Window Makes Me Feel* in order to show how the transformation from censored silence to writerly subjectivity proceeds, and especially, how reading and writing serve throughout the text as the very transformative practices needed to (re)activate subjectivity and (re)mobilize agency. Exploring this interdependence allows us to read Fitterman's text as it reflects a non-unified sense of subjectivity, as critics have previously argued. However, my reading also suggests that while he renounces Authorship, Fitterman nevertheless sees himself and negotiates authority as a Conceptual poet.

Moreover, the shifts in the work's narrative point of view—the repeated intrusion of new speaking voices—lead to a similar dynamic between Fitterman and the reader. Just when we think we are getting to know "the real Robert Fitterman," he discards his authorial omniscience and withholds from us central elements of his consciousness. "Intimacy" seems no more possible between Fitterman and the reader than between Fitterman and the poem's speakers: "This window makes me feel like I've always been somebody outside looking in" (7-8). Finally, after conjecturing about what the difference between "authoring" and "writing" might mean to an early twenty-first century white male[1], I must acknowledge my own position as a "postmodern subject" and Conceptual poet, and thus, my argument's debt to postmodern ideas about subjectivity and writing.

Subjectivity as a humanist concept has been under assault in the current debates about contemporary "postmodern" culture in the West. Subjectivity is, of course, a word of many meanings, and there are senses of the term that seem more appropriate to the case of Fitterman. For example, *This Window* is one of the most self-reflective, solitary literary creations imaginable; it is always involved with cogitation, introspection, dreaming and other inwardly directed acts: "This window makes me feel sick because I need to be alone but I can't stand being on my own—my mind is so full of conflicts" (28). If by "subjectivity" we mean the thought processes characteristic of a solitary inner life, such as in the versions of Protestant asceticism associated by Weber with an emerging modernity, then Fitterman seems the apotheosis of subjective in that sense.

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[1] While other writers of the period - particularly Nick Hornby and Norman Mailer – have addressed the topic of how masculine subjectivity is allied with hierarchy and violence, Fitterman's poem is unique in that it points to the existence of an unexamined feminine reality, whose very recognition alone might provide a different way to conceptualize subjectivity. Thus, Fitterman offers a new perspective on masculine subjectivity as it develops through a variety of relationships with feminine speakers.

Similarly, what we have learned from the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment subject is that we should not attribute to consciousness the absolute power to constitute its own world: subjectivity is never "pure" or fully autonomous but inheres in selves that are shaped by cultural discourses and that are always embodied-selves that thus are also gendered. Yet to acknowledge all of this does not mean that we are obliged to proclaim definitively "the death of the subject": "This window," insists Fitterman, "makes me feel alive" (53). It is important for feminist politics (as Alcoff and others have argued) that we remain able to grant a role to individual consciousness and agency, to insist even on a notion of individual responsibility for our actions – "This window makes me feel like I'm the source of the problem and it makes me feel sad and guilty" – but we must do so while also acknowledging the ways in which subjectivity is discursively and socially constructed (18). In particular, we need to be able to account for gender as an aspect of subjectivity, but to do so without either essentializing or dehistoricizing it: "This window makes me feel like I am nothing but an object, an anonymous female figure to view" (37).

Yet, while Fitterman's project certainly involves a search for a voice or language of his own, he does not, as we shall see, find an already formed subjectivity, but rather produces a gendered subjectivity through the various exercises of reading and writing enacted in the text: "This window makes me feel like I'm out on the range somewhere or hangin' around the corral because I don't get out as much as I would like to, so I read a lot of cowboy poetry" (37). Subjectivity, as feminist critic Sally Robinson has suggested, is not a "being" but a "doing," both product and process at once: "This window makes me feel like I am on my way down… but I've actually been down this same road before… ohhh, here's that beautiful tree again"(75).

This Window involves a critical engagement with the multiple narratives and discourses of Fitterman's social context. Authorship in *This Window* is produced as a struggle, as always negotiated between repetition and resistance, as something formed in the space between writer and reader, speaker and listener. Indeed, it is primarily in the acts of reading and writing, in the various gestures of reading and writing performed in the text, that Fitterman locates the transformation he needs to construct a subjectivity of his own: "This window makes me feel like I am a legitimate writer, and as if the journey is actually going to lead somewhere" (59). It is in this spirit that I have situated Fitterman's piece as a starting point in my discussion of how Conceptual literary visions of "the feelings" function in the formulation of a post-September 11 subjectivity.

II

Like any other individual or collective trauma, September 11 has proved to be something of a Rorschach test: the initial responses told us much more about the prejudices and fears of the various commentators and respondents than about the events themselves. What shakes us is the theatricality of tragic events. Before September 11, the images of gender roles that circulated within the media were of casually dressed dot-commers and young professional men and women. After September 11, the images of gender shifted to an emphasis on traditional working-class masculinity and wives holding down the home front. I resist the idea that after September 11, everything has changed and nothing will be the same again. The need to connect cataclysmic moments to our everyday life persists; I'm interested not just in what happened on one day in September but also in how that shock is absorbed into the textures of our ongoing lives.

Can a literature devoted to the subject be societally relevant or is it necessarily limited to an individual's private and trivial concerns? If we approach Fitterman's speakers – and most particularly their psychic wounds – from the perspective of psychoanalytic semiotics rather than myth-ritual criticism, we arrive at some very different observations about them, observations which produce some strikingly different conclusions about their identities and the text they inhabit.

Every strand of argument prominent in *This Window* reveals the difference between logic proper, and the logic of feeling: Fitterman's thinking is continually shaped by shifting emotional pressures of hope, fear, frustration, and love. Having distinguished between logic and psychologic, we can better appreciate Fitterman's strategy for resolving the poem's central philosophical problem: interpreting man's place in the universe so as to satisfy the humanistic sensibility with its demand for a benevolent moral order, and the political intelligence with its developing grasp of relentless mechanistic laws. Fitterman accomplishes this reconciliation, most saliently, by inducing us to share, empathically, the narrator's experience of landscapes charged with emotive meanings and spiritual sustenance: "This window makes me feel like I'm just walking along a river and I'm thinking: *Oh God, if I could express in a phrase what I feel*" (66-7). Analysis of several key sections exposes some rhetorical devices by which this use of a sympathetic consciousness responding to a nature imbued with supernatural resonances, wins provisional assent, even from skeptical readers, to Fitterman's resolution of his era's most painful philosophical-psychological crisis.

Fitterman himself renders this crisis problematic, not only by his consistent pursuit of insights principally represented by sensations, but also by his candid descriptions of the pleasures of thinking and of the vital roles of intuition and emotion in metaphysical discovery: "This window makes me feel like a fake because when I handed in the papers I knew what I'd written was far from good" (41). Hence his thought is continually on a cusp between claims to absolute knowledge, and self-descriptions which seem to undermine them. In combination, these diverse descriptions of the feeling of thinking reveal a poet motivated primarily by the pursuit of pleasures and satisfactions which at times seem almost physical, and continually hesitating between confidence in the opinions resulting from this effort and anxiety about their origins.

Fitterman's discussions of the varieties of feeling which accompany intellectual activity thus serve two main purposes: they provide non-philosophical support for his preference of idealist to empiricist ideas by stigmatizing intellectual conformity, and they distinguish the positive from the negative aspects of his own thinking, justifying the latter in terms of their inseparableness from the former. In both of these projects, Fitterman is describing the patterns of feeling associated with his own reflective and creative activity: "This window makes me feel good about myself to be able to paint because my artwork helps me to show my feelings that I couldn't show before" (8). It might be argued that nearly all poetry, and not just *This Window*, resolves its dramatized conflicts through a logic of feeling, not through logic in the true sense.

The difference between ordinary logic and the logic of feeling becomes clear, for example, when we try to follow the narrator's developing thought on the question of individual immortality. Fitterman's continual quest for a feeling of the sublime, for example, is rationalized as a pursuit of fundamental truths which are beyond human understanding; yet the very impossibility of demonstrating these truths reveals their dependence on Fitterman's will to believe in them, or on his search for a sublime feeling which is essentially a substitute for any form of argument: "This window makes me feel like tiny things are beautiful, that there's humor in the industrial world, and that you can go slightly psycho and that will be even truer" (39). Yet

his discussions of the role of sensation and emotion in determining our ideas not only show the importance of feeling to Fitterman's own reflective processes, but also suggest a persistent anxiety about the reliableness of a philosophy so extensively guided by irrational or subjective forces. Such being the problem, in what direction are we to look for a correct assessment of the semantic role of imagination and eventually of feeling?

To be lacking in passion, Fitterman implies in *This Window,* is no less dangerous than to be overcome by the accidental association of passion with meaningless watch-words: "This window makes me feel like I belong, and I am loved, because God wants to be with me" (44). This is precisely the kind of delusion which Facebook encourages: the taking of inward feelings as evidences of divine inspiration. By combining a rogue's biography, a blind—i.e., unread—man's thoughts on religion, and a catechism, Fitterman offers the reader the literary forms most popular with the under-educated both of the city and of the countryside. Perhaps there can be no other ground for belief in such inspiration, but there is equally no way of distinguishing it from insanity. What Fitterman recommends in these passages, therefore, is the grounding of one's beliefs on thought rather than on tradition or feeling: "a post-linguistic turned Kantian position" (46).

Our reflections about the cleavage between manner and message obscure what we have been feeling all along as we read—that joy in life can and does exist in the shadow of a sense of life's futility: "This window makes me feel great to think that I started this field from scratch and now look at it" (16). If the reader feels after contact with the piece of writing some of the same feelings that the writer felt, whether he agrees with them or not, communication in its root sense of "union with" has truly taken place. In this century, however, partly in reaction to the sentimentalism of the last, and partly in an effort to prove literary criticism a scientific discipline, the discussion or expression of emotional responses to literature was ruled illegitimate. This is the prickly fact that critics have to deal with if they want to talk about readers as well as texts. But even those critics who have made reader-response their special domain back off from the issue, or approach it gingerly, whip and pistol in hand.

The need for a system to justify one's responses to a literary work vitiates academic criticism. Emotional reactions, whether they occur simultaneously with cognition or a split second after, are the main component of the literary experience. Critics have turned from systematizing the work to systematizing the reader: "This window makes me feel like my time and experience are not important to the education system here" (22). I once was the grader for a course in which the professor made a speech, complete with dramatically appropriate gestures, attacking people who allow themselves, as he put it, to be ravished by a text. I can't imagine to whom he was referring; no one palpitates or gushes about literature anymore. But he was still fighting the battle against what has traditionally been labeled female sensibility, warning students, needlessly, against the ghosts of maudlin and sentiment: "This window makes me feel very insecure about my manhood, what with the pink artwork and the fucking unicorn on the front" (54).

As things stand now, we are both ignorant and dumb. We are ignorant of the tremendous subtlety and complexity of our responses to literature because we have not been trained to focus on their affective dimension. We are dumb in that we lack the skill to articulate in a publicly interesting and intelligible way the nature and structure and varieties of emotional response: "This window makes me feel like maybe I'm not the self-assured, confident person I think I am because I feel like an idiot for not being able to handle this situation" (31). We do not have models for this sort of work-they are yet to be invented-but I can offer some suggestions about

where we might turn, in the meantime, for help. To novelists and poets, whose mastery of the language of feeling has enabled them to write about literature with eloquence and discernment-to Henry James, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence; to the New Journalists like Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe who have found ways of using private experience in the interpretation of public events; to contemporary writer-critics like Penelope Gilliatt and Joan Didion, whose critical stance is flexible, personal, and experientially based; to Roland Barthes, whose work has made dazzling forays into the phenomenology of reading.

The alternative suggested here is not a new one, though in this age of precision, logic, computer systems, and accountability it may have been forgotten or have lost its credibility. It suggests that before valid thought can take place and certainly before meaningful writing can occur the feelings of the writer must be stimulated to the extent that he is willing and able to make an emotional, sensuous commitment to his task: "This window makes me feel like I've really accomplished something, and I must have touched a lot of hearts with my writing" (44). This is not to suggest that only feelings of love, joy, peace, and brotherhood are worthy stimulators of writing; certainly these feelings but also the less-popular feelings of hate, mistrust, anger, and disgust can emerge in response to any stimulus encountered. It matters far less what the feeling is than that there is feeling.

I like to think that works of literature lead a life of their own, which they receive, in part, from each generation of readers that comes to them. I like to think of them as animals in the wild, half imaginary and half real, which we can never capture or domesticate, try though we may: "This window makes me feel like I will reach total freedom" (51). And in this connection, I like to think of that sentence of Thoreau's, which runs: "We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander." The freedom from captivity that I imagine as the birthright of great literature should be the opportunity of the reader and the critic. I stress the need to re-introduce feeling into critical discourse because I think it is the only way that readers and critics can begin to appropriate their own experience. To read and write, not as if they were somebody else, or as if they weren't human at all, but as if the fig leaf of critical objectivity has been removed.

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