

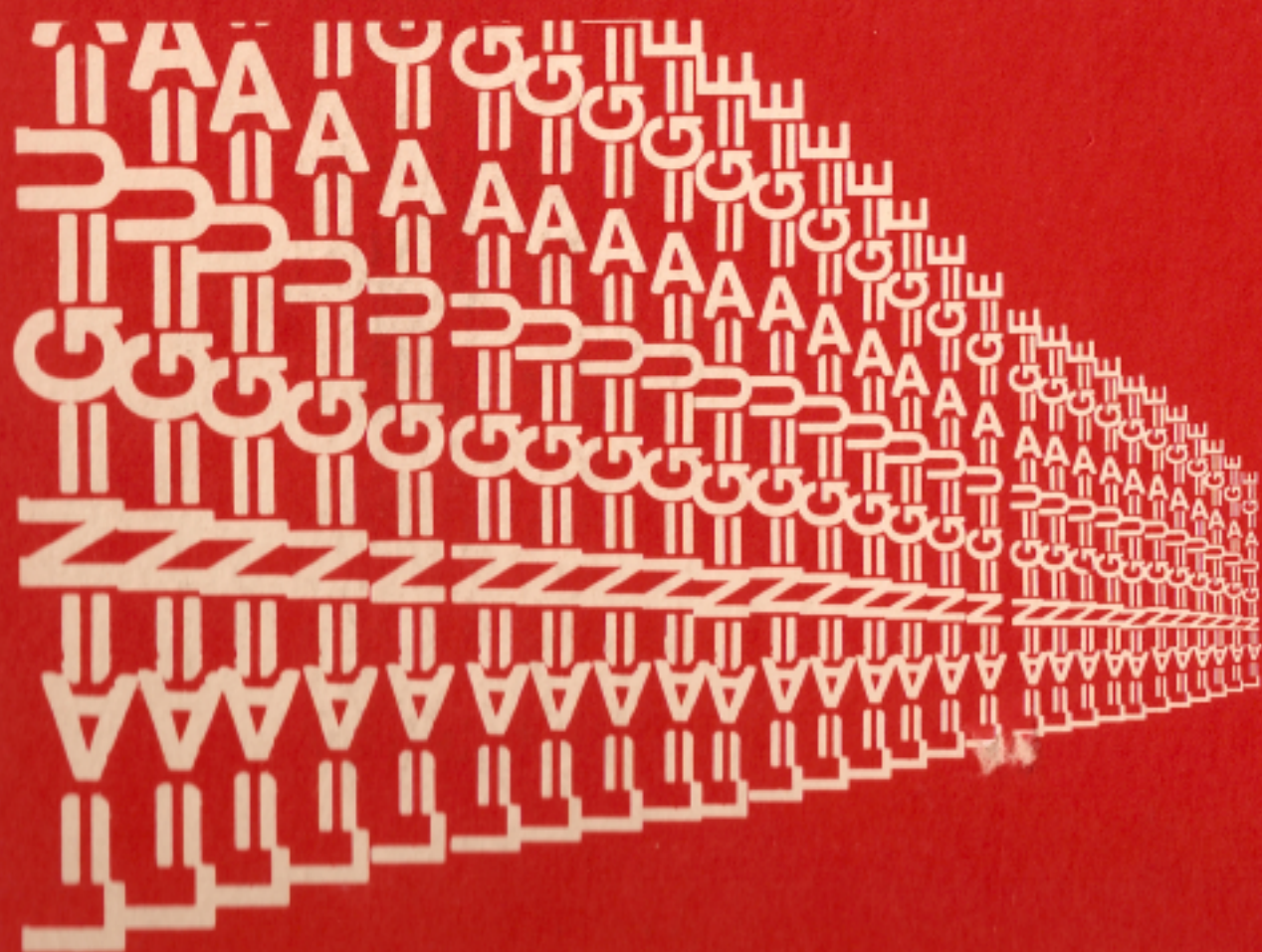
# OPEN

# LETTER

Open Letter, Winter 1982. Fifth Series, No. 1  
L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Issue

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**L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E**

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**Volume Four**

*edited by* **Bruce Andrews & Charles Bernstein**

**Open Letter, Fifth Series No. 1**

Open Letter 5.1

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Volume 4

Bruce Andrews & Charles Bernstein, Editors

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## Approaches Kathy Acker

Steve Benson

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KATHY ACKER WRITES NOVELS, COMPOSED OF LONG PASSAGES THAT GIVE her some room to work out the momentum of various narrative gambits. These passages are fragments out of synch or traditionally linear context with one another. Their origins are ambiguous; some appear flagrantly stolen from others' work, some plainly autobiographical, but in any case they turn resolutely from any such genesis and face forward towards the reader as though oblivious to any context beyond their own confessions of identity. A novel is a collage of such verbal overlays in conscious contiguity.

The figures explain themselves, enunciate their themes in selections from what must be virtually endless snakelike mental sets, to no evident purpose or effect in mundane, lugubrious particularity of vocal gest. When insights occur in the work, they do no more than that and pass with the flush of psychic event, scarcely resonating, neither delaying nor transforming the indulgent evacuation of self-consciousness. Names, identities, issues, emotions, everything evident is *fronted* compulsively. The listener editing for the authentic, the clichéd, the hyped-up, the suggestive ellipsis, the key words, the sensitive implication, is driven back by the landslide of heavy matter.

Obvious, heavy-handedly forced on our attention, evidently commodified in their melodramatic urgency and timely references, Kathy Acker's signifiers are weights being whirled – not constituents of a measured world – out there. The compulsive explanations of motivation, the churning insistence of rhythms, the banal accessibility of all the proceedings disorient – there's no eventual necessary thing to do with them. They are not empathic, though they would seem to mean to be. They depend too steadfastly on their alienation in order to maintain the need to speak for a stranger (the reader), incapable of interrupting them, to reach behind their passive-aggressive emblems.

The work is consequently offensive, inherently and intentionally. Rather than inviting imaginative implication with ambiguities and difference, the voices vigorously, baldly put every nuance forth in the declarative. Each relationship seems so frankly subject-object, one-on-one with one of these

discounted, there are no interstices for the reader to inhabit: there's just a speaker and a void of material, historical things, junctions, ideas, cluttered, empty and blasé. The listener or reader may be knocked off balance at first by sensational, anti-intellectual attitudes struck in the writing, before recognizing the sensual, literary, anti-academic realism underlying its attack. The *presence* of the texts packs a wallop of disconcerting punches; its disregard for the convention of delineating subtle, accurate *representations* of truth stands behind the verbose, demanding voices that command no validity aside from that of text. Rimbaud's 'I is an other' extends to the work itself: this writing, this material, faces off against the acknowledged written world, plainly offspring of that world's experiences (its chromosomes everywhere indicate the parentage of literature) but resistant to integrity *within* its patriarchal orders, the tradition of narrative, that caravan encamped at a mirage. Inevitably such work offends. Through the guise of the common, the predictable, the grossly manipulative, Acker strikes against accepted values, by the transparency of her strategies, her disregard for taste, unities of form, motive, effect – a given character serially adopts quite various voices, behavior-patterns, values, fates, making a travesty of the integrity of the individual and of social responsibility, their very internal disjointedness (or a logic as obscure and plain as that of dreams) radically questioning the possibility of autonomy. To engage art so against the grain one needs to come to terms with one's hostility to it, as well as one's appetite towards its promises. Acker exposes the glamor in narrative fiction as ruthlessly as any novelist has ever written. From such an angle, the realization is rigorous, deeply controlled, virtually pure....

The sometimes garish and sensational genre-literature that Kathy Acker manipulates in her fiction – the pornographic, the violent, the fantastically autobiographical – and its insistence on emotional states of helplessness, fascination, obsessive desire, masochism, rebelliousness, quasi-near-madness – these *seem* determined to press buttons, demanding either acceptance and empathy or rejection and criticism. But I would argue that the overkill deadens; hyperbole reduces its matter to mannerism. The verisimilitude of the situation is cast into doubt, the conventions of a given mode aren't held to reasonably, alternative renderings interrupt each other and encourage a sense of the arbitrary or momentarily impulsive, neither characters nor narration is artistically colored with ambiguity and insight enough to seduce a ready imagination. Often the narration thunders with hooks clamoring for willful identification, and yet the hooks all strike me pointed the wrong way, so I just feel the cold curve of steel pressed against my side and see the point over *there*, uselessly faced nowhere. I am remarkably present and implicated in this displacement of affect – hey, why am I feeling



nothing? – or just the surface *texture* of a violent emotion?? I share the writer's cold uncritical gaze on her material, and recognizing it, and my difference from her, am thrown back on my own distance from the whole affair.

So I don't think her audience/readership succumbs to the situations emotionally – I haven't met anyone who felt swept up that way – but there may be something of the emotionlessness of an unconvincing pulp that does ironically convince one. I suspect a lot of people may dig it as kitsch, as a kind of nihilistically campy reflection of a reductive view on reality that has a lot of currency in the punk worldview, and in New York – the sense we have no power over circumstances and are hopelessly divorced from those who do; the sense sex is inextricably connected with violence; conversation's as valueless as dryhumping, a futile echoing of readymade dead style and information; satisfaction with art derives from recognizing in it that aspect of stylistic and informational reductiveness that refuses to be fooled by desire for more than its own texture, attraction, show. Everything's almost inherently obsolescent, so there's no cause to care to define the purpose or resilience of the work – a onetime effect is enough. And in this, punk nihilism is simply an obverse of the corporate mentality of contemporary capitalism.

Defiant punks, themselves often artists in their approach to life and life-problems, appear intent on establishing themselves as a lumpenproletariat against the bourgeoisie, in large part their background; Kathy shares their ambivalence between an enraged class warfare on the one hand (a romantic legacy of more issue-oriented movements?) and socking in for the hard times ahead (a return of our parents' repressed, the Depression). Her novels are vengefully individualistic, flaunting the rights of the private.

As she becomes more interested in playful and textural qualities in her work, she steps still more deeply in, intrigued with making her peace with it. Her values seem to be becoming more domestic, stabilizing, professional. As an upstart entrepreneur growing out of punk, she depends on tastes it's generated to make a living from her work.

The genres and languages, the texts and personal experiences she draws on are fixed in the past, known, done, and preserved through mundane and typical usages. Their articulation addresses us with a futility, a purposeless finality, and if these are the terms for ego and identity, no wonder she would want to exorcise value from those depositories of life-significance. Rather than engaging or developing new terms with which to mobilize a sense of human values to supplant conventional and depressed ones, she marshals these patently defunct ones as though to hammer out a proof of the absence of knowledge, creation, personal power available to recognition – leaving one to suppose that if such things exist, they must be somewhere else, maybe illusory inasmuch as one aims to grasp them or function in terms of any leverage

their identification may grant us on conditions.

The characters in her fiction are definitely limited; the author is clearly free to alter them at will. The dead weight of mundane banal discharge and the blocking disposition of contingencies of all kinds as the *modi operandi* of life as represented are qualified only by the artifice's ability to wantonly shift on any parameter. In a universe of fixed conditions, the narrative exercises freedom by contradictorily recognizing all as fragmentary, interchangeable, flux, through which it makes a way by erratic crawls and jumps. The life of the writer's somewhere outside it, in a one-to-one relationship with the writing, in no stable relationship whatever with the figures within.

The work is certainly as serious and internally motivated as it is opportunistic and socially appealing – it derives its cues and value more from the former but the fact that it makes its reputation and status as commodity largely by benefit of the latter make them crucial concerns. When the writing is the life, the social relations that the work agrees to or engenders are particularly accountable and compelling. Choice of content or areas of reference doubtless inform this, but the writing is *how* the life makes itself social, formal, evident and influential. If an investigation into the politics of literature (as the body writing and reading) has possibly begun, Acker's work undertakes a brave and challenging contribution to it, as well as an extremely striking one.

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Clearly, she writes not to represent a life or world she has lived or wants to see lived but to embody some sense of a dynamic condition that needs living at the period of composition. Writing is a language alternative to the rest of acting in the world. Its relationship to that is sometimes adversary, sometimes passionately reverent, often smugly, arrogantly blasé, usually coldly reckoning on the balance required for its hegemony and survival – the writing is, after all, a parasite.

The writer's intense, well-nigh complete investment in her writing does not realize its identity with the rest of her life, by this conception, but eclipses that identity, the writer becoming wholly identified with the work. (This is arguably a radical, surrealist conception, arguably an absolutist commitment to literary fiction *per se*.) In fact Acker traces a decomposition of identity through her acts of novelization, to a point where she now feels fairly free of its presumptions on her circumstance. Hence, voicing the text in a reading is like putting on again a cast-off weight of identity which she no longer feels a compulsion either to assume or to work off. To the degree that the writing act has been truly accomplished, the public work is quite surely fictive, in that not only are the acts it represents not empirically verifiable (Indeed, Acker's work is intentionally counter to verisimilitude (She says, 'What's okay is

when it's so unbelievable you couldn't imagine anybody dealing with it'), a key indicator of her disinterest in representationalism as a grounding to her drift. Parody and the grotesque are frequent means to this disorientation of the realistic interpretation, as are disjunctions of time, situation, identity – literature and the commonly-known world are material not in the writing but of the writing's perceptions.), but also the vital activity that the writing embodies (the need and the execution) is no longer present, but merely evoked. Her prohibition against revisions of any sort in her serial novels testifies to this commitment to the record of the writing act as primary; she is not trying to represent something else.

The impulse to eradicate, annihilate, distort, pervert, fundamentally disturb identity is a recurrent theme in her work and in her commentary on it. I suspect this is why a lot of the masochism – built up not just as an imaged process but also as a series of empathetic, melodramatic hooks – comes in. Sensitive as her early books are to the sense of a process of realization (In Williams' sense of 'the embodiment of knowledge,' the work seems to *live out* the identities and transitory traumatic states the author was interested in.), the imposition of determined fictional identities on the figures of her writing must strike her as the function of a sadomasochistic relationship she has a definite hand in, as master. Doubtless she nonetheless empathizes with even as she manipulates the roles of her slaves – these ciphers she arranges about the page in the images of fatally suffering and conflicted identities. The accessible legibility and blatant dramatic force of her approach, which are coldly and sometimes brutally fronted in her work (such that their being so insistently pushed forward seems ever more remarkable than style and content, often tacky and mundane, are themselves), are the chains and racks themselves to hold flatly in place the variously strained and relaxed forms of identity lent the work by either writer or reader. Then, how much can s/he take before s/he goes over the edge? and, what edge? and, is there any edge? or, is there merely legibility, and letting the reader let the book go, whatever the end of reading? The pictured images, the voiced ideologies, the infought conflicts, are the variously displayed and exercised instruments of this lascivious, largely fantasied torture.

Such a characterization might apply to most any writing. Acker doesn't half-deconstruct the apparatus à la Huysmanns, Lautreamont, Gide or Robbe-Grillet, with their ironic and significant relish for relationship with reader and the figures in the fictions. Her work doesn't aim to provide a reconciliation to her conflict over identity, significance and relationship so much as recognize the conflict and push it, to the breaking point, or out the window, or till she trips over it and beyond, if necessary – so she *doesn't care* what use the reader has or it, so long as it escalates the conditions that are most centrally problematic for her in the writing project. Such a character-

ization can't account for the fact that her writing has changed since then. If the Image of the Self might be said to be the antagonist of her project and whatever can be pitted against it her multifarious protagonist, then her allowance of so much of the field of articulation to confession, explanation and other self-referential histrionics on the part of her central figures belies the absoluteness of her campaign against the Image's primacy: it seems to be the establishment of stacity and status in the Image that antagonizes: The novels work Singleness through one thing after another, restlessly refusing to let it stop, even at nothing ...

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# The Invisible Universe

Kathy Acker

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IT DOESN'T AT ALL WORK TO SAY THAT YOU FANTASIZE — THAT WOULD BE taking the fantasy for a representation of scenes. Rather, I believe, your use of fantasy enables you to render intricate, organicize the text. Freud explains that, for an individual, fantasy admits all the combinations. Example: I hit you; I am you hit; ... The verb here doesn't change. Likewise, in your fantastic texts, the verb (the action) is also the main actor and the represented. Fantasy, then, is a structural combination. It is: all possible actions, or the illusion of monotony. Variations and mutations repeat the same verbal structure. Do you agree?

Yes. The organic process I use immediately proposes, then divides the text. Not what is supposedly represented, but the text. When I am writing, the text-body is my body so there's no problem of inadequate fantasy (fantasy versus reality). The movement is strictly economic. There's no eroticism, for eroticism is simply a deviation of the sexual act. Desire creates hierarchies and 'unnatural' has no meaning. All acts are part of the sexual movement as all sexual movements are parts of all other acts. The text is material.

In fact, the text is never sexual. It is only material, nothing else. What destroys idealism deepens the materialism of the text. Then the sexual act disappears, or is lacking, under the mass of processes.

How does writing destroy?

By breaking down idealisms. I bring everything to the material level. Active verbs; present participles and the past perfects of these active verbs; these kinds of adjectives or the redoubled prefixes of verbs rather than adverbs; commas and dashes instead of full stops. The abolition of all psychological, humanistic, and metaphysical terms. Complete attention to the phonetic material level.

The text sits on an incessant double working: the webbing of a word's reference and a word's sound. This and only this is the text. There is no idealist proposal.

The text is a motor: Everything in it is for a purpose: Words are written to be eaten; words lead, treaties, up to their exhaustion.

The text has roots simultaneously in the body which acts and the body that writes. I use three levels of writing. At first, a savage text that I wrote when I was fourteen. For me the sexual desire has always been bound to this savage desire to write. I write as I masturbate. On the other hand, there's a text of notes, a huge mass of notes, the learned text. Just as my day begins around 9:00 AM and ends at 2:00 AM (from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM and from 10:00 PM to 2:00 AM), so one text is inserted into this time circle in a regular manner and then another. I don't write; I type. I mechanically insert one text into another text. Mechanically meaning musically. While I was writing EDEN, EDEN, EDEN (Gallimard), I was listening to Japanese, African, Arab, South American jazz, the whole mass of Italian madrigals, Monteverdi. I calculated the timbre, the volume. Each text-sound immediately modulates every other text-sound. The wind immediately modulates each organic noise. All relation-textures are always inextricable.

[EDITORS' NOTE: Above based on interviews with Pierre Guyotat in *Literature L'Interdite* (Gallimard, 1974).]

Reporting is a means to an end. In reporting, the reporter uses language to describe an incident which is outside the language being used. Literature, on the other hand, is not a means to an end. Therefore: when meaning is destroyed, literature emerges.

When, teaching English to Tournon students, I lost my belief in God, I began to believe in literature. The commitment to act for the Western world is what religious practice/philosophy is for the Eastern.

Since words not ideas or meanings make up literature, the actual words the 'purest' (i.e. stripped as far as possible of references) relations between words, for that's what words are, are literature's ground. The values of truth or falsehood, or fiction and documentation, refer to referentiality.

The crux here, and if it is lost literature disappears, is that words are referential.

Any genre of writing – political analysis, romantic novels, mathematical proofs, Ronald Reagan's vomitings – as soon as its meaning is destroyed becomes literature. The hotter the writing, the greater the tension between the meaning(s) and the ongoing destruction, the more literary the work.

For those to whom reality is unbearable.

If literature concerns itself with truth values only insofar as it concerns itself with referentiality, what is reality for a writer? If the reality is the words themselves, words are existences whose values depend on differences. Words are precise measurings of specificities. Money as it occurs in our society is the

opposite of such occurrences. Since money now defines the greatest proportion of human relations, valuable or specific human relations aren't occurring. For instance, on Christmas Day an American pilot can, by machine, write MERRY CHRISTMAS on a bomb and send it down to Vietnam only because he, I presume it's a he, doesn't know reality or value. The American school system bases its educational practices on the definition of *knowledge as the remembering of information*. But *knowing* (reality) is *knowing values*.

Why do we want to destroy?

Because a value is specific and absolute unto itself. No person knows by reducing events in time to meanings. For instance, a newspaper reporter uses the meanings his words refer to to suggest certain models or control his readers. Truth is a contrivance resting on opinion which is always taught.

The shit is a poet. She's a poet because she tells everyone to go to hell. That's the only definition of a poet there is. She the shit poet has lots and lots of money. Not LOTS of money, but she is an upperclass bourgeois ensconced in wealth, which means she doesn't know she's as starving as the American misery-stricken bums she's as poor as them she will find this out when during even the slightest Depression, and in the future the American economy has to undergo BIG DEPRESSIONS INFLATIONARY RECESSIONS, the least miserly landlord is going to take back his house which she's been paying a huge mortgage on fifty years now while her taxes will rise. Dear Bourgeoisie, your bourgeois money isn't real money. Someone's been fooling you. So this shit poet has childhood material crap and a mommy and daddy who love her. Mommy doesn't teach her she's a cunt, but instead feeds her TV and talks to her just like the TV mothers think their TV daughters are their best friends. Daddy doesn't rape her. This is the happy family. What is a happy marriage? Does a cock know how to go into a cunt anymore?

Daddy dies because he buries his head in shit just like an ostrich which is very stupid of him. No one now knows what he was thinking about. Two years before he died he blew eight hundred thou and then he stole his mommy's diamond rings, but he wasn't a drag queen so he couldn't have blown the money on men. The next year mommy married a tight-ass Colonel because she had a hot cunt. Mothers have no right to be women and women have no right to have cunts they should be devoted to their children. Because they don't cut out their livers and feed them braised in marsala to their children their children want to kill them this is the start of the Spanish revolution.

How does a great writer come into being? Hatred antipathy to human fear of everything selfishness inability to communicate deformed physical attributes chronic illnesses moods-like-demons in particular: epileptic escapism, thundering naive desires? The first step in the stage is to fuck every street-walker especially the eight-dollar-a-throw ones. Simultaneously feel mad incurable wants for sex (symbols) you can't have. (The beginning of sym-

bolism.) Put yourself in a position where you HAVE to escape while a sex disease is rendering you helpless.

This is the time to escape. (Paradise. The New World. Longings for purity. Love.)...

That human life is but a first installment of the serial soul and that one's individual secret is not lost in the process of earthly dissolution becomes something more than an optimistic conjecture, and even more than a matter of religious faith, when we remember that only commonsense rules out immortality. A creative writer can't help feeling that in her rejecting the world of the matter-of-fact, in her taking sides with the irrational the illogical the inexplicable and the fundamentally everything, the word is the relationship of repression, she is performing something similar in a rudimentary way to what under the cloudy skies of gray Venus.

For Owl, wise though He was in many ways, able to read and write and spell his own name WOL, yet somehow went to pieces over delicate words like MEASLES and BUTTERED TOAST.

'Owl, I require an answer! It's Bear speaking!'

But the circularity of the signification of any particular signifier itself caught in the circularity of the signification of language itself so that issuing a reward is sneezing and there are no tissues around because there weren't any sneezes so Owl goes on and on, using longer and longer words, until at last he comes back to where he started but nobody can remember where that is.

He didn't really know what Owl was talking about.

'Didn't you see the words?' said Owl, a little surprised. 'Come and look at them now!' So they went outside. And Pooh looked at the words and he looked at the bell-rope, and the more he looked at the bell-rope, the more he felt that he had seen something like it, somewhere else, sometime before.

Pooh nodded.

'It reminds me of something,' he said.

Our last night... Up until three in the morning... Dawn cocks crow, my two candles are lit. I am sweating, my eyes are burning. I have early morning chills. How many nights behind me! In four hours, I leave Cairo. Farewell, Egypt!

Tyltyl has no sooner turned the diamond than a sudden and wonderful change comes over everything. The old Fairy alters then and there into a princess of marvellous beauty; the flints of which the slum-building's walls are built light up, turn blue as sapphires, become transparent and shine and spin like the most precious of stones. The junk furniture takes life becomes resplendent; the deal table assumes as grave and noble an air as a marble table; the clock face winks its eye and smiles genially, while the door which contains the pendulum opens and releases the hours, which, holding one another by the hand and laughing merrily, begin to dance to delicious music.