CHRISTINA MENGERT

The Nature of Consideration: On Keith Waldrop's *The Real Subject*

> *The more sensitive a soul a contemplator has, the more he gives himself up to the ecstasies this harmony arouses in him. A sweet and deep reverie takes possession of his senses then, and through a delicious intoxication he loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful system with which he feels himself one.*
>
> —Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*

The Real Subject by Keith Waldrop. Berkeley, CA: Omnidawn, 2005.

Though not so curmudgeonly or paranoid as old Rousseau, Jacob Delafon, the fictional protagonist of Keith Waldrop's *The Real Subject,* does seem to follow in the footsteps of the first solitary walker. Both are "noticers" whose wandering minds are sparked by something: a word, idea, object that in turn reveals "the real subject"—the mind itself, a landscape shaped by attention to the world, and to written representations of the world (e.g., the book). Where one ends and the other begins, the reader is never entirely certain.

The book's title is quintessentially Waldrop, for its simplicity and forthrightness and subtle humor. It is a title that tells the reader, with no ambiguity (though perhaps with a bit of irony), what to expect. The book is composed of prose "queries and conjectures" separated and punctuated by nine "sample" poems (though samples from whom is unclear—Delafon? Waldrop? This is the site of the book's most compelling convergence). The poems are spare, abstract, and serious—a good counterbalance to the playful and often profoundly funny "conjectures." While one of these poems might (and does) address the mind as simultaneously an experiential reality and literary construct, it reveals a substantially different *way* of the mind—the poem does not muse, it considers the machine behind the musings. And so we read:

. . . curious

ordinary
mind, arbitrary
at the core

imprinted on the
fingers, the whole
animal suffering

under the great ellipses . . .
("Shapes")

Contrast this with Waldrop's prose:

> Would it be possible, Jacob Delafon wonders—a query with, he supposes, no personal, that is, no practical, application—in, for instance, the polar glare, to be afflicted simultaneously with frostbite and sunburn?

Here, too, the wandering mind is laid bare. But unlike the poems, these queries act more like snapshots of thinking (from the outside looking in) than ontological investigations into the space between mind and thought and thought and word (from the inside looking out). Waldrop's genius lies in his marriage of the two in one book—thinking and the "sensitive surface . . . underneath." I do not think, however, that Waldrop intends to suggest that poetry is not the medium of a wandering mind, and that prose is not suitable to sustained abstraction (his oeuvre suggests otherwise). The applications of prose and poetry here are fundamentally practical—rather than integrating styles, Waldrop's abrupt breaks from Delafon's "reveries" (counter-intuitively) afford his thoughts a sustained character. This is a unique joy of the book.

There are quieter but equally important interruptions in *The Real Subject*, moments wherein an "I" outside of Delafon (who is referred to in the third person throughout the book) emerges with an opinion on whatever thought Delafon is at the moment indulging. For example:

> Is there an adequate reason, Jacob Delafon wonders, for the creation and continuation of the universe?

> He—Jacob, I mean—still, you see (naïve), still thinks there is a universe.

Where Waldrop meets the "I" and the "I" meets Delafon is one of the more fun and rather funny questions that *The Real Subject* poses—who is, among these three, the actual subject (subjective identity) navigating the subjects (topics) throughout the space of the text? Furthermore, given the constant references to Delafon's reading (Edmond Jabès, the Bible, Zing Yang Kuo) and the thoughts that follow this reading, how much are each of these subjectivities shaped by the writings of others? It seems that they are all equally dependent—and it is this dependence which constitutes the compelling intellectual crux of this book.

One of the marvels of *The Real Subject* is that it sustains such an intellectual investigation while never once sacrificing humor or pathos. It bears Waldrop's famously pithy wit and wisdom, his concern with the instability of language both inside and outside of the mind, and his insight into insight itself.