edited by
LOUIS ARMAND

HIDDEN AGENDAS
UNREPORTED POETICS

edited by
LOUIS ARMAND

prague 2010

Litteraria Pragensia Books
www.litterariapragensia.com

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Published 2009/2010 by Univerzita Karlova v Praze
Filozofická Fakulta

Litteraria Pragensia Books
Centre for Critical & Cultural Theory, DALC
Náměstí Jana Palacha 2
116 38 Praha 1, Czech Republic

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The publication of this book has been partly supported by research grant MSM0021620824 "Foundations of the Modern World as Reflected in Literature and Philosophy" awarded to the Faculty of Philosophy, Charles University, Prague, by the Czech Ministry of Education.

Cataloguing in Publication Data

Hidden Agendas. Unreported Poetics, edited by Louis Armand.—1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-80-7308-311-3
1. Poetics. 2. Poetry. 3. Literary Critcism.
I. Armand, Louis. II. Title

Printed in the Czech Republic by PB Tisk
Cover, typeset & design © lazarus

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Notes in lieu of an Introduction

Unreporting / Poetics

Speaking at Prague's Film Academy (FAMU) recently [9 May, 2010], Kenneth Goldsmith—curator of Ubu Web—addressed two of the principal fallacies of the contemporary archival project: the perception that web archives are "acts of reception" in anything more than a provisional and procedural sense; and that such archives are in any way stable. A certain view has arisen that, in the age of the internet, marginality in literature and other aspects of culture has become a kind of anachronism. There is an expectation that the in-principal accessibility offered by electronic archives obviates the need for critical reception and contestation—that marginality is simply a symptom of inefficient information retrieval. But if nothing else, the sheer magnitude of the potential electronic archive (and the enlarged proprietary interest in exploiting it) renders illusory the idea that "accessibility" via the web equates to reception; indeed, a great deal about how the web has evolved and is now organized stands opposed to such an idea at every level. Yet even where open archival resources currently exist (such as *Jacket* Magazine, Penn Sound, the Electronic Poetry Centre, Ubu Web...) to gather and present what might otherwise be perceived as underreported, marginal, or fugitive works (or works by writers not represented in the "mainstream"), there remains the issue of the instability of record *exacerbated* under net-conditions, and the simple fact that no archive (and no canon, for that matter) is ever a surrogate for the ongoing task of critical reception. If the web reinforces one lesson, it is that everything remains contestable.

Goldsmith's talk underlined another aspect of "marginality" in the wake of the internet—the sometimes *undesirability* of access. Beyond a type of Luddite mentality, there is a view counter to the pervasive Google-ization of the web which invites a certain difficulty in making particular types of archival material immediately locatable. Ubu Web's self-removal from the Google search engine points to a growing aversion to the market cult of accessibility and the tyranny of distribution (mediated and regulated by proprietary bodies such as Google, Amazon, et al.). That is to say, a resistance to the regularization of the web and the *Matrix* mentality that seeks to proprietarise even marginal "content"

as potential commodity. Ubu Web's status evokes that of other "informal" networks sometimes associated in the privately owned media with web piracy, so-called, and the Creative Commons network with its affiliations to remix culture, open source and peer-to-peer. The copyright status of Ubu Web ("we act as if copyright doesn't exist") and some other online archives also points to the relationship between a certain type of cultural marginality and the shifting norms of political economy—for some time thrown into disarray by the seeming formlessness of the World Wide Web, but now subject to increasing normalization. What this also highlights is a resistance to both the fetishisation and corporate colonization of the "marginal" (whether in terms of gender, ethnicity, political dissidence, locality or as an artefact of avant-garde-*ism*). As the utopian view of the internet—represented in its formative years by Ted Nelson's Xanadu project—recedes, archivists and artists alike have had to confront the universalizing trends of the web-as-marketplace, in which the invaluable project of recuperating lost, fugitive or obscure works is increasingly marred by a profit compulsion, both cultural and financial—the most excessive and destructive example, perhaps, being Amazon.

Beyond these issues, there is the question of how "marginality" itself may be seen to underwrite a poetics—not simply a style or poetic stance, but a technics of composition. In the context of electronic archives and the World Wide Web, there has emerged a considerable body of work devoted to hypertextuality and "textual genetics," both of which explore the liminal character of non-sequential writing and modes of textual transmission—and which, incidentally, still remain largely unreported within the supposedly major discourses of literary theory. It may seem to go without saying that such is also the case for any genuinely innovative work that does not in some way conform to the technological or aesthetic placements of the current institutions of culture and learning (consider the re-normalisation of critical theoretical writing after the "death" of deconstruction), and applies equally within the institutionalization of the avant-garde. Radical innovation today, in spite of—or perhaps even because of—the pervasiveness of networked information environments, remains virtually invisible. And here arises a quandary—which is that (wherever it has come to supersede previous forms of information retrieval and habits of scholarship) the sheer magnitude of the electronic archive ostensibly *obliges* us to be, in some respect, complicit in the delegation of critical reception "to it," allowing ourselves to become blind to whatever is not yet assimilable within its present structures (and to what, by way of propriety forms of software obsolesce, is periodically lost within its labyrinthine "unconscious")—however "improbable" this may be made to appear.

Paradoxically, it is only in such ways that the idea of the marginal is able to form and reform, in the gap between conformity and formlessness. The marginal always approximates itself without ever

succumbing to it-self. It is, to paraphrase a well-known formulation, always in a nascent state—a state not of its own choosing. If *marginalization* and avant-*garde* tend to intersect in contemporary usage, it is only to the extent that each evokes a certain state of affairs in relation to which a critical "situation" may be said to be operative (in the sense that both terms describe a project). And yet the marginal remains relativistic in the extreme, and equally indeterminate. Or to put it another way: there is nothing self-evident about the marginal. All reports of it, by whatever frequencies transmitted, *defy* hearing.

*

Originally conceived as a sister title to *Avant-Post: The Avant-Garde under "Post-" Conditions* (2006), this volume grew out of a number of discussions about "marginality" (as above), and reception (or critical "reportage"). It assumed a contrarian stance towards the idea of a global exchange of poetic information, as it were. An unreported poetics could not be allowed to simply be thought as the disadvantaged or disenfranchised *other* of a presumed mainstream. If marginality is relative, it is also pervasive. It is indeed just as pervasive as the mechanisms of normalization at work in *any* information/language environment.

For this and other reasons, one of the starting points for this volume was a revisiting of an issue of *TriQuarterly* magazine (once the pre-eminent journal of American avant-gardism, now defunct in its print incarnation): number 38, Winter 1977, "In the Wake of the Wake," edited by David Hayman. In it, Hayman lifts the veil of canonicity from the figure of James Joyce and foregrounds the continuing evolution of a Joycean poetics in dialogue with contemporary poetics at large—a dialogue, for Hayman, indicative (thirty years ago) of the situation of writers as diverse as Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, Maurice Roche, Hélène Cixous, Philippe Sollers, Arno Schmidt, Christine Brooke-Rose, Samuel Beckett, Raymond Federman, John Cage, Gilbert Sorrentino, William Gass and Italo Calvino. In the process, Joyce himself becomes a kind of re-nascent, "marginal figure"—a figure largely unrecognizable from the viewpoint of the Joyce Industry and the history of literary "modernism" as taught in universities—whose legacy is ultimately one of contestation. Indeed, for and in whom the ongoing necessity for *critical* reception *is poetics*. A poetics, moreover, that is able, even today, to establish a point of view *from the margins*, not because it exercises claims over the marginal, but because its most vital element is precisely what cannot be expropriated to the business of copyright profiteering and canon-building—even when that business does its utmost to simulate, incorporate or purchase the very idea of the "marginal."

This volume, however, is not an attempt to take a stance on marginality or to systematize a critical poetics. Nor can it claim to give

anything like an overview of a state of affairs. Its rationale is far less "coherent" than that. In consideration of the ambiguous status of "major" writers like Joyce and of a certain marginality that escapes normalization in their work—and indeed continues to evolve in dialogue with a contemporary poetic practice "on the margins" of that strange institution called Literature—a number of writers/editors were invited to reflect on a poet, a group of poets, or a poetics from the last half-century, that they deemed of personal significance and which they felt to have been underestimated, neglected or overlooked. Consequently, each contribution is both subjective and critical. Brought together in this way, they represent a tentative critical assemblage that nevertheless points towards a substantial and necessary project that could never, in any case, be subsumed between the covers of a single book, or of several dozen books. It is a project whose scope is indefinable, because the problems belonging to it and emerging from it exhibit a certain porosity and plasticity. Moreover the problems themselves evolve from circumstance to circumstance. There is no objective marginality, even if we may speak of "traditions of marginality" (as for example Kathleen Fraser has).

The idea of marginality has always been subject to the hegemonies at play within local cultural discourses. Likewise, even where "innovation" is most hotly contested, its terms often remain encumbered by assumptions of cultural centrality, historicity, and tribalism. The logic of marginality translates difficultly in those contexts in which its commentators are accustomed to assuming a "global" authority; and yet beyond the limited confines of their various debates—even aided by the internet—their most pressing concerns remain obscure.

For this reason, but not only for this reason, the scope of this volume has been opened as broadly as possible—although, in the end, its focus has restricted itself to English-language poetics. This by contingency, rather than by design. When it first began to take shape, *Hidden Agendas* looked very different from the way it does now. To the extent that the present volume is in a sense "ghosted" by another, virtual one—one which includes writing on "No Regrets" (the Sydney Women Writers Workshop of the 1970s), on the Cuban exile Octavio Armand, on the anarchist and Sydney Push writer Harry Hooton, and numerous others—Armand Schwerner, Nicole Brossard, Charles Buckmaster, Karen Mac Cormack, Véronique Vassiliou, Jackson Mac Low, Barbara Guest, Steve Carey, Amanda Stewart, π.O., Hannah Weiner, Alain Arias Misson, Sylvia Legris, Ray Crump, and Ania Walwicz—here doubly-unreported according to the proscriptions of accident alone. Among those whom circumstance ultimately prevented from contributing: Pam Brown, Ruark Lewis, Caroll Watts, Edmund Berrigan, Chris Mansell, John Kinsella, Peter Riley, Steve McCaffery and Pierre Joris. If nothing else, these names ought to serve as a kind of index of further reading—implied lineaments of an ongoing discussion.

Alongside the many authors and also editors which this volume *might* have addressed, there are also the almost countless number of fugitive publications which existed in print before the advent of the Web—no less fugitive in light of the growing realization that distribution *is* publishing: small presses like Talisman, Barque, O and Textbase, along with magazines and zines like *Carbuncle*, *Jejune*, *Quid*, *Bull Head*, *Angel Exhaust*, *Score*, *Tinfish*, *Skanky Possum*, inheritors of the mimeograph and samizdat legacy of the 1970s and 80s. Such presses and (non)periodicals represent the very armature (and not merely an archive) of a properly contemporary poetics, too often absorbed and obliterated in the eminent domain we call Literature, but which is in fact little more than real estate; reminding us that the "marginal" is a *complex*—a whole web of parallel universes surrounding and overlapping whatever purports to constitute a "centre," yet about which it remains in the dark.

Kyle Schlesinger

No One "Understands" Language: Asa Benveniste & the Trigram Press

Asa Benveniste and his Trigram Press piqued my curiosity when I began writing a dissertation about the renaissance in poetry and letterpress printing that began after WWII in America. I discussed William Everson's Untide Press, Jonathan Williams's Jargon Society, Wallace Berman's *Semina*, Dave Haselwood's Auerhahan, Piero Heliczer's Dead Language, Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop's Burning Deck, Jon and Gypsy Lou Webb's Loujon, and Charles Alexander's Chax, as well as other notable (largely self-taught) printers and presses that revolutionized the written word and made books that rivaled those of the European and Russian avant-garde in the early twentieth century. I wanted to learn about the fine points of typography, letterpress printing (which was by then a commercially obsolete technology or specialty service) and the extraordinary things that occurred when poets took production into their own hands. In other words, I wanted to see what happened when poets and devoted readers actually *printed*, rather than merely *published* the writing they believed in.

In the 60s and 70s, letterpress equipment was affordable and easy to find, but even the most utilitarian jobs required considerable skill as well as a substantial commitment of time and patience. Before the gentrification of urban America took hold, poets coming of age in the 50s, 60s and 70s were often able to support themselves with part-time jobs, affording them the opportunity to typeset a manuscript letter-by-letter, word-by-word and line-by-line. Some (like poet Ed Dorn) would have received basic training in printing in high school, while others (such as Clifford Burke) might have had part-time jobs working for the local

* Special thanks to Tom Raworth and Alastair Johnston, without whom this essay could not have been written. Thanks also to Washington University's Special Collections Library for permission to quote from letters contained in the Trigram Press Archive. Additional thanks to everyone who has corresponded with me about Trigram Press and Asa Benveniste, particularly Jed Birmingham, Steve Clay, Ray DiPalma, Ken Edwards, Harry Gilonis, Alan Golding, Alan Halsey, Anselm Hollo, Pierre Joris, Peter Quarterman, Tim Shaner, Bill Sylvester, and Sam Warde. The title of this paper, "No one 'understands' language" is a sentence from Benveniste's essay, "Language: Enemy, Pursuit."

paper as high school or college students, but the majority of the baby boomers would have picked up printing on their own. Time, space, accessible equipment, NEA grants (especially under the Nixon administration), and a sense of urgency, were the major forces behind the proliferation of the small press movement.

Of course, this renaissance was not isolated to America. At this pivotal moment in media, politics and poetics, there were others throughout Europe who shared similar convictions and became forerunners of what would come to be known as "artists' books" in the 1970s. Tom Raworth and Barry Hall's Goliard, Gael Turnbull's Migrant, Stuart Montgomery's Fulcrum, Simon Cutts's Coracle, and Asa Benveniste's Trigram were among the finest literary presses in the UK. They contributed much to an ongoing poetic dialogue on both sides of the Atlantic, and consistently published exceptional writing in satisfying, if not "artistic" formats.

With no less than a dozen books of poetry to his credit, Benveniste was one of the major (if forgotten) voices in the British Poetry Revival, and he generously gave his expertise in printing, publishing and typography to a generation (or two) of emerging and then unknown writers who would forever change the face of poetry. He was a brilliant editor, decades ahead of the mainstream literary curve, seemingly oblivious to the trends and fads of the time. His standards as an editor were in sync with his own writing, while also reflecting his meticulous skill and instinct as a printer and designer. He once wrote of himself:

> For a time in my mature idiocy before truth came face to face—I always cited, for biogs of this sort at the back of littry magazines, a first book of poems I never wrote. I called it "Cities & Whitethorn" (note the ampersand). A fantasy at first; lately I'm beginning to think I did write it and that it was published by someone, somewhere.[1]

Since my research was on American printers, I promised myself that when I finished my thesis I would begin reading up on Benveniste and Trigram, but quickly realized that very little had been written about the press or its proprietor. Indeed, in the course of my research, I discovered that there was very little scholarship on literary publishers whose hallmark accomplishments did not contribute directly to the seemingly not-so-distant worlds of graphic design, artists' books or even the private press lineage that began with William Morris. Bibliographies devoted to twentieth-century presses are few and far between, and even checklists are uncommon. Given that the technologies of printing and publishing have changed more in the last 50 years than the last 500, it seems to me that something must be done to preserve the histories of contemporary publishers, to say nothing of the challenges we now face with archiving digital files and cataloguing print-on-demand publications.

[1] Asa Benveniste, "Asa Benveniste on Himself," *Critical Quarterly* 32.3 (1990): 112.

I am of the opinion that literary critics often neglect textual studies, underestimate the value of bibliography and few have the expertise or inclination to address publishing histories in a meaningful manner. I'm interested in another breed of publishing, an approach that prioritizes content while making significant contributions to innovation in design; publishers that seek to revolutionize the word as object and idea, even if their typography, like Benveniste's, is beautifully understated.

Aside from an obituary by Tom Raworth, an essay by Alastair Johnston and a poem by Roy Fisher called "At the Grave of Asa Benveniste," I found very little writing about the poet or his press, so I began doing some grassroots research.[2] I was convinced that there must be more, so I sent an inquiry to the Poetics Listserv (an international forum for dialogue about poetry and poetics with just under 2,000 participants) and I received a number of generous, though somehow enigmatic responses. At times it seemed as if everyone caught a glimpse of Benveniste, but nobody knew the whole story. Tim Shaner asked me if Benveniste lived in England. When I responded with an affirmative, he wrote:

> I'm glad my memory is still in some kind of working order. And now that you've confirmed my hunch, I start to remember more. I did a little googling around and my other hunch was partially confirmed as well: that Asa used to live in Hebden Bridge, which is in the Yorkshire region of England... Hebden Bridge is just down the way from Heptenstall, which is where Sylvia Plath is buried. The Arvon Foundation, which sponsors writing workshops, owns an old nineteenth-century millhouse near Heptenstall called Lumb Bank, which was donated to the foundation by Ted Hughes. I attended two of these week-long workshops as part of my Antioch curriculum, where I took courses with Carol Ann Duffy and Ian McMillan, and Hanif Kureishi paired with someone whose name I can't remember now (a TV writer who used to work with Tracey Ullman).[3]

I spoke to Steve Clay at Granary Books who told me that although he loved the press, he never had any direct contact with Benveniste and suggested that I write Tom Raworth, Miles Champion or Thomas Evans. Alan Golding told me that he visited Benveniste's Imprint book store in Hebden Bridge: "I got the impression that the 'bookshop,' though it was a literal shop, consisted largely of his own personal collection." Golding also mentioned that Maggie O'Sullivan, "lived just over the hill in the next town, Heptonstall" and suggested her as a potential source of

[2] Raworth's "Asa Benveniste and Trigram Press" appeared in *Critical Quarterly* 32.3 (1990): 110-112. Johnston's "Asa Benveniste: A Poet of Unique Type" first appeared in *Ampersand* 10.3 and was reprinted in his collection of essays *Ellipsis* published by Poltroon Press in Berkeley, California in 2008. Fisher's poem appeared in *The Long and the Short of It: Poems 1995-2005* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2005). In October of 2006, Sam Warde brought Jeremy Reed's poem "Asa Benveniste" to my attention. It appeared in *Tears in the Fence*.

[3] Tim Shaner, e-mail to the author, December 13, 2005.

information.[4] Ken Edwards of Reality Street in the UK also directed me to Raworth, but had no direct contact with Benveniste. Mark Mendoza sent me Lee Harwood's address in East Sussex. I sent a letter to Mr. Harwood but never received a response. I wrote to Alan Halsey, who with Geraldine Monk publishes West House Books and runs a rare book shop in Sheffield. I met them at the Small Publishers Fair in London in the autumn of 2004:

> Interesting you're researching Trigram and I guess it's not only in the US that it (and Asa) are largely forgotten, if ever known. I can't help very much, the press was disappearing at about the time I was getting involved in the small press world & I only met Asa once, long after, when he was very ill & selling up the stock from his bookshop in Hebden Bridge. He'd just had a leg amputated & was very humorous about it. Died soon after, alas... Trigram belongs to the golden age of UK small presses, when there was Arts Council funding for quality production, and Asa was the best of the designers I reckon, the one who carried the values of letterpress into commercial offset. (The more vaunted Fulcrum is very overrated in design terms although arguably it produced the more influential books.) It also belongs to the last period of high-profile independent bookshops in the UK; the dominance of the chainstores in the 80s with centralised buying policies probably did more to sideline independent publishing than the conservatism of the Arts Council (and the government). Oh of course the remnant of us carry on being awkward squad, it ain't all bad & recently the AC has put decent money our way... Enough latenight rabbiting from me.[5]

Pierre Joris wrote:

> As I was based in London from 1972 to the mid-eighties, I knew Asa from the poetry scene—cldn't tell you how we first met or through whom, it was a very active and busy scene with many readings, pub-crawls, etc. Trigram was obviously a major name among superior small presses at the time, with Fulcrum (which was however already beginning to slow down.) I liked Asa a lot, even though he may well have turned down a first ms. of poems I sent to Trigram after I saw Raworth's ACT, a beautiful book. But Asa himself some time later, 1974-1975, knowing that I had translated [Paul Celan's] BREATHTURN, having seen some of the poems in small mags and/or having heard me reading extracts, asked me for the ms. wanting to publish it. (I remember Asa often talking about Celan, in fact). Unhappily he was unable to secure translation rights as those were sown up by Hamburger & his publisher at the time & it took me a long time talking first to Gisèle Celan-Lestrange and after her death to the son, Eric Clean, to get the translation rights policy opened up. Meanwhile, I kept seeing Asa whenever I was in London & visited a couple of times in Hebden Bridge when he had moved to Yorkshire. Oddly enough, looking

4 Alan Golding, e-mail to the author, November 2, 2005.
5 Alan Halsey, e-mail to the author, October 27, 2005.

around my shelves, I seem to have very few AB books (his own poetry, I mean) left unless many of them are still in storage, which is possible.

> Would love to see your piece when you have it done—btw, thanks for asking: made me pull out the little Asa I have & reread his poems.[6]

I wrote to Peter Quartermain (a terrific printer in his own right) and co-editor of *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* with Richard Caddel. He said, "I never met (or corresponded) with Asa—know his work slightly rather than well. Harry Gilonis in London might have info—he knows everyone and everything."[7] Gilonis wrote: "A kind thought on Peter Q's part, but I never met Asa, corresponded with him very briefly towards the end of his life. Try Wolfgang Görtschacher."[8] Poet Bill Sylvester read an interview with me in the local newspaper where I stated, in response to one of the reporter's questions, that I was attempting to write an essay on Benveniste.[9] He wrote:

> I never met Asa Benveniste, and I spoke to him just once on the telephone. He told me that his diabetes was severe, and that he could not see me. He wanted me to thank Betty Cohen for thinking of him. (He also said that Tom Raworth had a problem with his heart—the first time I had heard it.) His voice was friendly and open. This was about two weeks before he died. As I remember it, the *Guardian* ran a full page obituary—Jean and I were both struck that a poet and publisher would get such attention. Would it ever happen in the States? Not bloody likely.[10]

I went to the Trigram Press Archive at Washington University in St. Louis in December of 2005, and remember hearing the news on the radio about California Governor Schwarzenegger's decision to execute former Crips leader turned children's book author Tookie Williams.

[6] Pierre Joris, e-mail to the author, December 19, 2009. Joris's translation of Celan's *Breath-turn* was published by Sun & Moon Press in 1995. Raworth's *Act*, with drawings by Barry Flanagan, was published by Trigram in 1973.

[7] Peter Quartermain, e-mail to the author, January 29, 2006.

[8] Harry Gilonis, e-mail to the author, November 2, 2006. Görtschacher is the author of *Little Magazine Profiles: The Little Magazines in Great Britain 1939-1993* (1993) and *Contemporary Views on the Little Magazine Scene* (2000).

[9] Kyle Schlesinger, interview by Miakka Natisse Wood, *ArtVoice*, v. 5 no. 10 (March 9, 2006).

[10] Sylvester elaborates: "Betty Cohen was the 'practical' editor of a poetry magazine called *Audit*. She was a warm, gregarious and loving person, so effusive that some people made a little fun of her. She loved everybody. And I believe to this day that she really did. But her love for Asa Benveniste was probably the really great love of her life, or so she said, and she urged us to call him, while we were in England. Her own husband had died, and I think she felt free to speak out. (At least one of her daughters was not pleased by the revelation.) The magazine *Audit* reflected more of the conflicts and shifts in interest than any of us realized at the time. The editor was Mac Hammond who was widely known and admired, and for a few years had been thought of as a 'modern' poet, in touch with pop culture, movies and he avoided stereotypes of emotion. He was even perceived by some as a cutting edge theoretician, influenced by Roman Jakobson." William Sylvester, e-mail message to the author, March 15, 2006. I have yet to find this obituary Sylvester mentions in *The Guardian*.

Although the archive is incomplete (1965-1975), there was enough material for me to spend the week reading scores of letters, manuscripts and printer's proofs. Shortly thereafter, Keith Tuma of Miami University signed me on to the UK Poetics Listserv and I wrote an open letter, asking a few questions about Benveniste. More information came in bits and pieces, so I decided to keep track of the fragments with the hope that I might someday cobble together a picture of this remarkable poet and publisher. In writing this, and other essays on poets whose accomplishments have been overlooked by critics, one wonders what can, or should be said, if anything at all. In this short essay, I have chosen to offer a few contextual notes, while focusing on the events of 1968.

Asa Benveniste was born in the Bronx on August 25, 1925 ("Asa," from the Japanese, means "born in the morning;" "Benveniste" from the Latin *bene venistis* "you have arrived well"). He was a childhood friend of San Francisco poet-activist Jack Hirschman who published several books with Trigram (including a collaboration with Benveniste entitled *A Word in Your Season*) and married Benveniste's second wife, Agneta Falk, in the late seventies (David Meltzer performed the ceremony). A Sephardic Jew, Benveniste fought in the armed forces during the Second World War, returned to New York briefly, and in October of 1948 took the SS America back to England where he remained until his death on April 13, 1990 (there's a snapshot of him on the ship embarking from New York to Le Havre on the back of his *Throw Out the Life Line Lay Out the Corse: Poems 1965-1985*). He told Raworth that his distain for the United States was so severe that once when he returned to visit his family he could not bring himself to leave the airport, so they met him there, and he hopped the next flight back to Europe. In his first book, *Poems of the Mouth*, Benveniste wrote that he left New York in 1948, "after being pursued by a doppelgänger in the same furnished coven in Irving Place which Madame Blavatsky inhabited several decades earlier."[11]

With GP Solomos (also known as Themistocles Hoetis), he established *Zero* in the autumn of 1948 while studying at the Sorbonne. *Zero* was an English-language quarterly review of literature and art that was first issued in the spring of 1949. Solomos, also an ex-GI American, pooled his pension with Benveniste and started the most provocative literary journal on the Left Bank. It contained contributions by Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Richard Wright, Wallace Fowlie, Kenneth Patchen, William Carlos Williams, James Baldwin, and other authors. Subsequent issues of *Zero* were released from Tangier where Benveniste lived after his time in France and before moving to the UK in 1950. *Zero*'s masthead was drawn in crayon by John BL Goodwin in Santa Fe,

[11] Asa Benveniste, *Poems of the Mouth* (London: Trigram Press, 1966).

New Mexico in the summer of 1948. Goodwin contributed his own poems to the journal and put the young editors in touch with Paul Bowles, Christopher Isherwood and Jean Cocteau, as well as artists Max Ernst and Matta (all of whom subsequently contributed to this publication). After the second issue, Benveniste moved to England. Solomos continued to publish Zero from various cities, including Mexico City, New York and Philadelphia, and released the *Zero Anthology* in 1956, as well as several other books, but I don't know how much involvement Asa had with *Zero* after he settled in the UK.

In England, Benveniste worked as a market-gardener, in an ice-cream factory, reared chickens and bred pedigree dogs, and even as a character actor in provincial repertory theatre. In London, he married artist and photographer Pip Walker in the mid-50s, returned to New York for a stint at Doubleday, and in 1959 he became senior art editor at Paul Hamlyn back in London. Hamlyn and his brother, poet and translator Michael Hamburger, were part of a Jewish émigré family that came to London from Berlin in 1933 and made a fortune in the publishing industry. A few years later, in 1961, Benveniste became senior editor at Studio Vista, and finally struck out on his own in 1965 to found the Trigram Press with his wife and stepson Paul Vaughan. That spring, Allen Ginsberg read at London's leading alternative bookstore, Better Books, and offered to read elsewhere for free during his visit. On June 11, 1965 an audience of 7,000 came out for the Albert Hall International Poetry Incarnation featuring Ginsberg, as well as the "children of Albion": William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Harry Fainlight, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Spike Hawkins, Anselm Hollo, Michael Horovitz, Christopher Logue, George Macbeth, Tom McGrath, Adrian Mitchell, Alexander Trocchi, Simon Vinkenoog, and others.

Benveniste was a maverick editor; he chose an eclectic range of writers and produced over fifty books by poets such as Jack Hirschman, Piero Heliczer, Anselm Hollo, Tom Raworth, David Meltzer, Tristan Tzara (translated by Lee Harwood), Jonathan Williams, JH Prynne, Louis Zukofsky, and Brian Marley. Visual artists include Jim Dine, Lee Friedlander, Tom Phillips, Barry Hall, Wallace Berman, Glen Baxter, Pip Benveniste, and Jack Smith. In addition to the books and moderate amount of ephemera released under the Trigram imprint, Benveniste also did job printing and took on design commissions for other publishers including Peter Jay's Anvil Press and Bernard Stone's Turret Books. It was a time when publishers worked together. Tom Raworth remembers:

> [Benveniste] had a good print shop for everything, so he could do commercial work at times. It wasn't just the publishing. I was looking at one of those films of Bob [Creeley] yesterday and there's one where he's sitting underneath three big framed Kitaj prints [*A Sight*]. Those were printed at Asa's. That was a job where Creeley sent the poem to us for us

> to raise some money, Kitaj did the design and Asa printed it because he had a fine silkscreen press. So that's how that came about.[12]

Through Hall, the Benvenistes were introduced to Raworth and everyone took an immediate liking to one another. Trigram and Goliard were both young and the presses began to collaborate (formally and informally). Bunting's *Briggflatts* was printed for Fulcrum on Asa's press. Raworth said:

> [We] set the type and had those sort of uncials, those red and black initial letters, one of which is upside-down because we didn't have the right letter, so I think it's a "u" that becomes an "n" or something like that. But that was how it worked, seemed to be a combination of presses. There didn't seem to be some particular sense of competition. What was available, who had space to do something: *Do you want to do this? Would you like to do this? And do you like this?* And then there was another edition, I mean that was like the luxury edition I suppose. Well, they did a lot of books, they're all somewhere I suppose, stacked up. I'm sure they have copies here. Stuart probably has cases of most of them still tucked away somewhere—everything resurfaces.[13]

Trigram Press opened its doors in 1965 (the year of the snake; Benveniste often referred to the Chinese Zodiac in his colophons) at 148 Kings Cross Road (now the home of a new age publishing house called Eddison Sadd), not far from the tube station. Most jobs were printed on a Glockner letterpress or on their Sericol screen print table, but they also had a small platen press and of course, no shop is complete without a manual guillotine. In their early years, the printing and typesetting were performed on the premises, though the binding was always performed elsewhere, with the possible exception of the hand-sewn pamphlets. The first book Trigram published was *How To Make Your Own Confetti* by filmmaker Oswell Blakeston, a title that falls just outside the Jewish/pop/psychedelic/revival that was in the air. Hirschman remembers:

> Berman, a powerful influence, manifested a kind of hip kabbala with his use of Hebrew letters amid the most contemporary scenes of fotomontage. My interest in kabbala, which had begun in the '50s, was intensified; then, in London in '65, I met up with my oldest literary friend, from my neighborhood in The Bronx, Asa Benveniste, who, after fighting in WWII, remained in Europe where he wrote his poems and published Trigram Books and was also involved in a kabbalistic approach to language. When I returned to Los Angeles and was no longer teaching, another poet interested in the kabbala, David Meltzer, an old friend of Wallace Berman, began a correspondence with me from Northern California. Meltzer, who is one of the most knowledgeable poets in the

[12] Tom Raworth, unpublished interview with the author, May 22, 2006.
[13] Tom Raworth, unpublished interview with the author, May 22, 2006.

country with respect to both popular and literary culture, literally saved my "correspondential" life because at the time I was living and writing quite alone in a small house at the end of Venice, California.[14]

In 1966 (the year of the horse) Benveniste published his own *Poems of the Mouth* with drawings by Pip. He wrote, "The Chinese considered the mouth the paramount aperture of the body. God breathed life into Adam. The Hebrew Cabalists believed the utterance of certain sounds so important that some were completely prohibited. The earliest experience of love is oral. Sustenance is taken in the mouth. Speech is the most common form of communication, and we all die first in the mouth… It was only after writing these poems over the past two years that I realised they were linked by the word of mouth." That year also saw the publication of psychedelic-guru George Andrews's *Burning Joy* with painting by Barry Hall, and Jack Hirschman's extravagant gold-foil covered *YOD.* 1967 (the year of the sheep) saw the publication of Piero Heliczer's *The Soap Opera* (with an ensemble of images by Paul Vaughan, Robert Harding Brown, Augusto Genina, Ferro, Wallace Berman, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Jack Smith, and Harold Chapman) and Hirschman's second Trigram title, *Jerusalem Ltd.*

1968 was a year of hardship and strife, as well as a watershed moment in culture and politics, and the Trigram Press was in full swing. The Summer of Love was over; the year began with the Prague Spring, and Benveniste was writing the powerful collection of poems that would appear in his most realized collection to date, *The Atoz Formula*. In May, the largest general strike in history brought France's economy to a standstill. In America, the Vietnam war came home, and the civil rights movement was at its peak; Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* premiered in Washington, DC and the Black Panthers engaged in several fatal shoot-outs with the Oakland Police Department. The fight against nuclear proliferation was on, students were protesting in Paris, Martin Luther King was assassinated, and Richard Nixon was nominated to run for President at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida.

In June of 1967, Anselm Hollo sent a letter to Benveniste from the Isle of Wight congratulating him on the publication of Heliczer's *The Soap Opera*, "…[a] fine book, fine production, 'just right' for the man and his work—both of whom, as you probably know, I have known for quite some time, and always felt warmly about."[15] Responding to Benveniste's invitation, Hollo offered to send a manuscript, a manuscript that would become *The Coherences* with drawings by a then lesser-known artist named Tom Phillips. On March 22, 1968, Hollo sent

[14] Interview with Jack Hirschman conducted by Marco Nieli, *Left Curve* 25.
[15] Anselm Hollo letter to Asa Benveniste, June 17, 1967.

Benveniste a letter from the University of Iowa where he was doing some guest lecturing:

> Dear Asa,
>
> That was a good "send-off"—hope you recovered well—
>
> I'm slowly beginning to find my way round this little town—pretty wintery still, freezing, but not snow—
>
> Met Robt Creeley on my way here, in Buffalo, very run-down by his extensive reading & drinking tours—he may still write a little (probably the "end-paper" type) note on THE COHERENCES, tho I'm not counting on it too much: *by when* shd you have that, if? Also Robert Hogg, who says he'll get off his ass & put together a manuscript soon—and Robin Blaser, who was visiting, for an Arts Festival they had there, & said he'll write to you more extensively, likewise, soon (remarkable, somehow very French-seeming guy—"elegant erudition," like, but quite unobtrusive).
>
> This place is teeming with poets, most of whom I'd never heard of before—makes one wonder how many little pockets like that there may or may not be in the world?

Benveniste wrote back on March 29:

> "Don't know what came over me." You know I passed out, and spent the next three days with bugs in bed. I mean literally unconscious the night of the send-off (is right). Well... OK now.
>
> Creeley note on THE COHERENCES needed as soon as... I think I've found someone who could produce a beautiful cover for the book, and maybe one or two line drawings inside. A poet-painter-musician-bookman-alchemist called Tom Phillips—you may know. Had things published by John Furnival and shows around London (also showing in Chicago at the moment—O Carl, that place still up!) We're seeing what he does en masse on Wednesday and if I come away with photos I'll send them on.
>
> In the meanwhile, here's the poemposter which BPC will probably never do. These are just rough prints we made at the press instead of submitting sketches which no one can make head or tail of anyway. Thought this way a little rigid printing would mean less change in the end. If...
>
> Tom was in Camden Square once more to record another three hours of poems for Stream. I think he's about to board planes for Paris and south—around the 1st or 2nd April. But we aint heard too much from him either.
>
> The ICA opened its door last week with an enormous party, desperate with people and pop and jelly lights along the whole of that 6000 square foot wall. People who hated me kept coming up all evening to shake hands how lonely we were. Don't think I saw Josie there, but we didn't stay too long. Too big. And too nervous.
>
> I think we've finally cut the straw that kept us to Bernard for Teddy. Protesting and turning down invitations to show books at the American Embassy. Conference organised by Eddy on Poetry (for the benefit of the Wisconsin Primaries) a bad thing. Barry and I writing angry letter to Ddy. Stuart not sure yet if he wishes to oppose Ddy on that level. Will Y reply?

London lovely now. Hot and dusty. Gentlemen and ladies walking through the street in their sleeves; other than that people beginning to cross the channel more actively numerously.

It's the season!

I'll send you any stuff that may be suitable from Tom Phillips next week.

Keep happy in that city.

Love,

Asa

On May 14th Benveniste wrote to Hollo with some bad news, which may account for why the typesetting of Trigram books was outsourced (rather than set in-house as it was in earlier years). Benveniste also took issue with Hollo's disinterest in Phillips's drawings for *The Coherences:*

Dear Anselm,

Sorry not to have written before, but up to my heart with all sorts of setbacks. Thanks for the little peace message from the Reps; soon after I got it, a couple of thugs (I guess, although I aint met them) broke into the press and took away every scrap of type and metal we had in the place. About 700 pounds of the stuff, almost worthless as scrap, but blood and oxygen to us. And that right in the middle of my knockdown match with Ted L-S and the illiterate US cultural attaché. You know about that—anyway seemed to me at the time like Chicago-style old movie (Break up the radical newspapers so they wont print those lies no mo'). And to top it with more of the same, a couple of days later, "they" broke into Camden Square, same way, and generally, erratically, upset the rhythm at that end.

Chap ii: so coincidentally a group of irate poets and publishers gathered outside Turret Books on the day of the "poetry symposium" taking place at the USIS, handed in some flowers and wreaths and (you never seen so many against so quiet) the police arrested ten of us (me too) for "obstructing." Case so far postponed until September; gives all of us a chance to square off—for what? Outlines getting a little blurred. And only just now, with a little bread scraped together, back at the press with a couple cases of type and paper to thinking once more of putting ink to cartridge (I mean paper).

Your turnaround on TPhillips did turn me off for a while, because as a matter of fact I'd already asked to design a cover and about 4 drawings for the inside, which he's done. Actually wants to do about seven drawings to choose the best. And I honestly think the stuff he's done is beautiful—in its own right and not only for the book. He digs the poems very much, and has worked on the drawings with great care and calm—

to me some of the best work of that kind around. I think what was wrong with the cover Ambit did was that bad kind of literal illustration of the title that always comes out coy and outlandish. Faces & forms—so on the cover form (graeco/roman lesson on anatomy) & face (some of the same and not enough outside to imply anything else.) Phillips saw

immediately that it would be awry to "illustrate" the poems but read them very closely and has produced four drawings that have the same kind of sequence within them that the poems have. Anyway, you'll see. As soon as he's through with the six or seven he's doing I'll get copies of them and send them on. No, I won't say "nervous." What turns me on is their clarity.

There's also the hump of time now. Tom's poems are in proof with illustrations, and I'd like to bring both books out at the same time. But anyway let me know when you get the drawings. *Hope* you like them.

TMOORER incidentally is in Granada, apparently hating it, but that was when he first got there, sort of alone, non-speaking and weary. Maybe better now. He gets post at Lista de Correos, Granada, Spain. When letters get past the avaricious curiosity of the postmen.

Poems from Hogg? Never came.

Read a story the other day about Aaron Copland and a friend driving through Kansas. Copland insisted that they get through the state non-stop because anything was liable to happen. But finally his friend had to stop for food, and when it came to the dessert, the waitress said they only had peanut flan pie, and Copland shrieked "I told you we shouldn't have stopped in Kansas."

Hope it's warmer. London shines with the sun.

Love,

Asa

A few days later, Hollo wrote back (May 19, 1968):

Dear Asa

V. late, v. stoned—*but*, want to send "sign-of-life" to you, & to thank you for your letter, and to commiserate /or rather, tell you how goddamn FURIOUS I feel, at the bad news of your losses—makes me feel v. much like that "h-t" I remember liking, "I'm Gonna Get Me A Gun"—more so, after short wkend in Chicago: &, more especially, Cicero, there—. Hope TPhillips gets drawings to me soon—really and truly do not want to hang him, nor you, "up" in any way—did I send you WSMerwin and Jonathan Greene's (small name here) comments on THE COHERENCES? If not, tell me, & I'll type up copy—has Ed [Dorn] gotten his "Note" to you? Wd *love* to have bk out same time as Tom's—a *real* concern—Robt. Hogg's ARIES IN PISCES DREAM (12 pp.—maybe a pamphlet? To go with TR's & AH's "bigger" bks?) (*w/out* implying any "value" judgment—on its way to you, under separate cover—[sunshine drawing]

may She shine on you, both love Anselm

Just over forty years later, I wrote to Hollo asking about Trigram, and here's what he had to say:

Living in London from 1958 through 1967, working for the British Broadcasting Corporation's European Services, I quickly became part of a rather heterogeneous group of mostly London-based poets who were

looking for ways to "get out from under" the so-called establishment of various dominant cliques of British poets of those days, such as the Larkin "Movement" and the tattered remnants of the "New Apocalyptics." Our number included poets like Adrian Mitchell, Christopher Logue, Bob Cobbing, Harry Fainlight, Lee Harwood, Michael Horovitz, Pete Brown, Jeff Nuttall, Michael Shayer, Gael Turnbull, Eric Mottram, Tom Raworth, and others. Asa Benveniste, a US transplant, was one of the first small press publishers to recognize the potential of this upsurge of another, wider, sense of what poetry might be. His Trigram Press published many of those mentioned above, in beautifully designed and produced volumes. He himself stated that he was mainly interested in "poetry that was mysterious and therefore not easy to read."

I cannot tell you exactly when I first met Asa, and his then wife Penelope ("Pip," a brilliant visual artist and filmmaker, now 88 years old and, I presume, still active), but I think it must have been in the early nineteen-sixties, and most likely in the company of friends Tom Raworth and Piero Heliczer, the Italo-American poet who spent many years in nearby Paris and also in London. In Asa's hospitable company—never literary parties but animated evenings at his and Pip's home, over drinks and various kinds of smokes—I also met for the first time Jack Hirschman, now still soldiering on in San Francisco (where I reconnected with him in the early Eighties when I was a colleague of David Meltzer's at New College in SF).

Asa's Trigram Press brought out three books with my name on them: *The Coherences*, 1968, still one of my favorites in terms of content and design; *Haiku*, with Tom Raworth and John Esam, also in 1968; and finally *Alembic*, 1972.

Sadly, the last-mentioned caused a rift between Asa and me, and I regret it to this day. He had delegated its design to someone (possibly an intern?) not mentioned in the book, while he was taking a break from the press in (I believe) North Africa. At that time, I was living in the US, teaching at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and when I received *Alembic* there I was absolutely horrified by the way it looked. It struck me as warmed-over "flower power plus psychedelic folk" design, not in tune with the intentions of my work (unlike the two previous books that definitely chimed with those). I let him know about this and received some sort of apology, but we never corresponded after that. Most of the contents of the book were reissued as a volume of the Buffalo Institute of Further Studies No. 27, "Sensation," a modest production designed by Guy Berard which seemed to match my work much better.

My last meeting with Asa must have been in 1967 or 68. I was deeply saddened by the news of his death in 1990. I liked him and Pip very much, and your question has revived many positive memories and quite a bit of research on the Web about his later years and associates. Thanks for asking!

Best,
Anselm

—and don't hesitate to ask me for clarifications or et cetera.[16]

[16] Anselm Hollo e-mail message to the author, December 13, 2009

In 1967, Trigram published one of its greatest books, Raworth's *Big Green Day.* Peter Middleton described it this way:

> It is the sort of book that takes its time to usher you from dustjacket to title page, starting with a cover illustration of superimposed photographs of different types of urban dwelling, then a mustard-coloured endpaper, then a blank page, then a pair of creamy white pages with the words "THE BIG GREEN DAY" in tiny letters at the bottom left to the righthand page, then two see-through vellum pages, the second of which has a large inkblot, around the edge of which is the entire alphabet in uppercase lettering (except, fittingly, a lowercase "i") which approximates a typewriter font. These pages have been looking ahead to the start of the poetry because the next title page is just visible through them. Here the title is in lowercase, the word "green" is printed in its colour negative, red.[17]

Middleton observes, "The ability to see the blot image both as part of, and apart from, the title page speaks to the relation between word and image very cleverly, not least because the blot with alphabet edge is a sign of the failure of writing as well as an image in its own right whose right to be an image is questionable—is it just an error? I think of Ben Johnson's remark about Shakespeare when the actors praised him for never blotting out a line: 'would he had blotted a thousand.'" On May 14, 1968, plans were already underway for Dine's own first, and to the best of my knowledge, last book of poems, *Welcome Home Lovebirds:*

> Dear Jim,
>
> Cheque enclosed for the drawing in BIG GREEN DAY.
>
> Just spoke to the typesetters about your book and they tell me (they *always* tell me) that proofs should be ready on Thursday. But don't pin too much faith on it. What's holding them up is the display fount for the titles I asked for, although I don't really need those yet. Anyway, soon as we have them I'll stick em down on pages and pass them on. Yes, I think overlays might be best for the marginalia.
>
> Tom Raworth sitting gloomily in Granada said he wanted to write to you. Don't stay too long in Germany, eh. They're black pudding eaters there.
>
> Love,
>
> Asa

Sent via airmail August 13, 1968 from 531 Commercial Street in Provincetown, Massachusetts, Dine wrote:

[17] Peter Middleton, "Silent Critique" *Removed for Further Study: The Poetry of Tom Raworth* (Toronto: The Gig, 2003) 16.

dear asa and pip,

it was terrific to hear from you and to get all those gossip cum news notes. we return on sept 3 and cant wait as america goes so far beyond all our fantasies for pure scary bullshit that it will be hard to explain even in person. ive written about ten poems in two months made one large drawing and rite this minute mr ron padgett is here with family and we are trying to collaborate on a mysterious project for holt rinehart and the box project for you is all set.[18] also the best photographer in America is I think my friend lee friedlander. he and i have been talking about a smallish book of my drawings and his photos mixed in some natural way. a book by 2 friends who like each others work. i thought i would offer you the idea first as i think you all could do it beautifully. weve had sunny weather here all summer and have done lots of swimming and i play tennis every day. if you havent already sent the raworth books dont, just hold for me till i get back. there seems to be alot of interest here about my poem book and many people are anxiously awaiting its birth. i dont know about that furnace your thinking of installing......i mean the gold standard is very low couldnt you install one that changed grass into grass? SEE you in a month, nancy sends her love

as do i

Jim

On March 28, 1969, Benveniste expressed concern about the next Dine book, written in collaboration with Lee Friedlander. The letter was sent to Jim Dine c/o Peter Orlovsky, Main Street, South Station, New York.

Dear Jim,

When are you coming back? I got your address from Nancy, and before I got your cards I really thought you were hiding out in Cornwall.

I'm enclosing a couple of catalogues we just done, and sending one to the Gotham Books souk; also one already gone to Milan.

Paul-Cornwell-Jones came in the other day to look at the back warehouse, but no word since. I think he was frightened.

Well, I finally heard from Lee Friedlander and *I'm* frightened. I'm beginning to wonder if the book will ever get past proof stage. A whole list of things we got to do in order to get the maximum accuracy; screen, paper, pigment, varnish, pressure. I mean I don't think we're that *good*. It's just a hobby with us anyway. I dont want to be a professional printer for god's sake! I love the way you and Lee are trying to get the book into 3000 homes from Modart to Fresno, but I xxxxxxxxx may crack under the strain of getting every single print just as it was christened. What with everything else, like Nixon, Vietnam, China, black power, Stuart Montgomery, the weather and my declining prostate gland.

[18] Dine is referring to Padgett's translation of Apollinaire's *The Poet Assassinated*, lavishly illustrated and published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston in 1968. The "box project" is *Oo La La*, a portfolio of original lithographs published by the Petersburg Press in 1972.

But it was nice to hear from you. And that frigging herself on xxxxxxxxxxxxxx Jones Beach.[19]

Love to all

Asa

Jim responds shortly thereafter, by way of postcard:

Dear Grey Eminet,

Don't take Lee too seriously. I'll be back on 20th and we will groove on facts.

Love

Superwordman

Although the best year for Trigram was clearly 1969, which saw the birth of David Meltzer's *Yesod*, Jack Hirschman's *Black Alephs*, Benveniste's *The Atoz Formula*, Jim Dine's *Welcome Home Lovebirds*, George Barker's *At Thurgarton Church*, Nathaniel Tarn's *October*, and Jim Dine and Lee Friedlander's *Work From the Same House* (Trigram's most commercially viable publication to date), everything was in gestation in 1968. In fact, looking at Trigram's publishing history in detail, it is easy to underestimate the singular expedience of Benveniste's urgency in getting books to press. Manuscripts typically yellow on a publisher's desk, but Trigram was very much of the moment, rarely taking more than a year to transform a manuscript into a book, and to put that book on the shelf. By today's standards (without "enlightened" digital technologies and print-on-demand opportunities for expedient publication), their turnaround was absolutely phenomenal, and very well done.

According to Raworth, sometime in 1971, the press moved to Southwark Street and David and Georgie Wolton became partners. Wolton's father was, or had been, a hop merchant, that was what the new building smelled of. Trigram's new home offered more space for equipment, and Benveniste took on a couple of art students as interns. The presses were available to passing friends: Ray DiPalma and Betsi Brandfass printed a booklet while in town. DiPalma wrote to me:

Had an e-mail from Thomas Evans yesterday. I'd mentioned to him that we'd met at SVA and had an opportunity to exchange some books and chat at length. Thomas said that you were interested in Asa Benveniste's

[19] That "frigging herself" likely refers to a picture-postcard from Jim earlier that month featuring a woman in a bikini on the shore.

> work, which I was glad to hear. I got to know Asa and stayed with him briefly when I was living in London in 1972. The copy of *The Atoz Formula* that he inscribed to me is still a prized possession. That summer was also when, upon Asa's suggestion, we published TIME BEING as a Trigram/Blue Chair book—it contained a poem by Asa, one by Tom Raworth, and one by me, with graphics by my then wife Elisabeth Brandfass. It was done at the Trigram Press setup in an old former hops warehouse in S. London. A poem about what went into creating the book appears in my collection PROVOCATIONS. It was Asa's idea that all of us shd write a poem about time, so I suggested we call the book TIME BEING. We signed most of the copies [around 200 were printed & numbered] & Asa sold many of them to London rare book dealers... I think the Library at Buffalo has a copy, so you may have seen it.
>
> All the best,
> RAY[20]

Behind every production at Trigram Press between 1965 and 1978 lurked Benveniste's unflinching typographic and editorial edge. In the late seventies Asa met the Swedish artist Agneta Falk and moved to Hebden Bridge and opened a bookshop. During the 1970s and 1980s the town saw an influx of artists, writers, photographers, musicians, alternative practitioners, teachers, green and new age activists and more recently, yuppies. He kept the name of the press but sold off his printing equipment. A few books were farmed out to other printers, but Benveniste was consistently disappointed by their shabby workmanship, and expressed his disillusion with publishing in his remarkable essay *Language: Enemy*, *Pursuit* published in a limited edition by Poltroon Press in 1980:

> I have never succeeded in printing a book which did not contain an error somewhere, no matter how carefully I prepared for the work. Rabbi Meir relates: "...when I went to Rabbi Ishmael he asked me: My son, what is your occupation? I answered: I am a scribe of the Torah. And he said to me: My son, be careful in your work, for it is the work of God, if you omit a single letter, or write a letter too many, *you will destroy the world*..."
>
> Madness. The last book for which I was responsible, Zukofsky's "A" 22 & 23, one of the most textually difficult books the press has published, reached its final state, even after three grueling, enlightening seasons of proof reading and layout, with eight literals (for each of the trigrams?). Zen errors perhaps, though for Zukofsky's sake it saddened me. He was ill, looked forward to our edition and then I think, from a polite, firm note I had, was appalled at the inaccuracies in his tight, dense syntactical discoveries. I'm told he has died, but in England that's hardly the stuff of mawkish journalism, so I can't be sure. Is it true? Later, a small passage I found in the poem:

[20] Ray DiPalma, e-mail to the author, February 25, 2009.

A beast
in a dream warns not
to kill in all languages

in any language...but itself? Death?

Diagnosed as diabetic, Benveniste refused to inject insulin. His right foot became infected, gangrene developed, and in early 1988 his leg had to be amputated. He wrote about (and around) the experience in his book, *Invisible Ink*, published by Singing Horse Press:

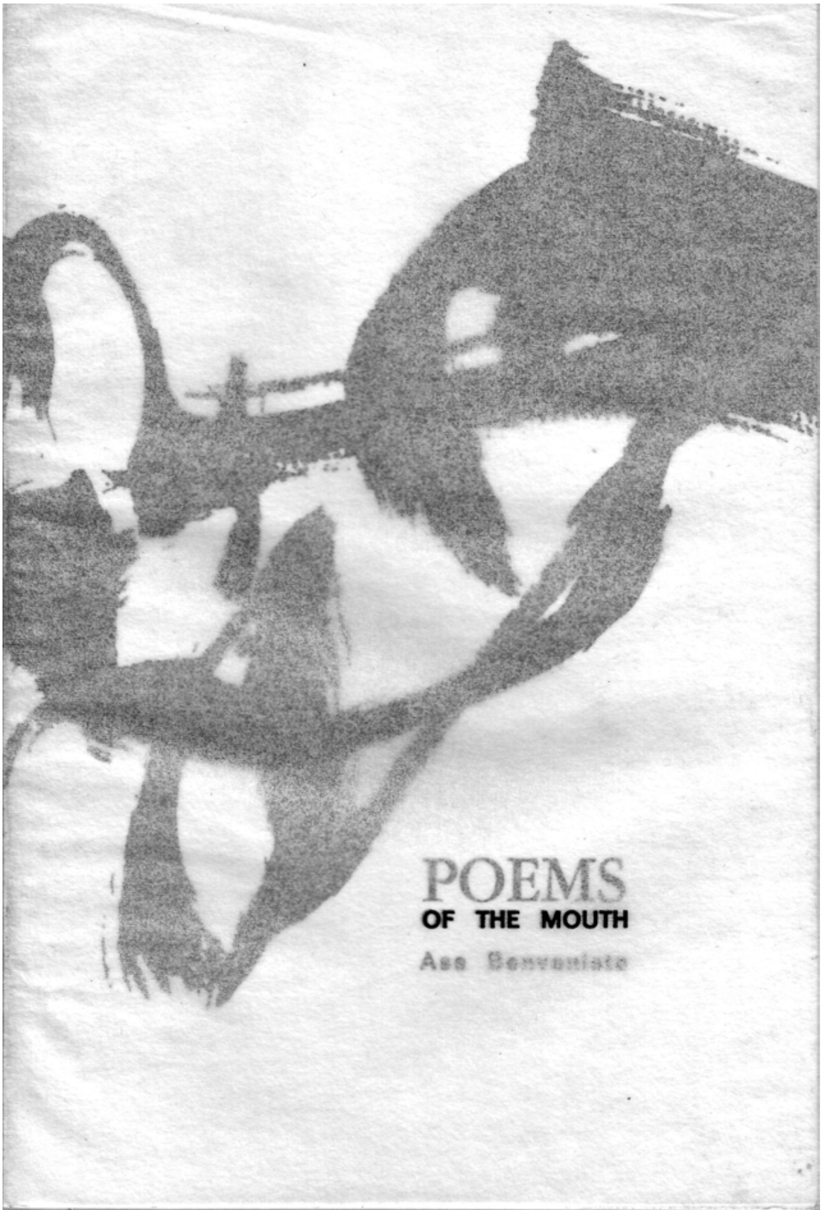
Population Control

Neigh, whinnied the patient camel,
Saw dust across the desert
reaching this white sheet,
being cut with
an economy of scalpels.
But chisels can be heard
outside the theatre.
The anaesthetic begins
to wear off,
the Greek chorus
predicts light showers
over Gaul and Yorkshire,
basks in the afternoon
population moves.
What a rigamarole,
you know what I mean?
He writes poems without
one excess adjective,
his language
which is pure prose.

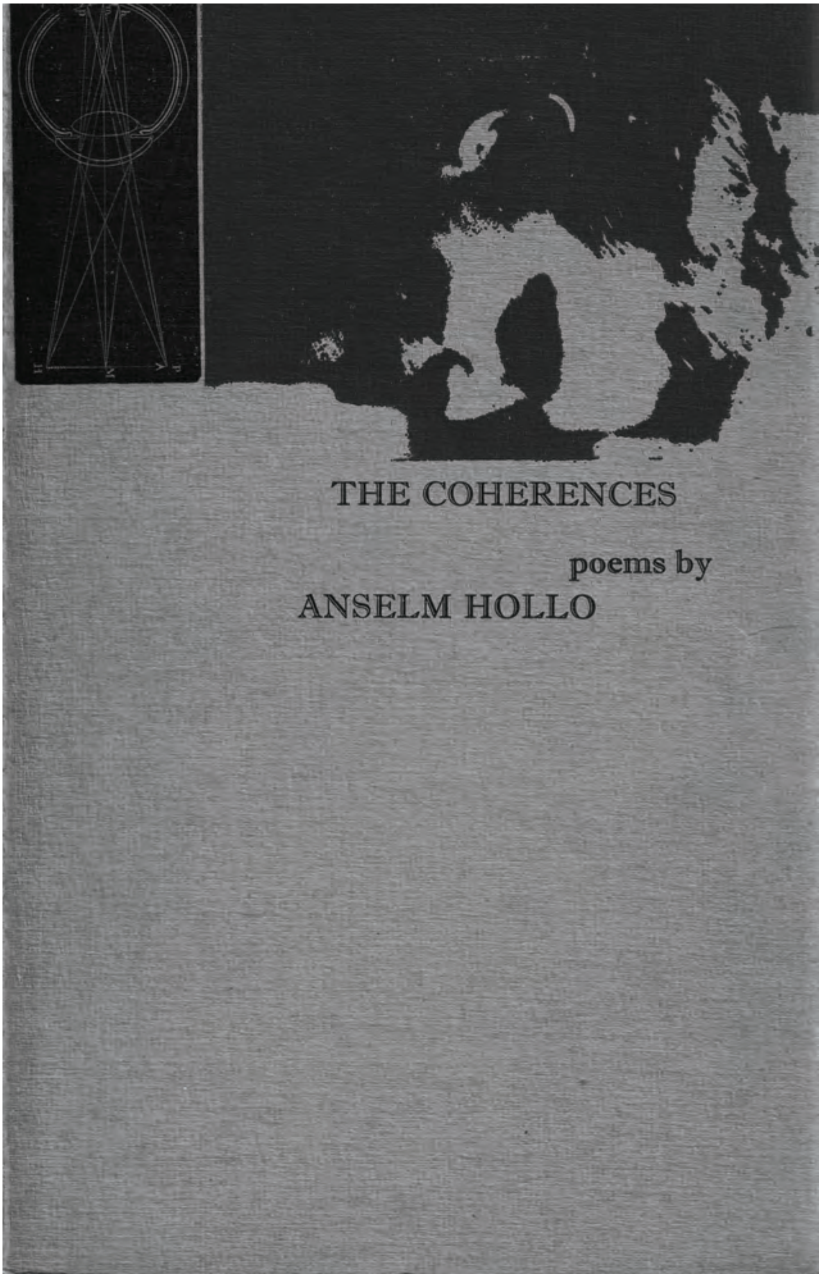
Phantom pain.

Invisible ink.

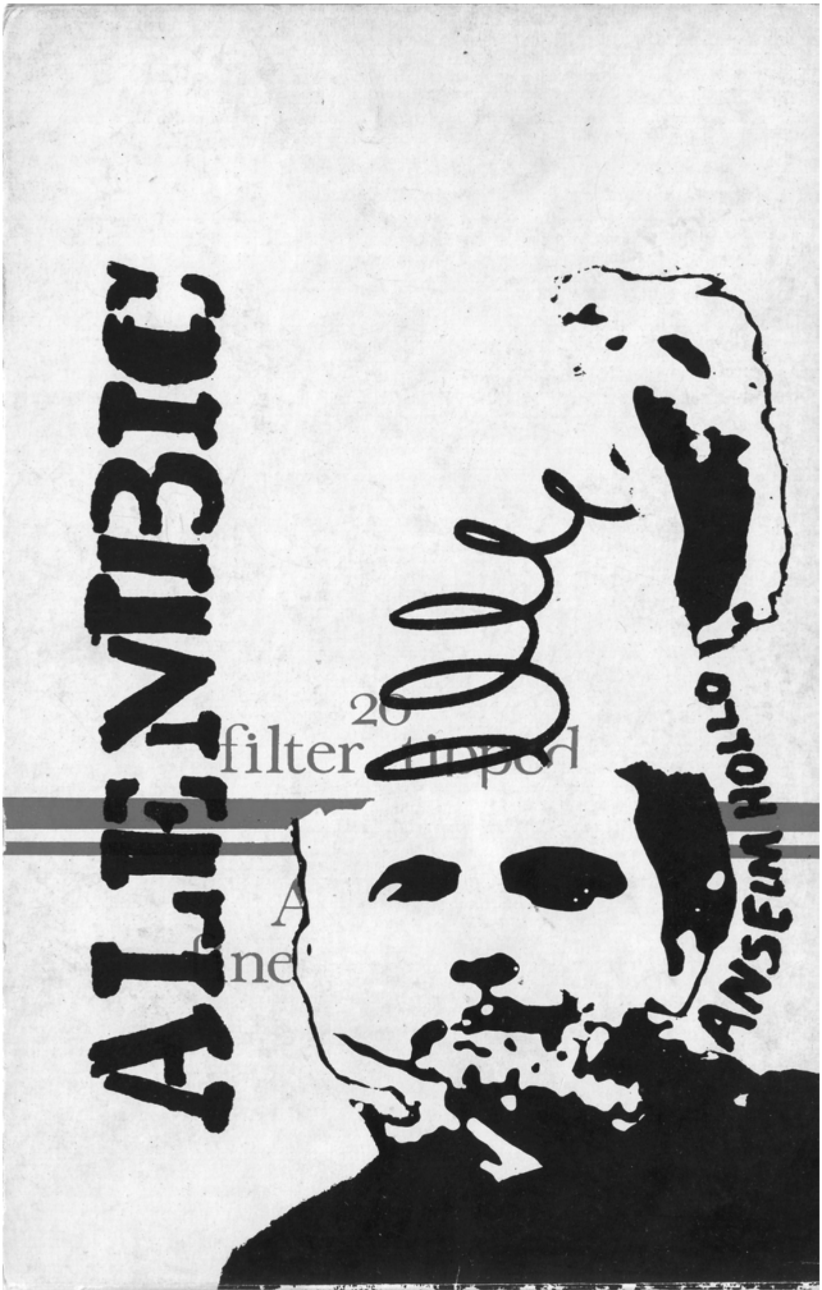
On April, 13, 1990, he died of a stroke and is buried near the grave of Sylvia Plath. In writing this brief essay, I hope that I have directed readers to some of the triumphs of Benvenste's life and work and exposed some of the many areas that have yet to be discussed. As with any grassroots research on an artist whose work has yet to be celebrated accordingly, many of the facts escape me, nevertheless substantive preliminary research will direct new readers to Benveniste's many volumes of poetry, and a still longer paper trail of books he published, not to mention a circumference of influence and dignity that is everywhere.



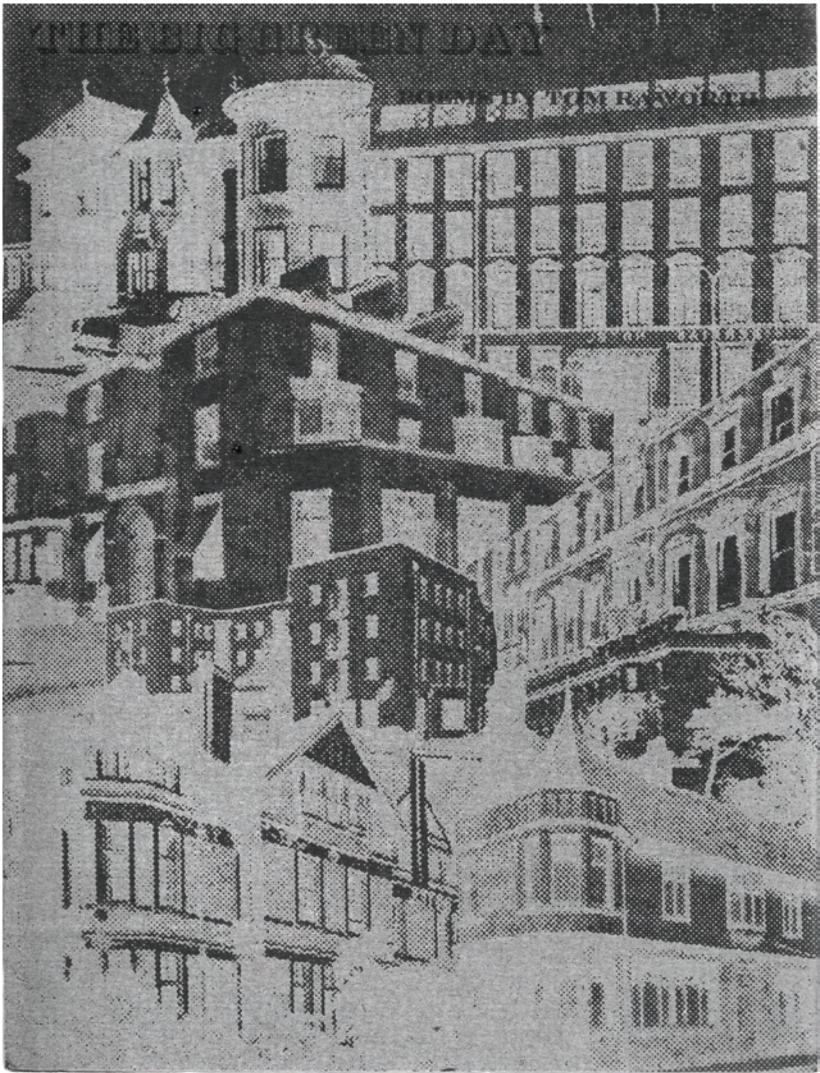
Poems of the Mouth by Asa Benveniste (Trigram Press: London, 1966). Cover art by Pip Benveniste.



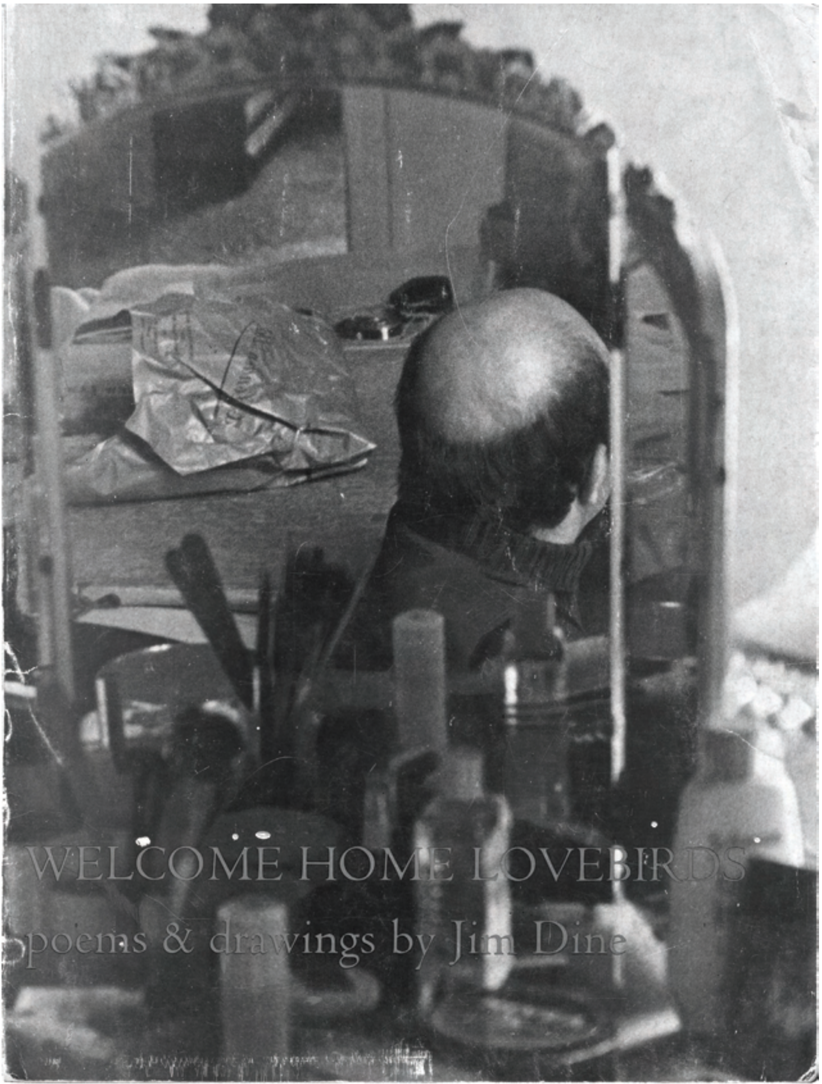
The Coherences by Anselm Hollo (Trigram Press: London, 1968). Cover art by Tom Phillips.



Alembic by Anselm Hollo (Trigram Press: London, 1972).



The Big Green Day by Tom Raworth (Trigram Press: London, 1968). Cover art by Jim Dine.



Welcome Home Lovebirds by Jim Dine (Trigram Press: London, 1969). Author photograph on cover by Nancy Dine.

Robert Sheppard

The Colony at the Heart of the Empire: Bob Cobbing & Mid-1980s London

The alternative London poetry scene of the early to mid-1980s is demarcated personally for me, by my arrival in London in 1983, and by my feeling that the anthology I co-edited with Adrian Clarke, *Floating Capital: new poets from London*, published in 1991, was documenting that scene circa 1987. It's a recurrent date on the acknowledgements page and the year we began consciously to gather the work (and the year I started my magazine *Pages*).[1] It is an under-reported era, a misreported one. It is encouraging how many of its artists are still active, many as leaders of their arts (as my footnotes show). One central figure, Bob Cobbing, is dead, but news of his death has been exaggerated. Jacques Donguy's authoritative survey *Poésie expérimentales—Zone numérique (1953-2007)* begins its section "La Poésie Sonore en Angleterre: Bob Cobbing," with the words: "Bob Cobbing, né en 1920 à Enfield Middlesex et mort en 1982, a vécu à Londres."[2] Cobbing died in 2002, but Donguy is right to say: "Il est...le plus grand poète sonore en Angleterre."[3] The test of his centrality as poet and arts organiser is that,

[1] See *Floating Capital: New Poets from London* (Elmwood: Potes and Poets, 1991). *Pages* continues at www.robertsheppard.blogspot.com.

[2] Jacques Donguy, *Poésie expérimentales—Zone numérique (1953-2007)* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2007): 153.

[3] Ibid: 153. Bob Cobbing: poet, publisher, performer: the distinction of his work is that he combined visual poetry and sound poetry into one practice and performance, and involved (inexpensive) book-making and publishing into the process, with his Writers Forum press and its attendant workshop. See *Shrieks and Hisses: Collected Poems 16* (Buckfasteleigh: Etruscan Books, 1999. For a recent record of early recordings hear *The Spoken Word: Bob Cobbing*, NSACD 42, released by the British Library, 2009. See also my previous critical writings upon him, including Chapter 9 of *Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), and my account of Cobbing's career before and after the 1980s, including my memories of attending the Writers Forum workshop in the 1990s, "Bob Cobbing: Sighting and Soundings" in my *Far Language: poetics and linguistically innovative poetry 1978-1997* (Exeter: Stride Publications, 1999). Adrian Clarke: the most uncompromising of the linguistically innovative poets. See his *Millennial Shades and Three Papers* (London: Writers Forum, 1998) for poetry and poetics.

if he had died in 1982, much of what I describe here would not have happened. Testimony to the under-reportage is Donguy's mistake.

The poetry reading series network of the era deserves record. First, there were the fortnightly King's College Readings, organised by Eric Mottram in lecture halls and common rooms, but with very few faculty or students in attendance (other than Mottram and John Porter, who collected the entrance fee). The better-known members of the avant-garde poetry world, the British Poetry Revival as Mottram called it in his critical work, read here, usually in pairs, a half hour set each: Lee Harwood, Paul Evans, Allen Fisher, Bob Cobbing, Ian Patterson, Stuart Montgomery, Iain Sinclair, Brian Catling, Jeff Nuttall, according to partial lists that survive.[4] They were the continuation of readings begun by Mottram in the 1960s at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, which he co-organised with Bill Butler. The audience gravitated to the Lyceum pub in the Strand after, for conversation, often in atomised groups, partly necessitated by the seating arrangement in booths, and partly by aesthetic affiliation. Sound poets preferred to hug the bar.[5]

Sub Voicive, run by Gilbert Adair and Patricia Farrell, was founded in 1980 and, during this period, met at the busy Covent Garden pub The White Swan, in the small, slightly dingy room upstairs, hung with bad oil imitations of Rembrandt; one reader (Ulli Freer? cris cheek?) covered

[4] See RWC Extra—September 1994, *Documenting Sub Voicive # 2*, ed. Upton, Lawrence, with major contributions from Peterjon Skelt and Ken Edwards. This lists both King's Readings and Sub Voicive events.

[5] Eric Mottram: academic, polemicist, editor and poet. See his *Towards Design in Poetry* (London: Veer Books with Writers Forum, 1977, reprint 2005), and Peterjon and Yasmin Skelt, eds. *Alive in Parts of this Century: Eric Mottram at 70* (Twickenham and Wakefield: North and South, 1994). See his "The British Poetry Revival," in R.Hampson and Barry, P., eds. *New British Poetries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993). John Porter: academic and translator of *Beowulf*. Lee Harwood: poet, translator of Tristan Tzara, first book, *title illegible* published by Writers Forum, 1963. See *Collected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2004). Paul Evans: poet, friend of Harwood, former student of Mottram, killed in 1991. See my edition, *The Door at Taldir: Selected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2009). Allen Fisher: polymath poet, then autodidact, now a Professor. During the early eighties he was between two massive projects *Place* and *Gravity* concocting poetics in *Necessary Business.* See *Gravity* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2004). Ian Patterson: poet, one of the rare appearances of the so-called Cambridge School in this account, an analogous avant-garde. Teaches English at Queens' College, Cambridge. See *Time to Get Here* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2003), but also his cultural history of aerial bombing, *Guernica and Total War* (London: Profile, 2007). Stuart Montgomery: poet, co-founder of the large small press Fulcrum in the 1960s which had published Harwood, Roy Fisher, Tom Pickard and others from the British Poetry Revival along with influential Americans. See *Islands* (Exbourne: Etruscan Books, 2005). Iain Sinclair: poet, novelist, anthologist, bookseller, and publisher. See his *The Firewall* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan Books, 2006) for poems from this period. See my *Iain Sinclair* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 2007). Brian Catling: poet, sculptor, performance writer. See his *The Stumbling Block its Index* (London: Bookworks, 1990). Jeff Nuttall: poet, painter, musician and actor (fat characters), whose finest poetry is in the 1987 Writers Forum pamphlet *Scenes and Dubs.* Reprinted in *Selected Poems* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003). See www.jeff-nuttall.co.uk. (accessed 6/4/09). Bill Butler: poet, publisher and bookseller, particularly of Unicorn Books in Brighton, where I first found small press magazines.

them up. It was shared occasionally with a down-market group of Freemasons. Sub Voicive was resident until 1988, when it moved venue. The fortnightly Tuesday evenings dovetailed with King's but were not in competition with them; Adair was a postgraduate student of Mottram, and Mottram read at Sub Voicive. The readers *tended* to be lesser known, often younger than those at King's, and some would come to be called "linguistically innovative," a term coined by Adair in 1988, but neither series was programmed to display a single poetics or to promote personalities. The readings were generous, since one reader held the floor for an entire evening (two sets of 30 minutes or more each), either sitting at a table or standing. The complete list of readers for 1985 was: Geraldine Monk, Paul Brown, John Welch, Eric Mottram, Ken Smith, Clive Bush, Denis Barone, Lyn Hejinian, cris cheek, Ellen Zweig, Hanne Bramness, Tom Raworth, Gavin Selerie, David Miller/ Wendy Saloman / Philip Jenkins (one evening), Robert Sheppard, and Maggie O'Sullivan. Lyn Hejinian, a leading Language poet, looks like a big catch, but these venues were the only ones interested in that work at this time. I recall Tom Raworth reading "West Wind" with its radical poetics and anti-Thatcherite political edge which fused well with the emergent aesthetic of "London" poetry, well-represented on the other evenings.

My journal for Wednesday 11 December 1985, reads: "Last night, after a raging sore-throat, and an afternoon with Patricia (Farrell), I read at The White Swan. It was a more successful, if less well-attended, reading than last time (15 May 1984), and there were two persons unknown to me in the audience (one of whom left at the interval); others were (from left to right as viewed from the hot-seat): Patricia Farrell, Gilbert Adair, Adrian Clarke, Peter Tingey, Gavin Selerie, Ken Edwards, Penny Bailey, and John Seed. Seed I'd not met before, but I'd realised, reviewing a book of essays on George Oppen for *PN Review* to which he'd contributed, that he worked at Roehampton, so Penny got in touch and he bought *Returns.* Afterwards he stayed there and we talked nineteenth century history (vis à vis my creative, and his academic, projects) and Oppen (whom he met)."

This account shows the intimacies and expectations of the occasion (including the seating plan) and also the serendipitous meetings such readings regularly threw up; Seed worked at the same higher education institution as my ex-girlfriend, who had published my pamphlet *Returns*. This was an important reading for me; but because of the length of the sets I was forced to reprise texts from *Returns*, before sharing new work like "Letter from the Blackstock Road" (which I performed with a carpet tape of sounds from that Finsbury Park street) and "Mesopotamia" (read with a tape of Afghan music and bamboo flute overdubbed by me), both texts that reflected the poetics of indeterminacy I was developing, partly as a result of moving into this poetry scene. Performative events were routinely integrated into the "readings" (although one audience member

clearly felt it wasn't for him or her). The source photographs for "Mesopotamia" were passed around the small audience as I read.[6]

There were, of course, other readings, sometimes connected with small presses, such as North and South, but these were book launches for volumes such as Lee Harwood's *Rope Boy to the Rescue* (1988). RASP was a more collaborative project among publishers, all from south of the river, the name an inventive multiple anagram for Ken Edwards' *Reality Studios* magazine and press, Paul Brown's Actual Size Press and Allen Fisher's Spanner press and occasional magazine. For example, in February 1987, they held two nights, on Fridays, at a housing co-operative at the Elephant and Castle, "a warm room with coffee & tea and bookstall." One Friday—I was there—featured a reading by Iain

[6] Gilbert Adair: poet, critic. See *Xiangren* (London: Veer Books, 2007). Patricia Farrell: poet, artist. See *New Tonal Language* (London: Reality Street Editions, 1999). Ulli Freer (previously McCarthy): poet. See *Speakbright Leap Password* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003). cris cheek: poet, musician, dancer, publisher. See *songs from navigation* (with Sianed Jones), book with CD (London: Reality Street Editions, 1997). Geraldine Monk: Poet and performer. See *Ghost and Other Sonnets* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008). Paul Brown: poet and translator. His Transgravity and Actual Size presses had presented Surrealist poetry and the Dutch "Fiftiers" translated into English. Now a bookseller in Brighton. Long poem remains unpublished. John Welch: Poet, publisher of Many Press and *Many Review*. See *Collected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2008). Ken Smith: One of the few alternative poets to gain a national following, largely through the patronage of Bloodaxe Books. See *The Poet Reclining: Selected Poems 1962-1980* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1982), particularly the urban sequence "Fox Running." Clive Bush: poet, academic. His pioneering study *Out of Dissent* (London: Talus Books, 1987) presents readings of Thomas A. Clarke, Allen Fisher, Barry MacSweeney, Bill Griffiths, and his mentor Eric Mottram. Denis Barone: American poet, publisher of Potes and Poets Press (which would publish *Floating Capital*). Lyn Hejinian: major language poet, most famous for her fractured autobiography *My Life* (Providence: Burning Deck, 1980). Ellen Zweig: American poet and performance artist, at the beginning of her career. Her Sub Voicive reading was regarded as too dramatic by most. See www.cueartfoundation.org/ellen-zweig.html. (accessed 6/4/09). Hanne Bramness: Norwegian poet, then resident in London, and writing in English. Now an esteemed poet and translator. See in English, *Salt on the Eye: Selected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2007). Tom Raworth: poet. Major figure, influence on American language poetry. See his *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003). Gavin Selerie: poet and publisher. See his forthcoming New and Selected Poems from Shearsman Press. David Miller: see *The Waters of Marah* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2005) and *Spiritual Letters (I-II)* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2004.) Wendy Saloman, poet, trained at RADA. See collected poems, *Syllables and Leaves* (Salzburg: Poetry Salzburg/University of Salzburg, 1998). Philip Jenkins: Welsh poet, author of *Cairo* parts one and two (London: Grand Hôtel de Palme à Palmerme, 1981); having been away from poetry for two decades, the third part appeared in *Shearsman* 63 & 64, Summer 2005. Robert Sheppard: Poet-critic, editor of *1983*, *Rock Drill* and *Pages*. Later wrote two collaborative works with Bob Cobbing, *Codes and Diodes* (London: Writers Forum, 1991) and *Blatent Blather/Virulent Whoops* (London: Writers Forum, 2001). "Letter" and "Mesopotamia" may be found in *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008). Maggie O'Sullivan: Poet, artist and performer. Work from this period is collected in *Body of Work* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2006). Peter Tingey: artist and print-maker, who designed covers for Many Press pamphlets, blues fan. Ken Edwards: Poet and publisher. See *No Public Language: Selected Poems 1975-1995* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2006). Penny Bailey: librarian, co-editor of *Rock Drill*, publisher of Textures, author of MA dissertation on small presses. John Seed: poet and historian. See his *New and Collected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2005). A "transcript" (with audience response) of a Sub Voicive reading may be read in Edwards, Ken, *The We Expression: The First Person Plural in Poetry.* (London: Reality Studios, 1985) and my account of that evening in my work in progress on poetics.

Sinclair and Brian Catling, the former reading from his novel *White Chapell*, *Scarlet Tracings*, which would within the year be taken up by the mainstream. Catling, though already well-known as a sculptor, would have to await his apotheosis as a performance writer until the 1990s. The following week promised a workshop "with Allen Fisher in the chair."

The New River Project—Bob Cobbing seemingly in charge—met at the premises of the London Musicians' Collective, 42 Gloucester Road, London, NW1, round the back of busy Camden High Street. I remember steps leading up the windowless side of the building to the shell of the performance space, as I balanced a pint of Courage bitter from the Engineer over the road. It was like being inside an airless, echoing crate, as though it had metal walls. It was an obsolete railway engineering works on the line leading into Euston. If I remember correctly, you turned right into the LMC; to the left was the London Film Co-op. The LMC is an organisation for free improvising musicians, such as Lol Coxhill, who has played with everyone from Alexis Korner and Kevin Ayres, to Steve Lacy and Evan Parker, as well as playing solo in many circumstances. What is odd is that one of his partners did not then include Bob Cobbing (that had to wait for the 1990s for him to join Bird Yak but they probably met earlier). Others, such as Steve Beresford, Maggie Nicols, Julie Tippetts and Sylvia Hallett are on record as having performed there during the mid-1980s.[7]

This venue was used for other ventures associated with Cobbing. One was the annual meeting of the Association of Little Presses, a publishers' self-help organisation in which Cobbing had been instrumental since 1965, when it formed. Sunday 29 January 1984:

> Saturday it was the ALP Bookfair at the London Musicians' Collective. We sold about £5 worth of tapes (*1983*) and *Rock Drill*. I bought a number of books: there were very few surprises since I'd seen a lot of the "wares" before, but I caught up on missed reading, Ken Edwards' early *Lorca* book, for example. I met Paul A. Green at last during the morning and he, Allen Fisher, and later Bill Griffiths, and I, had a beer over the pub. We chatted about *PN Review* and Christopher Middleton and other matters. During the afternoon Penny turned up (nursing a hangover) and we went for a pizza before the "reading" by ALP members. Unfortunately, very few people were there, because the hall was so cold all day and many ALP

[7] Lol Coxhill: Underrated British genius. I've seen him play dozens of time and once shared the bill with him. Like all these musicians named he plays in varied combinations. He also recorded an album with hurdy-gurdy player Stevie Wishart, with whom I worked in Norwich with Peter Stacey. See Jeff Nuttall, *The Bald Soprano* (Nottingham: Tak Tak Tak, 1989). See www.lolcoxhill.com. (accessed 6/4/09). Steve Beresford: pianist, played with David Toop, Derek Bailey, John Zorn and others. Maggie Nic(h)ols: improvising feminist singer. Perfomed with Keith Tippett's Centipede, Trevor Watts and others. See www.maggienicols.com. (accessed 6/4/09). Julie Tippetts, improvising singer, formerly the iconic 1960s rock/soul star Julie Driscoll. Sylvia Hallett: violinist, improviser. Played with Clive Bell and Gus Garside (who I'd work with briefly in the 1990s).

> members were frozen to the bone! John Muckle and his girl friend turned up. A religious R&B musician and publisher, Simon Law was there. I read first (work from *Returns*). John also read. Cobbing finished the session with some old texts, including the excellent TAN poem from the *ABC in Sound*. The grace and lyricism of the man's work is so different from the blank ugliness of his imitators: he is such an enormously important figure in British Art: he must never be allowed to become forgotten.

The fact that I thought Cobbing might be forgotten was perhaps a by-product of the chill of the performance space, and perhaps of the gloom at the lack of sales of my two magazines and my evident lack of interest in other people's old stock. But there is evidence of poetic community in the discussion in the pub. (It is not clear who I thought Cobbing's "imitators" were.) Perhaps the chill also encouraged John Muckle to start influencing Paladin, where he worked, to offer to general edit the anthology *The New British Poetry*, which was published in 1988, and which documented—and made public—much of the scene outlined here.[8]

Cobbing had been organising the International Sound Poetry Festival for many years, at one point at the Poetry Society's Earls Court premises, in the years of the British Poetry Revival's greatest visibility (before Muckle's anthology, that is). It was inevitable that both Cobbing and Mottram—one as organiser, the other as editor—should have become involved in the entryist take-over of the Society during the 1970s, which climaxed in the resignation of most of the committee in 1977 when the Arts Council decided the freak show of avant-gardism had gone on for too long.[9] Some of the individuals involved were blacklisted for trying to negotiate with the council, and nerves were still raw years later; it makes the activities recorded here all the more remarkable, as renewed faith in continual action overcame the shock and torpor of the early 1980s. One of the lessons of Cobbing throughout his life as an art activist was to weather bouts of popularity and unpopularity with equal good humour, and occasional retributive fury. In 1984, the LMC was the venue for the 14th International Sound Poetry Festival. In the "Interface" issue of *Reality Studios*, published in the same year, Gilbert Adair reports on what he regarded as "the event of the festival," a performance by Clive Fencott (voice) and Steve Moore (soprano saxophone and computer), called "Manual of the Permanent

[8] Paul A. Green: poet and saxophone player. Interested since the 1970s in recorded and later internet poetry. Hear "The Terminal Poet: A Drama for Audio": www.greatworks.org.uk/poems/ttp1.html. (accessed 6/4/09) Christopher Middleton: poet, translator and critic. Greatly underrated poet of immense subtlety and experiment. See his *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008). John Muckle: poet, prose writer, musician and editor. Excellent fiction writer: *The Cresta Run* (Galloping Dog Press, 1987), *Cyclomotors* (Essex: Festival Books, 1997). Simon Law: I never saw him again.

[9] See Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2006) for a book-length account.

Waver."[10] "The original 'Manual...' is a 1930s hairdressing manual... The scope of the book is astonishing," including passages on quantum mechanics.[11] The *process* of producing the event is outlined by Fencott, alongside excerpts from the visual text in the *Interface* edition: "Words and phrases were selected at great speed...and stored as a number of data files... Various computer programmes were written to manipulate the files' print-outs of text... The program selects a phrase at random from a file and prints it at a random position on the screen... It is possible to superimpose a number of treatments," a process of serial fracturing of cyberpoetic material into a number of script and purely graphic forms for live improvisation—all of this years before computer poetry supposedly arrived on our screens.[12] Adair notes, "It's not the use of hairdressing as metaphor. There are no memorably turned phrases"; in fact it is "a successful confrontation...with the intractable, sterile material, wringing, prising, coaxing, yanking by main force and technical energy something made out of it."[13] The fact of the performance becomes its own meaning, and eclipses the anecdotal strategies of more culturally validated poetry, as Adair marvellously puts it: "In the presence of this work I register being in the world I'm living in. Hence, I think the necessity of such work. (When reading, eg, Seamus Heaney, I register being in a world where such poetry is produced...)"[14] I recorded the following night: "On Friday we went to the LMC to see Tom Leonard, to hear some minimal tape-pieces by Gerhard Rühm, and to see the excellent Koncrete Canticle: Bob Cobbing (jumping about like a child), Paula Claire and Bill Griffiths. In the pub over the road I recognised R.D. Laing. (He) looked really pissed-off, hunched over his whiskeys sneeringly, listening to Keith Musgrove... It was a bit like seeing Heidegger kicking a cat, or Wittgenstein trying to add up his change in the supermarket. The gods are mortal (or, at least, half-mortal)."

Leonard, on a rare visit from Scotland, would soon abandon sound poetry; Rühm's tapes, I recall, without his human presence, were difficult to listen to. Koncrete Canticle was a classic sound poetry unit, principally performing works by Cobbing and Claire (with the odd piece by Griffiths, who always looked slightly uncomfortable performing sound material), in a manner that favoured the phonetic, the chant, the permutational, even the musical, over pure non-phonetic sound poetry (to allude to splits in French concrete poetry that were never emulated on this side of the Channel). That Laing, probably there to meet his old friend Musgrove, should have excited such comment indicates that I felt

[10] Gilbert Adair, "On 2 Performances: 1) Kings College, Jan. '84; 2) The L.M.C. April '84," *Reality Studios* 6, 1984: 10.

[11] Adair, "On 2 Performances," 4.

[12] Adair, "On 2 Performances," 5-6.

[13] Adair, "On 2 Performances," 6.

[14] Adair, "On 2 Performances," 6.

that something of the 1960s radicalism documented by Jeff Nuttall in *Bomb Culture* still hung in the air over these older figures featured in the book, even though many of us were nipping round to Compendium Books in Camden to catch up with Deleuze and Guattari or Lyotard for our current poetics.[15]

I suspect very few people were bothered which "organisation" owned the events they saw, but Cobbing, crucial to all of them, probably needed to separate them for funding purposes. (His training as an accountant stood him in good stead.) The New River Project itself was formally a "co-operative," an organisational concept very much of the time—note the premises used by RASP and name of the Film Co-op—a collectivist ethos, blossoming under the nose of the Thatcher administration that was ruthlessly reducing the common weal. Officially there were six members of the Project, as Patricia Farrell recalls: *Clive (Fencott) and Ann (Whitely-Fencott) and Gilbert (Adair) and me and Bob and Jennifer (Cobbing). Clive and Bob were at that time performing together a lot so they were putting on sound stuff. I think maybe one of the things they did with John Whiting was a New River Project thing.*[16] Farrell is here recalling Oral Complex, whose cassette *Oral Complex at L.M.C.* was recorded in September 1983, with the two vocal artists supplemented by Whiting's electronics. Allen Fisher was present, and reports in the 1984 "Interface" *Reality Studios*: "Cobbing and Fencott open their mouths, stick out their tongues and vibrate the air. Whiting shines a torch into their throats and records the vibrations, transforms the sounds they make in the process and feeds the new sounds back through their ears. All three complex the oral."[17] The poetics of many is summarised by Fisher: "Their art involves a wish to violate their own perceptive sets and, they believe as a consequence, the sets of their listeners. The words they use to describe their art focuses on improvisation, freedom and change. As such their perspectives engage with the complex discussion of these terms in contemporary cultures and in particular in the descriptions of low-wage performances and free improvised music."[18]

[15] Clive Fencott: poet, performer, computer expert. See www.fencott.com. Steve Moore: saxophone player and research scientist at Imperial College, hence access to cutting edge computers. Tom Leonard: poet, linguist. See especially his essay "How I Became a Sound Poet," but also the rest, in *Reports from the Present* (London: Cape, 1995). Gerhard Rhüm: Vienna group experimentalist. See his *I My Feet: Poems and Constellations*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Providence: Burning Deck, 2004). Paula Claire: concrete and sound poet, publisher, archivist of concrete poetry. Bill Griffiths: poet, performer, artist and publisher, former Hell's Angel, Anglo-Saxon scholar. See his *Durham and other sequences* (Sheffield: West House Books, 2002). R.D. Laing: famous anti-psychiatrist, poet, cult figure from the 1960s "Underground." See his *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967). Keith Musgrove: early Writers Forum poet.

[16] Farrell recorded April 2009.

[17] Allen Fisher, "Float Perception and Glue Balls," *Reality Studios* 6 (1984): 93.

[18] Fisher, "Float Perception and Glue Balls," 95.

Cobbing's collective practice was at the heart of the project. There were also, for a while, premises. I remember the Cobbings having problems working from their council house, something to do with the nature of the lease, or with the taxman, or both. Writers Forum had to be non-profit making and Cobbing's use of the NRP logo and bank account long after the co-operative broke up, was connected with that. *There were the workshops. Bob had a storage unit, really, in Islington, and I remember going there with Jennifer. She was doing the ceramics then.* Jennifer Pike (or Cobbing) was a courageous taker-on of new skills, a jeweller as well as a concrete poet and performer in her own right (she still is). In her seventies she became a dancer, but she was also a champion pool player. I saw her thrash teams of astonished young men in pubs. As Farrell explains: *Jennifer's day was organised around her pool. (So what was the idea of the workshop?) It was a big building full of storage spaces. It wasn't a performance space. (Studio space?) No, I think it was probably that Jennifer shouldn't have been doing anything there.* Publications give the address of NRP as Unit P8, Metropolitan College of Craftsmen, Enfield Road, London, N1.

It is clear that the co-operative was far from living up to its collectivist philosophy. *Jennifer was putting on spontaneous painting on the Saturday afternoons*, giant daubs of poster paint, a mixture of De Kooning in his dementia and Rolf Harris on children's TV, messy to pull down at the end of the day and destroy (unrecorded). *I certainly did one of those. It came as a surprise to me because I didn't even know that I'd agreed to do it. There were problems of communication. So that was a bit of a spat between Jennifer and I. But there were lots of spats. Administratively it was a bit difficult. With the painting thing it was probably me having just switched off, because everybody was arguing or something.* It is evident, when it came to the regular Saturday afternoons and evenings, that Cobbing was responsible for programming the poetry and inter-media events, as he had been since Group H in the 1950s, and Writers Forum since the 1960s.[19]

17 February 1985: "Last night: Clark Coolidge at the NRP, disrupting vocabulary (reference) but keeping articulate energy in its place." Coolidge often maintains such control, while formally creating elaborate semantically multiple structures, resulting in work that ranges from the austerely systematic to the oddly lyrical. I remember autonomous texts, introverted performance. I remember Anthony Howell furious that he had missed this reading, possible because publicity was always limited for

[19] Anne (Whiteley) Fencott: librarian, indexer, wife of Clive Fencott. See www.fencott.com. (accessed 6/4/09). Jennifer Cobbing (Pike): Poet, artist, jeweller, ceramicist, performer, dancer, wife of Bob Cobbing. Still active in her late eighties. See selected poems in preparation from Veer Books.

such events, although they were listed in *City Limits*, the radical alternative to *Time Out*.[20]

23 May 1985: "On Saturday at the New River Project I formed part of a circus of writers associated with Writers Forum (Bob, Paula Claire—who's working with Peter Stacey now—, Bill Griffiths, Allen Fisher, Gilbert Adair, and others). I read a shortened 'Strategies' (and a chat with Gilbert makes me think I ought to shorten it a little more) in the first set, and later appeared as Wayne Pratt (the names of performers were drawn out of a hat at random and I'd put him in!) Paula Claire found Wayne funny, but some of the audience—particularly the visiting "poets" from Wales—didn't quite see the joke. I chatted to Bob, Gilbert, Paula and Adrian Clarke."

Cobbing's method of determining the reading order is characteristic, classic chance procedure, and my dismissal of the Welsh poets (I think they were "cabaret" or performance poets of the conventional kind, who'd read a disappointing set earlier) would have been common among this avant-garde. The influence of Gilbert upon my poetry indicates that, although many in this avant-garde were averse to discussing poetics publicly, criticism evidently passed between us privately, as he shifted me towards innovation. Wayne Pratt was my spoof mainstream poet.[21]

A CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF WRITERS FORUM BOOKS PUBLISHED DURING 1985

Bill Griffiths, *Quire Book*, 12pp., small format.

Jeremy Adler, *Homage to Theocritus*, 24pp.

Michael Rapanakis, *I script over water*, *I dance over sea*, 8 A4 sheets in folder.

Tony Jackson, *Two Tails* (illustrations: Jeff Nuttall), 17pp. A4.

John Cage, *Cage on Cage*, 6 A4 sheets in folder.

Paula Claire, *Leonardo's Lists*, 10 A4 sheets in folder.

David Barton, *New Issue*, 16pp. A5 landscape.

Betty Radin, *Moonhatten and After*, 21 A4 sheets in folder.

H.G. Adler, trans. Jeremy Adler, *Windows (Fenster)*, German/English; visuals, Bob Cobbing. 42pp. A4.

Bob Cobbing, *Prosessual Sin-Off Two*, 14 A5 cards in envelop; dated 30 July, Cobbing's birthday.

Bob Cobbing, *The Processual Nonny-Nonny*, 18pp. A4. 30 July.

Craig (Crag?) Hill, *Democracy*, single A4 card.

[20] Clark Coolidge: important precursor to the language poets. Anthony Howell: poet, dancer, performance artist. Combined systematic texts like his erotic *Oslo: A Tantic Ode* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1975) with the more conventional *Notions of a Mirror* (London: Anvil, 1983). Threw good parties in the 1980s.

[21] Peter Stacey: UEA associate of mine, both for playing folk music and for *The Ship's Orchestra*, a performance group that performed settings of texts, including mine; musicologist; now returned to jazz roots. He recorded one cassette with Claire. Wayne Pratt: see Sheppard, *Twentieth Century Blues.* Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2008: 322-330.

Laurie Schneider, Souvenir, single A4 card—souvenir cartoon of Bob Cobbing's 65th birthday performance.
Peter Mayer, *Saga*, 40pp A4 landscape—a postcard novel.
Gerald Loose, *HNC 1P—The DHSS poems*, 8pp. A5.
Lawrence Casserley/Bob Cobbing, *Hydrangea*, 8 A4 cards landscape, joined concertina-wise, printed both sides. Musical score.
Herbert Burke, *ASTTS S-L*, 24pp. A4.
Maggie O'Sullivan, *Un-Assuming Personas*, 16pp. A5.
Herbert Burke, *Toxic Yahoo*, 13 A4 cards in folder.
Kathleen McGee, Lawrence Butler, Gerald Loose, *Yuga Night*, 14pp. A4—poems and illustrations collaboration.
Clive Fencott, *Boatshow*, 15 A4 sheets in folder. Computer graphics.
Paula Claire, *Van Gogh: Symptoms*, single A4 card.
Gilbert Adair, *Frogboks*, 55pp, A4 plus 7pp. A3 plus magnetic frog in cardboard box.
David Barton, *Agape*, 16pp. A5.
Bob Cobbing, *Swarf Process U.A.L.* (paper) 20 A4 sheets, landscape.
Betty Radin, *1 1*, single A4 card.
Betty Radin, *Zero Two*, 16 A5 cards in envelope.
Betty Radin, *Pas de Deux*, single A4 card.
Bob Cobbing, *Winter Poem No 10*, single folded A4 card.
Bob Cobbing, *A Processual Summation*, 33pp. A4, landscape.[22]

The last two publications—taking Writers Forum up to a count of 375 publications since 1954—would probably have been made on Christmas Day. "Winter Poems" annually were used as New Year cards. The editions were not always uniform. Birthdays and Christmas Day were all marked by increased artistic production by Cobbing, one inheritance of his Plymouth Brethren upbringing. "As usual I worked hard and played hard," Cobbing once commented in a letter of his birthday.

19 October 1985: "Last Saturday, at an inauspicious evening (following an adventurous afternoon organised by Paul Buck) at the New River Project, I read 3 texts from *Returns* to "launch" the book: 'Of Appearances,' 'Strategies,' and 'Returns.' Unfortunately the book was not ready..." A surviving A4 poster, a busy green sheet of photocopied book covers and Cobbing's cramped handwriting, tells a fuller story. A two day event, "Festival of Book Launchings with Music, Exhibitions, Book Fair, Performances," saw the launch of seven of the titles from Writers Forum's 1985 list above, from Gerald Loose's *HNC 1P—The DHSS poems* to Clive Fencott's *Boatshow*, inclusive. On the Friday night, the Scottish writers and artists Loose, McGee and Butler launched their books, and exhibited artwork from "an exhibition sponsored by the Scottish Arts Council." Possibly only Loose was present to read from both books. I remember the "DHSS poems" were cut ups of official government documents relating to social security, refunctioning them into irony. Maggie O'Sullivan and Herbert Burke launched their new works. Maggie O'Sullivan, not at this time well-known, and Herb Burke,

[22] *Writers Forum Check List of Publications 1954-1998* (London: Writers Forum, 1998?).

were both loyal attendees at the Writers Forum workshops (which I believe still met to discuss work before the NRP readings on Saturdays) and were experimenting in parallel with ways of integrating image into text or making text visual. This was a Writers Forum style of the era, as I shall show, although O'Sullivan's book *Un-assuming Persona* was not particularly experimental in that way, being a defamiliarised prose biography of her mother, though it was odd enough for Cobbing to declare on the advert announcing its launch: "was rejected by the Women's Press on the grounds that the form was so unusual..." Burke's role in supporting O'Sullivan's work at this time is under-reported. He emigrated, I believe, about the same time O'Sullivan moved north to begin work on the poems in *In the House of the Shaman*, published by Reality Street in 1993.[23]

On the Saturday afternoon Paul Buck evidently entertained me with a programme that included Frances Low reading Buck's one-woman play "Isabelle," and the launch of Buck's guest-edited "Sexuality Issue" of the magazine *Spectacular Diseases*. Buck also read solo, but in particular the event was to launch his joint publication with artist David Barton, *Where We Touch.* (Although carrying Barton's address in Hither Green on the title page, no publisher is shown, but the note "Printed and Bound by New River Project/Thanks to Bob Cobbing" reminds me that in addition to the books officially published, he printed works for others.) Buck had long been in touch with the work of the French avant-garde writers, as translator, the Blanchots and Batailles that the rest us were just catching up with, and his interest in sexuality and sadism in his work was infamous. Barton was a former student of Anton Ehrenzweig, his drawing mentioned in Ehrenzweig's *The Hidden Order of Art* as a successful instance of "the use of the intellect in order to challenge, assist and control spontaneous image making."[24] That afternoon Barton demonstrated "drawing in Slow Motion" which I recall as live drawing onto overhead transparencies projected against a screen or—more likely—wall, demonstrating the serial evolution of his naked figures through various contorted poses. "Plus violin solos by Hazel Smith who will also read her poems," the poster announces, showing that at this stage Smith had yet to integrate her virtuoso violin playing (she had played Stockhausen in the presence of the composer) and her then largely systematic and permutational writing. I remember her stiffly turning to one side or the other, or facing the audience, depending which verse-type she was performing from her tripartite "Threely." It was a totally different performance from Cobbing's: stylised, formal and precise. Clarke and I anthologised her work in *Floating Capital.*

[23] See chapter 10 ("Be come, Be spoke, Be eared: The Poetics of Transformation and Embodied Utterance in the work of Maggie O'Sullivan in the 1980s and 1990s") of my book *The Poetry of Saying*, 233-247.

[24] Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967): 151.

Launching a book without the book is dispiriting, so it is no wonder the evening was a let-down for me, but Clive Fencott launched his computer texts and Cobbing and Casserley's "A4 cards landscape," were presumably performed. There were tape pieces from Ann Wolff and Lars Rudolph (from Bremen) announced on the poster and, in writing that topples out of the frame of the page, Cobbing promises: "plus lots of things there's no ro…for on th," as though time, like the poster, couldn't quite contain its events.[25]

Gilbert Adair's *Frog Boks* was published in November 1985 by Writers Forum, and belongs to the text-into-image experiments described above. Indeed, a prefatory work, a series of loose leaves in a plastic folder, none to appear in the final box, *Frog Specialist Marketing Poem*, had been published by Writers Forum a year earlier, and its note indicates, that while a first performance had occurred at The Cut venue, curated by Clive Fencott, "a second performance will…take place at the London Musicians Collective on 17 November 1984 as part of a New River Project event," and would again involve vocal performance, perhaps by the same group: Adair himself, plus "Patricia Farrell, Maggie O'Sullivan and Clive Fencott," with a soundtrack of "Frogs" by Steve Moore.[26] "Present also were…" Adair notes dryly, a dramatis personae of "frog" products: rubber frogs, soap frogs, ashtray frogs, pencil-sharpener frogs, etc. This was a crowded event in terms of effigies, most of them gifts from other poets, musicians and friends. Instructions to the performers indicated three overlapping styles: "(1) flat; if a phrase means nothing to them, as it appears or in the performance context; (2) bringing out a meaning they find there; (3) as they want it to sound, whether or not it means anything, or travestying what seems to be there(.)"[27] The status of the text as meaningful or not is judged to be of minimal importance, while the interpretive abilities of the performers (including the option that they stay "flat" if they "find" no meaning, or, alternatively, feel drawn to exceed what "seems" to be in the text) are privileged. The author renounces authority and control, is open to the accidents of performance context. The meaning of the text is the total experience of what happens with it (a commonplace borrowed from improvised music, as Fisher suggests of Oral Complex). This interruptive

[25] Gerald Loose: poet. See *Printed on Water: New and Selected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2007). Herbert Burke, visual poet. See his last WF booklet *Las Diferencias* (London: 1990). Frances Low: later a film and TV actress, *Shallow Grave*, *Miss Marple.* David Barton: artist. Hazel Smith: poet, musician, intermedia specialist, academic. See her *Abstractly Represented: Poems and Performance Texts 1982-90* (Butterfly Books: 1991) for work from this era. Now in Australia, Professor of intermedia arts, works in austraLYSIS with Roger Dean. Lawrence Casserley: composer, conductor, improviser, computer musician and installation artist. Professor of Electro-Acoustic Music at the Royal College of Music, London. Ann Wolff: No trace. Lars Rudolph: avant-garde rock musician and composer of sound pieces for radio, now a well-know German actor, in films such as *Afrika*, *Mon Amour*, 2006.

[26] Gilbert Adair, *Frog Marketing Specialist Poem* (London: Writers Forum, 1984), n.p. An earlier performance of Frog material had occurred at the Sound Poetry Festival in April 1984.

[27] Adair, *Frog Marketing Specialist Poem*, n.p.

aesthetic is reflected in Adair's admission that, in the larger box, "A principle of the *frog boks* is to use different structuring principles for each piece [page], cut across by 3 (at least) typewriter faces, various types of handwriting, accents, etc..."[28] When it is remembered that the 1985 Writers Forum list describes the box as consisting of "55 pp, A4 plus 7 pp. A3 plus magnetic frog in cardboard box," this represents a multiplicity of processes, in which the following are found, combined and collided: handwriting (often swirling out of line, odd orthographies), various typefaces (often at jagged angles), images (often frogs), concrete poetry moments of partial acrostics and constellations, cut-ups, collages, pattern poetry, diagrams, rows of numerals, pictograms, non-semantic language poetry analogues, blocks of prose, found material, deletions, illegible scribbles, super-impressions, photocopied reductions of other pages, different coloured ink (photocopied on the green frog papers)—along with a single page containing a "conventional" poem, in lineation at least, entitled "Fascism—a Weird Concept" and, like an Oulipean clinaman, "TOAD—a page" written by Patricia Farrell. Crowded, overloaded, these pages demand the interpretation they also repel. If Adair had noted the lack of importance of "hairdressing" in the Fencott-Moore "Manual" text then "FROG" also, by its overdetermination, by its reiterations, as image, text (borrowings from dozens of batrachian sources), becomes a variety of empty sign, a solid signifier that will never settle into accepted meaning. Performed, it—or something bearing its name—comes into being. The opposite to this approach might be a text like Allen Fisher's contemporaneous *Brixton Fractals*, which in its very name declares his focus of attention and his poetics of indeterminacy. When Adair coined the term "linguistically innovative" in a letter to *Pages* in 1988, it was to dispute my borrowed notion from Veronica Forrest-Thomson that avant-garde poetry "suspended" naturalisation in the reading process, and to propose instead textual acivity that "eradicates" the process of naturalising text in terms of the non-verbal external world.[29] *Frog Boks*, of course, had already shown the way (a way predictive, incidentally, of certain kinds of recent so-called "performance writing" in Britain but, like Fencott's experiments, never acknowledged as precursor). My line about "suspending" naturalisation and Fisher's poetics suggests another way. "Linguistically innovative" was never intended as a rainbow term to cover the wide range of poetries it is now routinely used for, but for the *British* experimental spectrum that runs from Cobbing through to Fisher. When we edited *Floating Capital*, Adrian Clarke and I gave pride of place to these two writers (we also included Adair and O'Sullivan from the NRP grouping). But in our afterword we also integrated into our committee prose what I cheerfully called my "statement," a well-used

[28] Gilbert Adair, *Reality Studios* 6 (1984): 57.
[29] Gilbert Adair, "Dear Robert," *Pages 65-72*, March 1988: 68.

patchwork of others' poetics which summarises most of the spectral poetics of the London scene, and, I trusted, my own new work:

> The poets included hold at least some of these operational axioms in common: that poetry must extend the inherited paradigms of "poetry"; that this can be accomplished by delaying, or even attempting to eradicate, a reader's process of naturalisation; that new forms of poetic artifice and formalist techniques should be used to defamiliarize the dominant reality principle in order to operate a critique of it; and that poetry can use indeterminacy and discontinuity to fragment and reconsititute text to make new connections so as to inaugurate fresh perceptions, not merely mime the disruption of capitalist production. The reader thus becomes an active co-producer of these writers' texts, and subjectivity becomes a question of linguistic position, not of self-expression or narration. Reading this work can be an education of activated desire, not its neutralisation by means of a passive recognition.[30]

The refunctioning of the office photocopier as a writing technology facilitated the production of work by Adair, and others, like O'Sullivan and Burke. A complex camera-ready text could be simply handed over to Bob Cobbing to publish (usually within days). But Cobbing's own *Processual: Collected Poems Volume 10* (published by New River Project in 1987) which collected the "Processual" booklets, such as the birthday "Processual Nonny-Nonny" and yuletide *A Processual Summation* listed above, shows a related poetics. The "Summation" completed this series of 17 pamphlets, first published between 1982-5, and now "collected" by being packaged in a large box (a cake box, in fact). I have written of this extraordinary series elsewhere, and I provided the introduction to the box, which was not a critical essay, but the poem "The Micropathology of the Sign" (which in turn inaugurated my creative collaborations with Cobbing).[31] "Processual" was a word Cobbing had borrowed from Allen Fisher, and Cobbing relentlessly utilised his photocopier's resources to enlarge (and reduce), to re-process its own processes and mistakes, so that visual series proliferated from the 5 sheets of "almost random snippets" which Cobbing had used as "starters," some linguistic, some purely visual.

25 March 1986: "The weekend was launched by a successful, but ill-attended, New River Project Spring Festival of the Alphabet, part organised by alphabet scholar Peter Mayer. On the Friday evening Gilbert and I successfully read selections of William Carlos Williams' *Kora in Hell* (at Gilbert's suggestion). Saturday morning I was impressed by the Text-Commentary scheme of *Kora* and added some 'commentary' to my *Cannibal Club* to polyphonise it. In the afternoon I read about 20 minutes

[30] Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard, *Floating Capital: new poets from London* (Elmwood: Potes and Poets, 1991) 142.

[31] See critical texts listed in footnote 3 and collaborations in note 6.

of *Blackstock Road*, emphasising—reductively—the ABC Evology part!... Audience by this time: Gilbert, Betty Radin, Steve Clews, Bill Griffiths (asleep), Allen Fisher, cris cheek, Ulli Freer, Bob, Tony Wright, Jennifer Cobbing. Allen made a few remarks. Gilbert said I read well. Good pieces were cheek's interpretation of Satie's 'Dance of the Alphabet,' Cobbing's *The Five Vowels* and *ABC in Sound* (not the usual rubbish), a couple of Jennifer and Tony's pieces."[32]

I remember cheek laid out visual prints across the large floor space (the LMC's only luxury), explaining slowly to the audience as he did so before playing clarinet. Cobbing's *The Five Vowels* (1974) is a masterwork of lexical concrete: each vowel represented on different coloured paper in the reprint he made for this event, a flock of *e*s, constellations of *o*s, the lipstick traces of *u*s, for example. *The ABC in Sound* was Cobbing's breakthrough text of 1964/5, one of the masterpieces of concrete poetry, which includes the chant-like "TAN" as well as the conceptual grid R, or the complex vocalisations of E. Cobbing, wedded though he was to improvisation, frequently reprised this work, and found he had to meticulously rehearse its tongue-twisters and maintain momentum for about half an hour. The 1965 BBC Radiophonic Workshop recording of the *ABC* is another of the high points of his career (along with *Processual* of course).

What did I mean by "the usual rubbish," with which I was clearly contrasting these classic pieces? I was thinking, not of Cobbing's almost chamber work with Koncrete Canticle, nor of his expressive duo work with Clive Fencott (and Oral Complex), but the trio the two of them assembled with anarchic performer/musician Hugh Metcalfe, Bird Yak. My diary records a Sub Voicive reading for Cobbing's 65th birthday on 30 July 1985. After a performance which probably included "The Processual Nonny-Nonny," which he had published (and possibly composed) that day, Fencott, disillusioned with the lack of direction and structure during the performance of the work with Metcalfe, asked Patricia Farrell and I: "Is Bird Yak one of the most significant artistic achievements of today?" to which we replied simultaneously, "No!" Nor would Cobbing have intended it thus, deliberately revelling in the outer limits of performativity with this group, as he growled and rattled percussion instruments, but sometimes incongruously followed a carefully elaborated text or score, while Metcalfe, ignoring this, sawed a dead guitar with a violin bow, or drilled it with a Black and Decker, crashed cymbals, gargled submarine noises through his amplified gas mask, smashed beer glasses, or—worse of all—farted. "Art," said Cobbing in 1981, "has been taken out of our hands, it seems to me, and

[32] Peter Mayer, concrete poet. See his anthology *Alphabetical and Letter Poems: A Chrestomathy* (London: The Menard Press, 1978). Betty Radin: long-time attendee of Writers Forum workshop; persistently published visual poetry with WF press, maker of 3D concrete poems in 1970s. Steve Clews: librarian (currently Library Systems Manager at Senate House); friend of Bill Griffiths. Tony Wright: bamboo flute player, frequent performer at New River Project.

we must be artless."[33] They developed artlessness to a fine art. Fencott left Bird Yak in the late 1980s, to pursue a career as a lecturer in computing (leaving behind works, such as the unpublished "opera" *Hugh II*, *the Istictiv*.) The duo Bird Yak can be heard on their 45 EP *Green Computer*, playing at the LMC on 6 June 1987, one of its more restrained performances, using one of Cobbing's first colour computer texts, the title piece. (Incidentally, the acoustics gives an aural impression of the barren echoic interior of the LMC.) Metcalfe, off-stage a kind and thoughtful man, learnt the lesson of continual art activity from Cobbing, with his Klinker performance series, which is perhaps NRP's continuing legacy.[34]

In addition to these re-constructed evenings, I have other disconnected memories, lacking context or record, partial or over-vivid, that I can't resolve into narrative. They include: Ulli Freer building an environment and chanting inside it, a sound-system playing break-beats. Paul A. Green performing with blues pianist Vincent Crane, formerly of The Crazy World of Arthur Brown. I remember Green's intro, miked up and ready to go like a rock singer: "Hi there everybody and welcome to the New River Project on this fine Saturday afternoon," as Crane tinkled blues riffs. I think Gilbert and I stared at each other in disbelief! Clive Fencott performing with virtuoso free singer Phil Minton, spitting like chickens on LSD, yelling and screaming in demented disharmony. Other musicians include Philip Waschman, with his violin and pedals, electronically distorting his playing, possibly accompanied by Phil Durrant. (These were members of the LMC). Bob's friend from the British Legion entertaining us with conventional accordion one afternoon. (He was *not* a member of the LMC, but in such a context sounded genuinely weird.) Gavin Selerie launching his performance work *Strip Signals*, I think with several voices. Cobbing and John Rowan reading excerpts from Jack Kerouac's "Old Angel Midnight," an early influence on Cobbing, published by Moonlight Press (get it?) for the first time in its entirety. As homage to Dada, Cobbing republishing Hugo Ball's *5 Sound Poems* which were performed by Peter Mayer, wearing a replica of the famous dunce-hat costume worn by Ball at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916. An even vaguer memory of somebody performing Kurt Schwitters' *Ur Sonate.* The concrete poet Jeremy Adler introducing his father, the formalist German poet H.G. Adler (see the 1985 book list above). A vague memory (or necessary supposition) that Bill Griffiths must have launched his massive Writers Forum anthology *A Textbook of Drama*, possibly performing a mummers play or a Noh drama, the "proof" of his

[33] *Ballet of the Speech Organs: Bob Cobbing on Bob Cobbing*, ed. Steven Ross Smith (Saskatoon and Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1998) 21.

[34] Hugh Metcalfe, musician, performer, film maker, arts organiser. Away from Bird Yak plays with Tony Oxley and Philip Waschsman. See www.klinker.com

thesis about the performative metrics of the balanced line, on its publication in 1987.[35]

22 June 1986: "In NRP on Wednesday, Sally Silvers danced—which was very good; and Bruce Andrews read—which was excellent. His early "language" stuff was dull, but the recent material had brilliant flashes of wit, oblique attacks on habitual perceptions and institutions (both mental and physical)."

At this event, unusually on a week night, I imagine that American language poet Andrews was performing the decontextualised speech fragments that comprise *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*, rather than *Both Both* (texts he wrote with Cobbing, and published with Writers Forum in 1987).[36] Andrews seemed interested in the developing avant-garde of the London scene so it was inevitable that Clarke and I asked him to write the introduction to *Floating Capital*. His second Writers Forum collaboration with Cobbing, *Voodoo for Anti-Communist Tourists*, was launched at the last New River Project event I can recall, in 1991, doubling as the launch of *Floating Capital* itself.

Nearly all the anthologies that tried to represent this writing scene avoided the kinds of visual-text published by Writers Forum on grounds of technical difficulty and cost reproducing facsimile pages (although that did not stop Ken Edwards' "Interface" *Reality Studios*). Cobbing always felt that his own visual contribution to *The New British Poetry* looked isolated and decontextualised, and—in an uncharacteristic moment of doubt—he insisted he was represented by a semantic text in *Floating Capital* (part of our collaboration, a cut-up of words left over (literally snippets) from my introduction to *Processual*). Likewise Gilbert Adair and Maggie O'Sullivan contributed purely linear and non-visual work, which, though excellent examples of their *evolving* styles, meant that in the very act of drawing attention to one kind of new poetry in London, we were obscuring other avant-garde practices (not to mention

[35] Vincent Crane: also famously keyboard player of Atomic Rooster. Phil Minton: singer, improviser, yodeller, trumpeter, composer, leader of feral choir. Works in a variety of contexts from Mike Westbrook Orchestra (particularly on his settings of Blake) through to Veryan Weston. (In the twenty first century Weston worked with Jennifer Cobbing). Philip Waschsman: violinist, worked with Harry Beckett and Evan Parker in the London Improvisers Orchestra. Phil Durrant: violinist but also plays with John Butcher and John Russell (in the 1980s a friend of Gilbert Adair, who contributed a quotation to the "frog" materials.) John Rowan: poet, leading humanist psychologist, early Writers Forum activist, probably met Bob Cobbing around 1950. See www.johnrowan.org.uk/poetry.html. (accessed 6/4/09). Jeremy Adler: alphabet poet, publisher of Alphabox Press, and Professor of German.

[36] Bruce Andrews: poet and political scientist. Most extraordinary work: *Lip Service* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 2001). Sally Silvers: important dancer on the New York scene. Together they performed with the likes of John Zorn. A few days before at Sub Voicive, 18 June: "Last night Peter Middleton read a fairly interesting new piece, and I met Bruce Andrews, one of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* editors, who was interesting on funding of poetry in the US, and of how there are all sorts of Lowell, or Ashbery, or Olson clones in poetic and creative cul-de-sacs in the States, teaching creative writing. But are there any Andrews-clones? He seemed open and modest—surprised that *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* became so authoritative; indeed, that's why they stopped doing it."

performances). This situation was only remedied with Writers Forum's 750th publication in 1992, an anthology of the press's entire range, *Verbi Visi Voco*, in which many of the texts I've mentioned are to be found.

At the end of an NRP evening Cobbing requested the audience that remained to take empty beer glasses back to The Engineer. I remember always having to take a handful or a stack. Once in the pub, warming up in winter, cooling down in summer, conversation began, but rarely about poetry or art, as is the London way. I remember one night talking with Patrick Fetherston, a survivor of early Writers Forum days, indeed a name that can be traced back to an earlier avant-garde grouping around Stefan and Franciszka Themerson's pioneering little press Gaberbocchus. (I remember recording Stefan Themerson for *1983* in 1975, windows padded with mattresses to mute the passing trains in Southwick.) This account is slipping back decades, spiralling out from The Engineer on a composite Saturday evening, dangerously threatening to become legend, displacing all of us in time and space. Perhaps back to Themerson meeting Kurt Schwitters in 1944 at a PEN meeting in London. There needs to be a genealogy of these people and connections, to sustain our practice when it becomes difficult to maintain its authenticity against official histories that (still, unaccountably) include almost none of the names and activities from this memoir. No wonder Donguy thought Cobbing, the hero of this piece, had died in 1982. Patrick Fetherston is nervously darting back and forth. He tells me he is going to Canada to become King. "Hello, I know you—you're Dudley!" he says to Patricia. An epileptic fugue is due. He rushes out into the Camden night, dangerous to himself, to others, grinning and beady-eyed behind his pebble-glasses. Nobody follows...[37]

[37] Fetherston: poet and prose writer, employee of British Council. See his *Three Days after the Blasphemies* (London: Gabberbocchus Press, 1967). Stefan Themerson: poet, novelist, philosopher, filmmaker and publisher. See his *Tom Harris* (London: Gabberbocchus Press, 1967), and *Collected Poems* (Amsterdam: Gabberbocchus Press, 1999). Franciszka Themerson: artist and publisher. See her *Traces of Living* (London: Gabberbocchus Press, 1969). On Kurt Schwitters see Stefan Themerson's *Kurt Schwitters in England: 1940-1948* (London: Gabberbocchus Press, 1958).

John Wilkinson

Mark Hyatt's Poésie Brute

The term "poésie Brute" may be associated with Paul Valéry or with the post-first world war poetic generation of Pierre Reverdy and René Char, contrasting in the first case with Valéry's "Poésie Pure" and therefore, one must say, no more than medium-rare if that; and in the second contrasted with a cooler, more detached modernism exemplified by Paul Valéry himself (the whole banquet, from medium-rare to well done), but nonetheless a poetry precisely self-situating in its contemporary literary context and anything but "raw" in the sense understood by "art brut." Requisite for a poésie brute persuasively analogous to art brut must be a character as distinct from amateur poetry and poetry-as-literature as art brut is from Sunday painting and the academy; that is to say, poésie brute should designate a body of work consistent in its independently generated compositional principles, developed by a writer with limited formal education (or deprived of education's influence owing to mental defect or illness or habitual intoxication) and in isolation from the major writing of the time, yet possessed of an ambition comparable to contemporary major writing. In this connection to be raw does not mean unelaborated or unfinished, for all that the category of art brut usually includes "primitive" art as distinct from indigenous art; indeed, in visual art the productions of great paranoid outsider artists are often extraordinarily elaborate. Think of Adolf Wölfli or Henry Darger, the Chicago school janitor whose images and writings lie behind John Ashbery's *Girls on the Run*. And the work of "primitives" can be highly finished, as are the paintings of Henri, Le Douanier Rousseau. Wölfi's cosmologies might call to mind Christopher Smart and William Blake, although their constructions are more digressive than Wölfi's, and neither Blake nor Smart has been consigned to a distinct category according with poésie brute.

While generally written in isolation poésie brute can influence the course of academically-recognised major poetry, as certain artisan radical poets did in the late eighteenth century in England, and more arguably Gregory Corso in the mid-twentieth century in America. Ambitious work in rap or reggae idioms surely would qualify as poésie brute, for instance the toasting of Doctor Alimintado and Big Youth which influenced the

1970s writing of John James and Barry MacSweeney. Toasting was the alluring language of over-the-tracks in late 1970s England. These instances suggest that a characteristic of poésie brute would be indifference about supplying easily grasped representation or easily ingested moralising; such writing and verbalising can exhibit the quality of thickness, or "obscurity" in the extended sense of special or cult or cant poetic language discussed by Daniel Tiffany in his recent book *Infidel Poetics*, and therefore converges with the most adventurous, modernist strains in formally published and critically recognised poetry.

An interesting historical instance of this convergence and one which persists as an obstinate remnant is Beat poetry, oddly uncited by Tiffany and a continuing embarrassment to the academy. Hip argot is important to Beat poetry, whether for an ambitious and formally much-educated poet like Allen Ginsberg to mark his opposition to literary and social "squareness," or for myriads of local writers to invest their all-too-accessible musings with the air of hieratic mystery—as through the exploitation of Eastern mystical jargon. The persistence and the embarrassment of Beat alike depend on an indefinitely expansive "I" (along with professions of egolessness), reducing textual authority through the assertion of exemplary extra-textual experience. It is a moot point whether the present conventional expunging of the "I," ineluctably promoting textual authority in the teeth of all aleatory, combinatory or collaborative strategies, is more or less self-conscious and self-centred than frankly first-person writing; but certainly I-pasteurised poetry passes through the academic gut less irritatingly than Beat. Nonetheless Alan Kaufman and S.A. Griffin's *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* (1999) adorns every American mall bookstore's poetry shelf, a testament to the Beat movement's increasingly various progeny after its white male adolescent first-born; this anthology remains a solid block of resistance to academic incorporation and no doubt saves the sanity of many a troubled suburban teen. Here an exemplary figure might be d.a. levy (1942-1968), the energetic centre of Cleveland's underground press movement, an autodidact of boundless appetite, and a poet of real improvisational bravura:

FUNNY THING
    AFTER the first police putsch
    on the cities
        information sources
            sorcerers
            & magician s
        UNI*Corpsed from psycho
        logical operations
        similar to those musically
       performed at well known
       rest resorts like Dachau &
       San Diego/
           strange figures.

rose   from beneath the
streets of medina marble &
UNIFIED
      (gave me the first
christmas ive had in years)[1]

Too often these moments fall back into autobiographical rambling, as after this sample, or are strangulated into fey lyric oddly exotic to the mean streets, thieves' kitchens and drug hustles; but such inconsistency is inseparable from the continuing challenge of this variety of poésie brute.

The academic poetic ideal of parsimony could not be more alien from Beat poetry, formed as Beat politics were in rebellion against Fordist conformism. The parsimony codified in New Criticism surely belongs to the postwar cult of efficiency and prudent saving; every linguistic scrap must be put to work, every participant phrase must earn its keep. Lines that don't work deserve no charity; they are bums. It is remarkable how such moralism has been sustained into the present through the institution of close reading; for even the variety of close reading which focuses on symptomatic lapses wrings maximum value from those nonconformist units, deconstruction arising alongside the managerial cult of thinking "outside the box." More traditional close reading continues to thrive in thousands of poetry workshops; every dovetail joint must be perfectly routed and set. Constructivist poets might think of textile, where every thread of the poetic text takes its strain in managing the tension sustaining the whole at high performance. Systems poets set their runtime routines to order every particle. Parsimony, as this suggests, was succeeded by the cult of productivity as Japan and Germany began to compete in export markets, and then productivity by the knowledge economy—poems must instantiate smart ideas, right on the button with new theory and new technology. Against this dominant economic and poetic history, a savvy beat poet like Ed Sanders looks heroically resistant.

What is eschewed in Beat poetry, as also in Slam which partly descends from it, is professionalised reading (as opposed to professionalised performance). Readers and audiences, to their great relief, are not held answerable for the quality of their attention; indeed, it is a basic assumption that readers will be half-distracted and need frequent shocks to get them back from wool-gathering. Great tracts of Beat poetry are phatic in intent, establishing a community of the nonconformist (or weekend slummer), and such phatic, relatively information-impoverished speech and writing is essential to secure the conditions permitting receptive response to small but concentrated doses of "thick" poetry, or the registering of recurrent or cumulative

[1] Opening lines of d.a. levy, "Jaywalking Blues," online at www.thing.net/~grist/ld/dalevy/levyjw.htm. I am grateful to Peter Riley for information helpful in writing this article.

patterning. Thus Beat poetry can resist becoming the object of high-art connoisseurship or middlebrow collectability, and also sidesteps the frisson of contact with pathology towards which art brut and poésie brute so often devolve. That said, it is highly dependent on audience identification—often during some "passing phase." Writing like d.a. levy's represents a special case of poésie brute because it continues to develop and sustain an outsider community on whose now-conventionalised idioms it draws; and it lures its constituency towards an acceptance of the poetry's moments of obscurity as paradigmatic of their self-perceived social obscurity. This may present a conceptual challenge for literary criticism, but it exactly refuses to accede to the model of poem *as* challenge which dominates the classroom. And a taste for "challenge" is unmistakably born out of the character-building and entrepreneurial ideology of fifties America: no wonder Ginsberg despised it.

Perhaps because too many English schoolchildren had been instructed and examined in Blake in the classroom, an irony comparable to being drilled in Foucault at university, Beat never comprised a recognisable genre in English poetry; for all that Allen Ginsberg inspired autodidacts, dopeheads and young university poets weary of well-turned verse alike.[2] Ginsberg's 1965 arrival in Britain (Wales included) and his participation in the International Poetry Incarnation at the Albert Hall was a key moment in the formation of an English underground culture. This culture was far less free-wheeling than Californian sunshine and freeways allowed; Pink Floyd and The Incredible String Band were idiomatically restless compared with the San Francisco bands of the time, but relatively detached from their audience, whether holed up in studio or country cottage. The classic anthology of British underground poetry (it does include Scots and Welsh, but interestingly in retrospect, not the Irish poets who would exercise a much greater influence outside the British Isles) was *Children of Albion: Poetry of the "Underground" in Britain*, edited by the most assiduous of Ginsberg imitators, Michael Horovitz, and published in 1969 by Penguin. At the time this book seemed to lie around everywhere to be flicked through. Looking through the contributors now, it is heartening to contemplate their subsequent careers; while Horovitz has been criticised for his exclusions, especially the tiny proportion of women, when it came to male poets he had a good strike rate. Here are distinguished pioneers of an already middle-aged generation—Edwin Morgan, Roy Fisher, Gael Turnbull and Ian Hamilton Finlay, early writings by the "Cambridge" poets Andrew Crozier and John James, poets of continuing adventurousness such as Tom

[2] This may be a little too categorical. Dave Cunliffe's journal *Poetmeat* (which published d.a. levy) and its successor *Global Tapestry Journal* hewed close to the American beat aesthetic; as did the poet Jim Burns, promotor of beat poetry through his review column in the left political paper *Tribune*. This beat activity was centred in Lancashire, in the industrial cities of Blackburn and Preston—like "rocker" culture (the British version of Hell's Angels).

Raworth, and important regional poets such as Tom Pickard and Chris Torrance. In this context what is most striking is how little poetry in the anthology could be classified as Beat in the way d.a. levy unmistakably was, and how high a proportion takes its coordinates from the European and American avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. Horovitz was a generous anthologist. While these poets felt a cultural affinity with American Beats, the American sense of open space and the American syntactical style of sequential phrasal progress across the terrain and page were unavailable to British writers except those few, like Michael Horowitz, who entirely lacked irony. What British "underground" poetry of the time shared with Donald Davie, for instance, was an attachment to pastoral—praise of limestone had morphed into magic mushroom highs on the Welsh borders, as the canny Ginsberg noticed at once.

Among the pastoral Children of Albion, one "heart once pregnant with celestial fire" was Mark Hyatt (1940-1973), an English poet who wrote only a few good poems by the tenets of close reading, but whose poetry as a body of work is of much more than passing interest. There is evidence that Hyatt aspired to write lyric poetry that would be recognised as securely within the English tradition—he had a penchant for ballad forms; but because he was semi-literate and a heroin user (along with other "recreational" drugs), he always fell short of formal perfection. Several short poems begin in rhythmic confidence but trail off, too often vitiated by a painfully English inhibition manifestly shaped by lack of class and educational entitlement. Nonetheless amidst their formal imperfections and perhaps because of them the poems gather power, as the last couplet of "Delicate" both asserts and demonstrates:

> He steals a small poem
> and scars it madly.[3]

Time and again lyric poems that are small in ambition and in extent are scarred by lines of shockingly immediate and uncontrived beauty. The frequent incompetence of the small poems bearing these scars only heightens their impact, which at its most powerful can evoke Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. As with Beat poetry, the effective inconsistency of this work questions the procedures of close reading and its historically consequent poetic values, the chivvying of every line and every line-break to yield maximum provender. In a way Hyatt's could be characterised as stoner poetry; amidst a general vagueness more or less interestingly warped from poem to poem, something amazing occurs, and amazingly often. And the amazing thing is that these amazing things stay amazing. To return to these poems decades after first reading them is to feel their force again and to lament that they are not better known.

[3] Mark Hyatt, *A Different Mercy* (Cambridge: infernal methods, 1976) 20; hereafter refered to as *DM*.

In fact the poem "Delicate" concluded by the couplet above is almost entirely beautiful and as good a stoner poem as has been written. When Hyatt writes "I have to feel for words" (*DM* 10) he is writing only the truth. "Delicate" shows a poet fingering through the banal phrases that drift into his head, turning them around as though they were mobiles and slightly adjusting them—just enough. Where so-sophisticated poets love to exhibit scraps of tired material refurbished with ingenious perversity, Hyatt contrives to make sense by touch. And what happens is the poem does *make sense*:

DELICATE

He reads a tired book,
the books of thoughts.

He wonders at bright words:
are words like men
a shape to be broken
with a coughing sound?

He reads life into patterns,
a bursting joy in his blood.

He sees letters clear through,
print is his feed.

He fingers paper pain,
lovely.

He crosses his legs,
an action to please.

He lights up a friendly cigarette
while sight reading.

He lets senses take him,
human grace.

He turns another image,
his brains are fresh.

He draws close on his nerves
and works his body away.

He thinks on a quick visit
while tending his toilet.

He steals a small poem
and scars it madly.

Words are broken into activity as mens' attention has to be roused, their shapes and patterns coughing and bursting with pain and joy as "he" reads life into them. "Read" becomes a remarkably active verb here, a determined action rather than a skill turned automatic, and a "tired book" is revived by reading's almost sexual attentions to it; note that "he" does not "write" although writing is what he is edging towards, but rather he reads words into life. The insistent use of "he" and the resistance to "I" permit the thought that the final "scarring" which reading inflicts might produce a writing of "I" beyond or elsewhere. This is not so much a resistance to the first person as a distanced self seeking to rejoin the body. Either that or "he" might as well be a lover, the object of an almost-complete but still-yearning identification, not quite inhabited.

How does this active reading by Mark Hyatt or by his lover differ from professional close reading? Verbal and physical actions can scarcely be distinguished: "He crosses his legs" becomes an effect of reading, and this reading of the world into action becomes uncanny in a re-reading of the poem, as though one were in telepathic control of another's body or at these words felt a compulsion to cross one's own legs. In this poem reading becomes articulation that threatens the integrity of surfaces; words scar, burrow, break out. Their sounding can break the shape of men as well as their own typed surface shape, they can permeate the blood and feed the stomach, and they move back and forth, palpating the body and even sodomising it. Elsewhere and more explicitly the poem "Poor Sod" ends:

> but who cares what the surface is?
> I'm greasy inside, hot and tender,
> and I love it.[4]

Such reading as Hyatt undertakes is far from participation in textual production and from felicitous expression, but handles words trepidatiously as objects, whether aggressive or sustaining or fertilising. Or in a contrary direction the body becomes a sheet of writing, to "see letters clear through" is to experience "paper pain" but also for the skin to become a "paper pane." His sight and his nerves conspire to edge him into a text world, working his body away so that while he thinks he meanwhile is "tending his toilet" as if he were external to his own body and his body were a receiving instrument, marked on both sides and punctured by his attentions.

The transferred epithet of "tired book" and the complex of body, words and holes amount to a complex governing Hyatt's poetry, evident on many pages and driven by powerfully unconditional feelings. Overwhelming pain and delirious happiness claim the poems as they

[4] Mark Hyatt, *How Odd* (Eltham: Blacksuede Boot Press and Ferry Press, 1973) n.p.; hereafter referred to as *HO*.

claim his body, and it is apt that the only significant (although brief) critical attention Hyatt's writing has received comes in the final chapter of Geoffrey Thurley's survey of English poetry after Auden, *The Ironic Harvest* (1974). Identifying Hyatt as "the strangest and most talented poet in *Children of Albion*" he includes him among poets he trusts to break the "ironical sclerosis" of contemporary English poetry, declaring "his words have had no traffic with idea and concept, they are like stones."[5] Basing this characterisation on "Eleemosynary" (included in *Children of Albion*) Thurley appreciates the poem's neo-Elizabethan mishmash but misses the "unmasked | documents" stirred in among the "fat" and "injections of new tortures." For Hyatt writing is a business of both masking and unmasking, a method for alleviating pain that exacerbates pain, a turn-up for the books that Hyatt attributes repeatedly to his own literary deficiencies: "all you do is go wailing at the mind that is broken. | And your hand has no writer's method for hiding." This helpless couplet finishes the poem "Extended Movement" with its heartbreaking and strangely fascinating line: "you hang over a prickling machine very heavy" (*DM* 59). Is the machine the body or the page? Where are "you" in this? Can things be hidden in the mind, behind the skin?

> a man has tattooed
> my mind in the tradition of
> the world of the underworld,
> mottoes are thrones, experiences
> duplicated to the last cheap
> price
> ["Deep Silence," *DM* 44]

Remember that at this time pamphlets of poetry were *duplicated* with the use of stencils too-often punctured, especially at the letter "o." So perhaps the "prickling machine" is also a Gestetner, a duplicator.

In suggesting that Hyatt's words are "like stones" Thurley seeks to associate Hyatt, along with other English poets he favours, with an American modernist aesthetic descending from William Carlos Williams. But while Hyatt's words indeed possess a physicality alien to the "joylessness" and academicism of the Movement poetry Thurley deprecates, they work physiologically, not as building-blocks, and exercise a sometimes staggering pressure; it is the lyric warp under such pressure that compels, and the handling of words as though dangerous and unstable (Hyatt was writing during the "insurgency phase" of the Provisional IRA bombing campaign in Northern Ireland). Lines like "For

[5] Geoffrey Thurley, *The Ironic Harvest: English poetry in the twentieth century* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1974) 206-207. Lee Harwood however is the standard-bearer on whom Thurley most relies. In the interests of completeness I should cite also my review of *A Different Mercy*: John Wilkinson, "Mark Hyatt: A Different Mercy," *Perfect Bound* 3 (Cambridge, 1977): 82-85.

my mind has begun to melt rocks | And every day is Ash-day" tense with a non-objective physicality far from Williams or Oppen, but the poem scarred by these lines, "The Waste" (*DM* 40), is no celebration of egotistical power—it is permeated with the fear that words retained in the mind, words to which poetry has yet to give birth, will lay the mind waste through their unchannelled energy. Gape or die; for "The Waste" partakes of a near-identity of mind, mouth, womb and rectum evident throughout Hyatt's poems and to which this essay will return.

The most sustained intensity in Hyatt's poetry is found in the lyric "Puberty of Puck" (*DM* 29). This poem merits extended treatment, but for this introduction a few remarks will suffice. "Puberty of Puck" re-performs the trauma of a deferred entry into language, showing unmistakably that to write lyric poetry must have involved a re-enactment of that original trauma for Hyatt. Indeed the poem's first stanza presents the derealised body of severe post-traumatic stress. Here is the entire poem:

PUBERTY OF PUCK[6]

It's slow writing
on re-admission of the abyss
so if this body is sleepy-tired
please walk around.

Suddenly there's nothing
in the laws of the alphabet
that breaks open revealing
what buoyancy am I.

Surely the corpse of childhood
can't multiply any greater?
Only the sad hole of this new void
revisiting old headaches:

I realise the image of myself
coils round soft the life,
nolonger am I wise or otherwise
but alone;

exhausted by the birth of aching,
thoughts reach me
with pangs of emptiness,
once my mind wouldn't look at,

[6] The capitalised title reflects the convention adopted in *A Different Mercy*. The word "nolonger" is as printed: "the original text, as we have it, of each poem has been reproduced exactly," the endnote to the pamphlet declares. Since the editors are distinguished scholars, this statement is trustworthy.

split in thrills of urgency
growing inside my hair,
there's somebody inside me
that wants to fight any wild space.

The poem shows several syntactical eccentricities, even clumsinesses, but these seem enjoined by a mind that has begun to melt rocks, rather than by one disposed to grammatical carelessness. Once "the laws of the alphabet" break open, "I" become buoyant. Such adolescent buoyancy casts the self out of the body where it can multiply, where it must mourn its vacant and now tomblike original home, where it can tenderly enfold the body, where it must also suffer the body's rebellion against enclosure in a self whether tender or exploitative. "Puck" derives from a word meaning "unsettled" and evidently the adolescence following this "puberty" remains active and irresolvable. "Hair" here captures a valency equivalent to the buoyancy and multiplicity of "I"; this world comprises empty space, filled space and proliferation, and an identificatory partnership has yet to be imagined. *Writing* then entails "re-admission of the abyss" (whether the abyss is within or without) where *reading* in "Delicate" is an activity permitting scars to be inflicted, to be recognised on paper. Because of this writing is "slow" while "Delicate" tracks the darting and puncturing forays of reading, the light incursions and withdrawals. Where can the "sad hole" be located? Does it lie within "the corpse of childhood" or does the "sad whole" refer to the ejected "I" as it revisits "old headaches" and "coils round soft the life"? The coils and rhythmical viscosity of this poem's stanzaically-organised syntax contrast strongly with the fast-floating couplets of "Delicate."

It would be possible to close-read "Puberty of Puck" into exactly this oscillation between proliferation and a full/empty unity, that is between a productive text and a parsimonious one, and to disregard the phenomenology of the reading encounter. This poem achieves the notable feat of enjoining identification with its performance of ejected and thus-confirmed identity. The "I" clearly is experiential and authorial, but authorship is dissociated from authority and rodently mobile between inside, outside, linguistic, physiological, self, other and shifter: "nolonger am I wise or otherwise" (the compound "nolonger" obliges a parallel reading of "otherwise" as "other wise"). More than that, the reader is invoked immediately and intimately in the line "please walk around" and this brokers a relationship with the text analogous to the intimate exteriority of the "I" to the pre-linguistic body. Hence by the close of the poem, "somebody inside me | that wants to fight any wild space" accords with the presence of the poem as it has been incorporated through the act of reading. That is to say, the poem returns to and touches on the pre-linguistic core of the reader him or herself. And this is the truth of the effect of this uncannily haunting poem which never goes away because it was always there/here, pointing towards an

unimaginable and unfigurable "wild space" known to all but beyond and before words. That so, it lurks harboured and encapsulated in words used poetically, constituting their dangerous charge: "Here's to the high explosive deathbird | That troubles the vegetation on language."[7]

When reading Mark Hyatt's published work as a whole, and that is a profoundly rewarding thing to do, it should be remembered that his poems are of uncertain textual status. Apart from the five uncollected poems included in *Children of Albion*, they are collected in three pamphlets: *How Odd* (Eltham: Blacksuede Boot Press and Ferry Press, 1973, 150 copies), *Eleven Poems* (London: Ted Cavanagh, nd, 1974, 200 copies), and *A Different Mercy* (Cambridge: infernal methods, 1976, 250 copies).[8] The poems in Hyatt's first two pamphlets had been edited collaboratively with his partner Donald, whereas those in *A Different Mercy* are transcribed by Nigel Wheale and David Trotter from photocopies of originals that probably did not involve Donald's participation in the editorial process. All the pamphlets are posthumous. No information is available on the selection of *How Odd*, but the text of *Eleven Poems* was discovered among Hyatt's papers by the distinguished English poet Peter Riley, apparently prepared as a group for publication. Peter Riley recalls his dealings with Hyatt as follows:

> I can't pretend to an exhaustive knowledge of what went on in Belthorne (the village Mark and his partner lived in), and I've never seen drafts which differed greatly from the final published versions. I visited them there in 1970 or 1971 and we talked about this. The impression I came away with was that Mark, who was semi-literate, wanted Donald to correct the spelling and to some extent the syntax of the poems as he typed them up. He wanted them to be in "proper English." This wasn't keyed into publication: all poems were to go through this process as soon as completed.
>
> The complication is that Mark was at the same time studying (with Donald) to achieve true literacy, and had started to do some of his own typing and correction, maybe under Donald's eye. We can't then assume that any typed or printed text has been changed by Donald. I also think that they sat together while Donald typed up the poems and any verbal changes that were made were made with Mark's approval.

Learning from Nigel Wheale in response to his inquiry that most of the originals used for *A Different Mercy* were typescripts, Peter Riley writes further:

[7] Mark Hyatt, "Dice," *Eleven Poems* (London: Ted Cavanagh, nd, 1974) n.p.; hereafter referred to as *EP*.

[8] A pamphlet preceded the three listed, but its publication status is precarious: *Randell's Vision.* Peter Riley, spirit mimeo edition, Odense Denmark c1971. 10pp. about 20 copies. Even the publisher has no copy. Information would be welcome.

> One possibility is that Mark took to composing on the typewriter in the first instances and did so without bothering about "proper English," the scripts to be corrected (or not) later by Donald or himself, but that's only a guess.

Wheale and Trotter's endnote to *A Different Mercy* refers rather frustratingly to "other work…in magazines and anthologies" suggesting that diligent search in collections of British little magazines of the sixties and early seventies would be rewarded; for instance, five uncollected poems were published in *Poetry Review* in 1975 and Hyatt was publishing poems as early as 1961 in *The Aylesford Review*, a curious proto-countercultural journal published by the English Carmelites.[9]

While it would seem tendentiously reductive to refer to Frank O'Hara or John Ashbery as a gay poet, sexuality is so central to Hyatt's writing that he assuredly merits this identification; more precisely, he is a sodomitical poet. Biographically Hyatt must be regarded as bisexual given his relationship with the novelist Cressida Lindsay and his fathering of a son with her, Dylan Hyatt.[10] This relationship preceded the poems presented in the three pamphlets, which include poems strongly suggesting that Hyatt worked as a rent boy before meeting Donald: "I am a prostitute to my city | among the daddies of this time, | on just a manly whore's income" ("Work and Wonder," *HO*, n.p.). Throughout his collected writing, Hyatt associates the city with sex for money.[11]

Pursuing the sodomitical strand in Hyatt's poems, "Puberty of Puck" lends itself to reading as an auto-sodomitical poem, a "shape to be broken." "Suddenly" the body here is helplessly invaded, it reverts to the "corpse of childhood," a "sad hole," a "new void"; the "somebody inside me" may be another's penis, yes, but another loved narcissistically and thereby restoring the corpse of childhood to life. This revival is

[9] The poems in *Children of Albion* are "Smoked," "All Sunday Long," "Sh *Everyboy*," "answer don't move" and "Eleemosynary." The five poems published in *Poetry Review* 65.2/3 (1975): 177-182 are "I see heat as a bird in the universe," "Growing Peas," "Small Things," "Poem ('Hunting key holes for pity')" and "the golden penis still stands." Poems by Hyatt are known to have appeared in issues of *Canards du siècle present*, *Collection*, *Global Tapestry*, *The Curiously Strong*, *Equofinality* (eleven poems reprinted from other journals), *Figs*, *Grosseteste Review*, *Human Handkerchief*, *Joe DiMaggio*, *The Literary Supplement*, *Musics*, *New Departures*, *Palantir*, *Pause*, *Residu*, and *Turpin*. The majority of these journals constitute a roll-call of the Cambridge and Essex avant-garde poetry journals of the 1970s; where was Hyatt publishing between *The Aylesford Review* in 1961 and this 1970s grouping?

The Aylesford Review was edited by Brocard Sewell, a Carmelite friar, a specialist in fin-de-siècle "uranian" literature and a one-time member of the British Union of Fascists—providing a link to *Grosseteste Review* through the Poundian fascist Dennis Goacher who published in both journals. But these are murky waters…

[10] Cressida Lindsay seems to have been something of a British version of Panna Grady, the American socialite with whom John Wieners fell in love, and the lover of the impossible Philip O'Connor. Lindsay seems to have had a taste for high-risk bisexual men regardless of race and class, such as her publisher, the aristocratic Anthony Blond with whom she also had a son, and Jimi Hendrix. Like Grady's, her home became a countercultural salon.

[11] The city was associated also with heroin, and it seems that Hyatt's move to rural domesticity was motivated in part by a desire to escape heroin addiction.

consistent with feeling "held" maternally, which "the image of myself | coils round soft the life" registers so exactly and tenderly; for as Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani agree in their revisionist assault on the orthodoxy of desire as necessarily founded in difference, "when narcissistic desire becomes the medium for recognition rather than the obstacle—as it does in mothering—it is affinity more than difference that is felt (it is when the baby is experienced by the mother as alien, as not of a piece with the mother, that something is radically wrong)."[12] In this poem then, Hyatt mothers himself through sodomising himself, or through being sodomised by a narcissistically desired other.

To feel held maternally is a profound desire for Hyatt in his poems, and traceable to the "grave-yard in my childhood" persisting in "The Waste" (*DM* 40) at the centre of Hyatt's being: "the content of this body | Is a good portrait of the dead" he avers, and here his body is neither encircled by a mother's arms nor penetrated by a lover or by poetic expression, "For nothing flows in | Because nothing flows out" ("Hope," *DM* 36) conflates womb, tomb and rectum:

> I want too much, I want you
> to fill me
> with milk from your body
> bursting my womb so naked
> I want you to open me
> open me wide.

and at the end:

> the grave long for the dead breath [*sic*]
> and I long for you,
> I long for your love, life
> before I run from myself
> let me, let me love your body
> within my womb of tears,
> the only hope is to love, leaving
> both minds unhurt through all time.

Semen is represented as both milk and as tears; "womb of tears" recalls the proverbial "vale of tears" but the vale of tears which was his childhood has been encapsulated within Hyatt, reproducing his corpse. The birth Hyatt asks from his lover is his rebirth as the child who in his bed longs for and receives the maternal breath of life, reinstating this wished-for child in place of the graveyard child that he was and remains, awaiting "dead breath." Bersani and Phillips make much of such fantasies in the aftermath of AIDS and in connection with the sexual practice of "barebacking":

[12] Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 2008) 107.

> Asking your top to give you a baby can intensify the excitement of anal sex, an effect that, from a fantasmatic perspective, makes logical sense. The bottom is thrillingly invested with women's power to conceive, and, in a throwback to childhood (and now unconscious) theories about the path of conception, the rectum becomes the procreative womb. But the barebacker's rectum is a grave.[13]

The obvious difference in these poems is that Hyatt wishes to become his own mother through narcissistic identification with his lover, and that rather than submitting to or toying with the death drive, he seeks the maternal breath that will revive the dead child lying in his womb. It may not be too extravagant to think of the dead child as a turd, an enormous blockage which obstructs poetical achievement, especially with such a proximate title as "The Waste." Again, addressing a "young boy" who cannot be distinguished from Hyatt himself in the poem "The Boy" (*DM* 27-28) he calls: "mother | why was I not mother | to you | to your sucking bone" and finishes with a maternal enfolding echoing or anticipating "Puberty of Puck": "the quietness of your childish heart | eyes my body | and will loiter in my image." Sodomy is a nurturing act in these poems; it does not parody the womb and acts of breeding, but re-produces and makes good, makes love. "We are into shit arse and soul" as one of the *Poetry Review* poems puts it pithily.

Across Hyatt's poetry can be tracked this one poetic activity, whether integrated into a few powerful individual poems, or distributed through relatively incoherent pieces such as "The Waste" and "Hope." Alongside and against these physical poems and those of urban memories and returns, a pastoral and bucolic vein extends through Hyatt's poems. This includes the two poems identified as "Pastoral Poems" in *Eleven Poems*, "Wine" and "Inconclusive Engagement" (the former reprinted untitled in *A Different Mercy* and the only poem duplicated in his pamphlets), the twelve poems grouped in Section III of *A Different Mercy* and the excellent poems "Growing Peas" and "Small Things" published in *Poetry Review*. There is a fundamental systolic and diastolic rhythm apprehensible in Hyatt's writing between physical and pastoral. Characteristically Hyatt's pastoral is a mode imbued with a stoned or drunken happiness, a relaxed extensiveness representing a near-paradisical release from the physical clench, and the finest example of this is the perfectly happy "Country Poem" (*DM* 46) with its contented ambition: "The best a poet could do is state | the softness." But there is usually a worm in the apple; pastoral is touched by small but damaging disruptions such as the insects that pester at the end of "Growing Peas" or the small spider approaching at the end of "Small Things." More radically ambivalent is the souring in the last stanza of "Wine":

[13] *Intimacies*, 45.

Hurrah!
Away with carnival day
And the sweet ache of old wine!
Nothing can happen in the country.
Down with the sun and up with the rain!
Wine, more dank wine!
[*EP* n.p.]

The dismissal of the past ("old wine") and of active joy ("carnival day") in favour of a stoned pastoral where "nothing can happen" is dangerous and dank (that is, "Damp: with the connotation that this is an injurious or disagreeable quality" as the *OED* has it). A fragmentary poem collected in *A Different Mercy* performs an inside/outside switch between internal nothingness and external uneventfulness, eventuating in "a zombie of day and night" ("It's deep inside," *DM* 47). Such a trope and the forcefield exercised by the sodomitical poems determines that "dank wine" smells and tastes as though redolent of a disturbed interior. Sometimes Hyatt turns on his pastoral longings directly and dismissively, describing them as "the dreariest | dream of water locked in a cave" ("Green Life," *DM* 50), extensiveness collapsed back into the tomb-like womb and the amniotic waters turned stagnant. This is the "readmission of the abyss" ("Puberty of Puck") all over again. Internal deadness may dissipate into the pastoral scene's timelessness, but cannot be finally expelled, or reliably broken up or revived by the penis. The "sad hole" will need to be filled again, and the glittering, steaming, smoking and fluctuating pastoral scene first flatten into dreariness and then collapse inward once more.

To write about a poet whom almost nobody has read incurs certain temptations, and particularly the temptation to make irrefutable claims and to present interpretations as unfalsifiable descriptions. It is my hope that my descriptions can be opened to falsification, or at least to argument and refining, through the publication of Mark Hyatt's poems in the collected edition which I hope through this brief essay to have persuaded someone they deserve. While there is a handful of poems meriting anthologising, it is as a corpus that Hyatt's writing exerts its full power, drawing the properly half-attentive reader up short, consolidated, with amazing and unforgettable lines that have broken loose from encapsulated pain or from benign stupor:

and I am having one
of those sexless nights
where birds fly out
of the mouth
with their tails
on fire.

Vincent Katz

Visiting Edwin Denby's "Mediterranean Cities"

Although he was a key figure in the mid-century New York art world—as critic, writer, collaborator, and intimate part of the contemporary social fabric—Edwin Denby is not often recognized as a significant poet. When he does appear in accounts of those times, it is more as an important force in shaping aesthetics than as an artist himself. A champion of choreographer George Balanchine and painter Willem de Kooning, Denby fought in lucid, accessible prose for a kind of classicism in art, work that epitomized proportion, balance, composition, and attention to issues of experience and loss of experience. He believed in, and was the ultimate fan of, consummate technique; he did not think great art could be made without it. In an essay entitled "The Thirties," he wrote about his neighbor, the then-unknown de Kooning:

> I often heard him say that he was beating his brains out about connecting a figure and a background. The basic connection he meant seemed to me a motion from inside them that they interchanged and that continued throughout. He insisted on it during those years stroke by stroke and gained a virtuoso's eye and hand. But he wanted everything in the picture out of equilibrium except spontaneously all of it. That to him was one objective professional standard. That was form the way the standard masterpieces had form—a miraculous force and weight of presence moving from all over the canvas at once.[1]

What Denby was fighting against, sometimes surreptitiously, was art that relied too heavily on ideas. Usually, though not always, those ideas tended to be political. This antipathy to conceptual art set him in opposition to the seminal 1950s aesthetician John Cage, whose life's work evolved a Duchampian brand of modernism aimed at showing that anything could be art, with the implication that anyone could make it, if he could but think of it. No particular talent was necessary. To some eyes, Denby's insistence on technical precision may have cast him into a retrograde camp. Denby would not have minded.

* Special thanks to Vivien Bittencourt and Brooke O'Neill for their help in editing this essay.

[1] Edwin Denby, *Dancers, Buildings, and People in the Streets* (New York: Horizon Press, 1965), reprinted in Edwin Denby, *Willem de Kooning* (Madras & New York: Hanuman Books, 1988).

Modernism, reflecting its roots in romanticism, highlighted the individual's aloneness and consequent heroic, solitary struggle, while classicism was allied with humanism's belief that all people are equal—equally heroic and equally foolish—and that existence is played out in partnership with others. For Denby, this meant that, while only a very few achieve greatness as artists, all aspects of humanity are worthy of notice. His real contribution, something he shared with his close friend, photographer and filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt, was to show that anything, or anyone, if observed non-judgmentally, can be subject matter for a work of art. In an early sonnet, "The Silence at Night," Denby refers specifically to the grime of a city sidewalk as something de Kooning made him see as "designs":

> The sidewalk cracks, gumspots, the water, the bits of refuse,
> They reach out and bloom under arclight, neonlight —
> Luck has uncovered this bloom as a by-produce
> Having flowered too out behind the frightful stars of night.

As can be seen from this excerpt, classicism for Denby also meant adhering to the sonnet form and using end-rhymes, although these would become progressively looser as he played with the form throughout his career. The period when he was writing such poems—the 1940s and '50s—marked the ascent of modernism in American art, and thus his poems could have been seen by less perceptive readers as anti-modern. This, combined with Denby's reluctance to promote his poetry—he remained uncertain of his achievements and endlessly tinkered with poems, even after publication—led to a low profile for his art until the 1960s, when a new generation of poets and artists began reading and disseminating his poetry.

Denby, however, was not anti-modern. He was an admirer of Gertrude Stein's prose and emulated her method of using common language in sense-bending repetitions. His poetry was appreciated by such colleagues as dance impresario Lincoln Kirstein, composers Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson, painters Alex Katz and Fairfield Porter, and the first generation New York School poets. In 1957, Frank O'Hara reviewed Denby's *Mediterranean Cities* sonnets in *Poetry* magazine. Despite such significant supporters, Denby was in his 60s before a wider readership started to acknowledge him as an important poet. Even today, his reputation continues to percolate below the radar of most scholars and readers of contemporary poetry.

Born in 1903, he first emerged on the national poetry scene in 1926 when *Poetry* magazine included two of his poems. In 1948, Denby published his first poetry book, *In Public*, *In Private* (Decker Press), followed by *Mediterranean Cities* (George Wittenborn, Inc.) in 1956. Ted Berrigan devoted a 1963 issue of his *C* magazine to Denby's poetry, and Berrigan's second-generation New York School colleagues continued that support. *Snoring in New York*, published by Anne Waldman of *Angel*

Hair and Larry Fagin of *Adventures in Poetry*, came out in 1974. Full Court Press, headed by Ron Padgett, Joan Simon, and Waldman, published Denby's *Collected Poems* in 1975.

Despite being friends with, and admired by, the first-generation New York School poets, Denby is conspicuously absent from both Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* (1960) and John Bernard Myers' *The Poets of the New York School* (1969). One possible explanation for his absence from most accounts of New York School poetry is his reluctance to show his poetry to others, not to mention his abhorrence of giving public readings. His publication in *Poetry* magazine seems anomalous; Denby had hardly any journal publications after that, until his work was embraced by the second-generation New York School poets. His first two poetry books were self-published, which limited distribution to a small circle of friends. Although it was an illustrious circle, it lay outside the publishing world, even the poetry publishing world. Simply put, Denby could not and did not do the socializing necessary to build a thriving poetry career.

Working hermetically, Denby contributed something no other poet of his period did: a New York School sense of dailiness combined with an ability to reference the values of classical culture in a non-ironic way. His sonnet sequence *Mediterranean Cities* is an ideal site for re-examination of his work.[2] A series of 29 sonnets written after he had mastered his version of the form in several early New York sonnets, *Mediterranean Cities* takes Denby back to Europe—he spent several years there after college—providing him a setting in which to contemplate relationships between and redefinitions of old world and new, antiquity and modernity. At the same time, and of crucial interest for readers of poetry, Denby's inventive use of language and experimentation with the sonnet form reached their apex in these works.

I. THE MAKING OF MEDITERRANEAN CITIES

A collaboration between Denby and Burckhardt, *Mediterranean Cities* remains a signal achievement in the history of 20th-century artist's books, yet is seldom seen in exhibitions of such endeavors. In the 1950s, sometimes traveling together, sometimes separately, Burckhardt and Denby began making a series of photographs and sonnets based on destinations in Greece and Italy. Edited and collected into a single volume, the book's large pages grant both images and text the expansive space they require. Each poem takes a specific place for its title and subject; the photographs follow a similar but not identical itinerary. The result is an intertwining, a conversation with both artists' thoughts arising and sometimes disappearing, without conclusions.

[2] The *Mediterranean Cities* sequence can be found in Edwin Denby, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Random House, 1986), edited by Ron Padgett.

The sequence of 29 sonnets is in itself a remarkable achievement in which Denby lightly sprinkles his great knowledge of antiquity over sharp observations of people and visual detail. His commitment to the present moment controls the tone. Enamored of the sonnet form since his teenage days at the Hotchkiss School, where he wrote poetry and studied Latin and Greek,[3] Denby fits his words into the 14-line structure with traces of end-rhymes vaguely apparent, like the pentimenti on an ancient wall. Paired with his twisting and sometimes breaking or obscuring of syntactical logic, the poet's use of language parallels the past-in-present he witnesses and strives to depict.

The Mediterranean journey, as presented in the sonnet sequence, begins in Rome's Trastevere, then continues to the significant locales of Venice, Ravenna, Florence, Siena, and Naples. Denby's itinerary, however, is the opposite of a touristic jaunt to Michelin highlights. Even in the most well-known places, the poet's eyes and ears take in details of the particular day and its normally unremarked pedestrians. For he is always interested in how the average citizen exemplifies the conclusions of the classical poets and philosophers.

Denby also takes the reader off the beaten path, exploring the Via Appia, Villa Adriana, Ischia, Positano, Amalfi, Paestum, and four towns in Sicily. From the ancient city of Brindisi, on the Adriatic coast, he takes a boat to Greece, where again he visits cultural monoliths: Athens, the Parthenon, Mycenae, Thebes, and Delphi. As in Italy, he imbues these antiquities with a personally realized experience, using both observed detail and syntactic tying-together. Once again, Denby carries his reader beyond the Great Tour. The final sonnet brings him back to Rome's Ciampino airport for the bittersweet return trip to New York.

II. NEW YORK PREPARATION

Much like his frequent collaborator Burckhardt, with whom he shared a loft in Chelsea, Denby honed much of his observational, technical, and philosophical skills in New York prior to *Mediterranean Cities*. After spending most of his twenties studying gymnastics and modern dance at Vienna's Hellerau-Laxenburg School, then touring Germany as a dancer, he moved to New York in 1935. It was there, at the suggestion of Aaron Copland—the two were collaborating on *The Second Hurricane*, an opera that premiered in 1937—that Denby first began publishing pieces of dance criticism, now collected in several volumes.[4]

[3] For an excellent account of Denby's life and work, see Ron Padgett's introduction to Edwin Denby, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Random House, 1986), edited by Padgett, with essays by Lincoln Kirstein and Frank O'Hara.

[4] The most recent publication is *Dance Writings and Poetry*, edited by Robert Cornfield (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). In 1936, he began a column called "With The Dancers" for the journal *Modern Music*, and from 1942 to 1945 he contributed dance criticism to the New York *Herald Tribune*.

Like many artists who moved to New York in the first half of the century, he was attracted by the city's feeling of openness, both architecturally and socially. Denby and Burckhardt both took pleasure in Midtown's vast piazzas, where some of Burckhardt's films in color or black-and-white are set. Denby himself wrote sonnets about New York throughout his career, often evoking the city's possible freedoms and restrictions. In the sonnet "The Climate," for example, he states that the climate stays "fresh and neat" while everything else wears out. Moods change, perhaps because of the weather, but one's mood really doesn't matter: "In our record climate I look pleased or glum," the sonnet ends. Denby works by quiet invention, and perhaps this subtlety has sometimes caused his work to be underestimated. His use of the word "record," in the line quoted above, *seems* clear—the reader thinks he must refer to some temperature record recently marked—but the climate, as he stressed earlier in the poem, is something that does not change, does not have highs or lows. So "record" here must mean something different. Perhaps, it means that New York's climate itself—including the wider connotation of social, cultural atmosphere—is the best; it has made the record.

The idea of an overarching reality, like climate, appears elsewhere in Denby's early New York sonnets. We find that "The season keeps moving through and out of reach" ("People On Sunday") and "heaven lifts a hundred miles mildly" ("First Warm Days"). The poet consistently uses these settings, if we may think of them as such, to situate his particular humans psychologically, as well as physically. His poems, in turn, aspire to the same balance these city inhabitants feel in respect to their universe. Denby is able to make this harmony believable precisely because he is aware of its limits. In "City Without Smoke," he describes the sky after a storm:

> Over Manhattan island when gales subside
> Inhuman colors of ocean afternoons
> Luminously livid, tear the sky so wide
> The exposed city looks like deserted dunes.

This scene is a kind of heaven for Denby, an opportunity to lavish attention on something that is not a usual poetic subject. It is reminiscent of the "designs" on the sidewalk de Kooning showed him. But even in this atmospheric poem, words like "inhuman," "exposed," and "deserted" hint at the disconnection an observer might experience. For Denby, what is sad is our fleeting awareness of such moments. As he puts it, "Soon/This oceanic gracefulness will have died." Elsewhere, the narrator is "sour," or a day concludes "coldly." These notes help us believe Denby when he assures us we can be "Easy in the weather of our home star" and that "the separate single face" can be placid, laughing, or at peace. His acknowledgement of the transience of happiness ("I hate how rare it is to stay near friends," he wrote in

"Elegy—The Streets") makes his optimism, when it surfaces, more believable.

III. OLD WORLD, NEW WORLD

To appreciate the connections Denby makes between the old world and the new in *Mediterranean Cities*, it is necessary to understand New York as his point of departure. For Denby, paradoxically, the old world is his familiar home in Manhattan while the new world is the strange one he experiences in the Mediterranean. In some ways, the poet is moving from songs of innocence to songs of experience. As much as he knows about antiquity, he must re-experience that world in a modern setting, specifically a post-war setting. Denby's poems do not comment on the poverty that lay over most of the Mediterranean in the 1950s; he prefers to paint universal human qualities. Political contextualization emerges only in occasional references to a distant "government" that does not touch the people in the way Denby sees them touch each other in their daily lives. Yet through his observations, the reader can feel the specific textures of those lives suspended between a final moment of the pastoral existence Denby knew from ancient poetry and the encroaching technological and social change that would forever alter that history.

Giving his sonnet sequence a sense of coming full circle, Denby begins *Mediterranean Cities* with a transition from the States and ends the sequence with his return trip. In the first poem, "Trastevere A Dedication," the scene moves rapidly, almost cinematically, away from America and into Europe, eschewing a place of bright, mid-day conviction for one of shadowy "primeval realms," and "blurred sea-gods." America is referred to only in a tone of denigration, with a final look over one's shoulder, hoping urchins who stole a statue will sell it to a Yank and take advantage of the tourist's ignorance. In this initial poem, there are also thoughts of friends—possibly New York artists—and their (artistic) successes and failures. Later, in "Florence," Denby writes that the river Arno, "Licks streets glummer than New York's but possessing/Capacious idols dead magicians begot." Calling the Italian city's great artists "magicians" shortly after a reference to New York puts one in mind of that city's magician-artists, making an equation, as these poems often do, between classical and contemporary art, putting Michelangelo and de Kooning on the same footing.

Another, more modest, form of visual art seduces the narrator in "Thebes." At "High Cithaeron where Oedipus cried," modern elements mix with ancient: "the bus jostles" through a suburb, the wall Amphion's music built in myth is present in the poem as an absence ("gone the wall music built, Amphion's"), an architectural dig is near "a Frankish tower." Despite proximity to antiquities, however, the poem does not visit any archeological or historical site. On the contrary, the landscape takes on a sexual character (Cithaeron "lies bare," two "cone-shaped hills" swell,

"the bus jostles/and mounts") and becomes, as many of Denby's locales do, the site of a present, urgent desire. This present-tense impulse persists through day's end:

> after sunset
> Wild-eyed, ragged in the crowding dusk a boy
> Holds out silently for sale a toy acrobat
> Daubed paper; I peer, take it with sudden joy;
> On the Hudson in a room that branches brush
> It lies on a table, hears the crunch of anguish

Denby's presence in the moment—and his physical seizing of the object—bring him sudden joy. It is significant that this elation occurs in a single daily instant in Greece; the emotion is only colored by anguish when the toy returns to the States, to a new home in upstate New York. By the sequence's final poem, "Ciampino Envoi," we will see how the narrator's consciousness has widened to understand such fleeting, but real, happiness.

The pull of here and there, of home and away, of the U.S. and Europe, does not go away in these sonnets. Even when not explicit, the tension exists for the narrator as an unspoken reminder: eventually, this trip must end, and I must return to my "normal" existence. In the poem "Rome," for example, body parts and objects—"wreaths and noses/Waists and loose fountains"—are quintessential Roman offerings, blooming like vegetation from ancient times to the present. When "they" confront

> an American in the exposed ruins
> They meet him like a face unrecognized from home
> The mute wide-angle look, to Europe alien

Denby is always layering meaning in these poems—and one of our tasks as readers is to determine what is the result of this density. Here, the "they" is not made explicit. At first glance, the reader may take "they" to be contemporary Romans. Grammatically, it could be the wreaths, noses, and other objects; "the days whose blue is sweet" from the poem's first line; or, alternatively, we may even imagine long-dead Romans proprietarily confronting American tourists in *their* ruins. Equally ambiguous is the matter of whose "home" is being referenced. The multiple "they" see the American as a face unfamiliar to their (Roman) home. But the home might also be the narrator's (American) home; Romans meet the American as a face the narrator himself no longer recognizes. Denby goes on to categorize this face as "the mute wide-angle look," a packed phrase that not only describes a person's countenance, but also introduces the specter of American technological invasion. The look refers to both the person and his camera and, in both cases, to a means of seeing and an appearance. The phrase is further

parsed in the following lines as both the self-conscious "stare of big men worried about their weight" and a "gaze of bounty." Americans come from a land and a historical moment of abundance, but they are "too clumsy to have mourned/Or held, listening to the heartbeat which was a fate..."

At this point, the poet introduces the "I" for the sonnet's concluding couplet: "And I to whom darling Europe is foreign/Look home from here, to its mystery, with longing." Like the tourist, the narrator is a stranger here in the ruins but unlike him is able to perceive the mystery of their solemn ground. We are not sure whether he is longing for America, his incipient adventure, or simply feeling a state of longing without an object. Further complicating this concluding thought is the phrase "to its mystery." If he is looking home to the States, it is only by a great forcing of the possibilities of syntax that he can simultaneously be looking to Europe's mystery. Of course, the narrator can and does look in two directions at once; what is remarkable is how the language reflects the difficulty of that moment. Conflicting definitions of here and there are bundled together, fostering a compelling confusion as to where the narrator feels most at home. Meanwhile, the sensation of disorientation, the opposing pulls, and the occasion that has engendered them are all crystal-clear.

IV. ANTIQUITY, MODERNITY

Another tension in the sonnets is that between antiquity and present day. Just as we saw Denby infuse ambiguity into the word "home," by playing off multiple spatial and cultural distinctions, so does he use temporal distinction to present different historical periods as a continuum. Frequent references to mythology, and classical works of architecture and literature complement, rather than oppose, descriptions of modern people. For Denby, the present and its inhabitants will always have the strongest pull, but he still manages to experience Mediterranean destinations as living, ancient mythology. After all, present-day Italians and Greeks live in a world imbued with antiquity, making the connection between past and present more tangible in the Mediterranean than in most other places on earth.

We have already seen Oedipus appear in "Thebes." In "Mycenae," one of Denby's clearest examples of antiquity blending with and shadowing the present, we meet another figure from Greek tragedy: Clytemnestra. "By a gorge," begins the poem, "the height where Clytemnestra slew/Scrub grows in Mycenae..." We are not told whom she slew, only that she slew, then are plunged into the description of a place that offers "no walls/That remember." That job of remembering falls to the poet, who appears alongside his future collaborator in line six: "Rudy and I dark in a tomb/Speaking of the pompous Pantheon we smile/Cool underground we smoke in a sphere-curved room." As in

"Thebes," the present moment rules the day for Denby. In the ruins of Mycenae, however, the violence of the ancient Greek story, preserved for us in ancient poetry, returns, merged with the landscape: "But the gorge, like a hole hacked furious in haste/At possession, gapes under the royal height/Grandly; and no need has a forgiveness." The poem's final words find the two contemporary men in a decidedly non-mythical landscape:

lost
We turn away to the parched plain, the desert light
To our friendship; under Greek oleanders
Blooming white in the brightness downward we wander

They may be lost in a literal sense, but, more importantly, the pull of past royal violence is lost on them in this moment. They make jokes about man's great achievements, implying an intimacy with them. Together, they turn away from the ancient to their friendship, which is nourishing in a parched, desert present. Not only are the oleanders blooming; their relationship also is. The two have emerged from underground into the light, giving their wandering a purpose. They come down from a physical and psychic height; they are no longer lost.

In other sonnets that visit archeological sites, Denby shows past and present to be coterminous. These include poems set in the Roman forum, the Via Appia, Paestum, Segesta, Siracusa, and the Parthenon. In all of these locales, Denby creates fields of linguistic energy whose experimental condensing of syntax, guided by intense perceptivity and judicious use of details, results in uncanny senses of being in specific, recognizable, places. In "Paestum," the visual elements that begin the poem set the scene:

Buffalo among fields, an old bus, the sea
Rock hills grow small beyond a somnolent plain
Jacket folded placed near the bole of a tree
Between a jug stood and a wrapped package lain

This description serves as a present-day counterpoint to the appearance of the ancient temple in line eight. The imagery introduces—and focuses the reader's attention on—man's presence. (It is notable that although the setting of the three temples is a field at Paestum, Denby only loosely sketches in the natural picture.) He is careful to include human details and the residue of actions. A narrative can even be created, though none is made explicit: wine and song, perhaps, conjuring images from classical poetry. The poet spends half the poem recreating the experience of arriving in the field before approaching the temples. Even scents—"In the sweet alyssum and its honey smell"—are evoked. "Noon-immobile," a Denbyism, hones in on the time and the ambient lack of motion: not even a breeze stirs. The poet adds further nuance

before the line's end: "Noon-immobile, grey and ochre-hued like dawning." The picture is again modified in line seven, which tells "Of edged stone pocked by sea storms and shells of snails."
When we read line eight, we realize, retrospectively, that this most recent image introduces a temple. The edged stone is that of the structure, whose stone is pocked by both storms and lowly snails. In other words, Denby's "dawning" can mean the dawning on the viewer's consciousness of the temple's presence. Grey and ochre-hued, in turn, are perfect tones to describe the temple's colors. Observe the entire transition, which ends mid-line with a semicolon:

> Noon-immobile, grey and ochre-hued like dawning
> Of edged stone pocked by sea storms and shells of snails
> Poseidon's hall looms columned;

What comes directly after, seemingly prompted by the god's appearance, is the introduction of the "I." What he watches seems mythical, almost mystical:

> I watch dozing
> Merged like opposed wrestlers rear a majestic power
> Clasped nape, nipple deep-chested, the crushing roof
> Heaved; magnanimous the god rises toward me; prayer
> Begins to spread me, trembles unused to proof;

Given that the narrator is at a temple, one interpretation of the scene is a literal one of man confronting god. Another reading, implied by the sexual nature of the language, is that of an encounter with a godlike man, or, more likely, a vision of such a meeting. The narrator watches the crushing roof heaved. Is "heaved" a past participle? The separation of verb ("I watch") and potential object ("roof") allows the phrase "the roof heaved" to read alternatively as a complete sentence. What is he actually seeing? After all, as with most ancient Greek temples, this one's roof was made of wood and vanished in a fire long ago. Should we conclude he imagines the visual force of the roof being pushed up architecturally by the angle of the pediment and the density of the columns? And if he is actually asleep, is this a dream?

After the enjambed "heaved," the god suddenly appears. He rises toward the narrator (how could he be below him is not explained). Prayer begins to "spread" the narrator. Is it prayer as in a pleading? "Trembles unused to proof" is a strange phrase, making interpretation even more challenging. We might expect "trembling unused to proof," where the "I" would be the subject; the narrator, we may imagine, is unused to god's proving. However, with "trembles" the subject must be something else. A grammatically clear reading presents itself: prayer, not the god, is spreading him and prayer itself trembles, having never been used by the virgin narrator. Though highly unusual, Denby's

personification of prayer is tremendously effective. As in much of his writing, this innovation allows multiple readings to coexist simultaneously. The reader is not able to choose one over the other, as the word-rhythms refract different meanings at different moments in the poem.

In the end, "Paestum" shifts the scene once again, moving from a close-up to a long shot, leaving the reader to contemplate what has occurred:

> But by sunset fired against a cloudbank of slate
> And deserted, the temple burns isolate

The "But" contrasts this final moment with the earlier epiphany: the coming together of god and man via trembling prayer. "By sunset" expresses both time and agent; for it is the sunset, fired (this participle reminds us of the temple roof "heaved") visually against grey slate-like clouds, that lights the temple and also soon deserts it. The temple is now abandoned, lacking the intense communion it possessed only few moments earlier; maybe it is also without its god, or perhaps the god is temporarily elsewhere.

> Buffalo among fields, an old bus, the sea
> Rock hills grow small beyond a somnolent plain
> Jacket folded placed near the bole of a tree
> Between a jug stood and a wrapped package lain
> In the sweet alyssum and its honey smell
> Noon-immobile, grey and ochre-hued like dawning
> Of edged stone pocked by sea storms and shells of snails
> Poseidon's hall looms columned; I watch dozing
> Merged like opposed wrestlers rear a majestic power
> Heaved; magnanimous the god rises toward me; prayer
> Begins to spread me, trembles unused to proof;
> But by sunset fired against a cloudbank of slate
> And deserted, the temple burns isolate

V. THE HUMAN FIGURE, ALONE & TOGETHER

Throughout *Mediterranean Cities*, Denby often contrasts the loneness of the individual with cities' multitudes. Often too, he is concerned with intimate combinations of couples or small groups of people. The temple in Paestum was the site of a potent union, followed by a sense of burning isolation. Similarly, in "Villa d'Este," a scene of revelry and laughter in a fountain-filled park concludes, "Single on a desert mountain drips the locked park." Though the phrase "single on a desert mountain" modifies the park, it equally serves to describe the narrator after the wet pleasure he has enjoyed there. Even the word "drips" is precise to post-coital aloneness.

As we saw in "Rome," when people do appear in these sonnets, it is often as pieces of bodies—noses, waists, a face—which does not make them any less human. On the contrary, there is always something exceptionally vital about Denby's human forms. "Swaying bellies thread the streets, liquidly proud," in "Florence." In "Siena," people "stroll cool and joking with Duccio faces," and in "Naples," he finds "Eyes, thousands of eyes, thousand and one night eyes." The hour itself takes on a public meaning in "Amalfi": "As in citizen dusk groups strolling witty." Perhaps the most transformative reading of people in their environment, however, takes place in "Venice," where Denby observes "The water-like walking of women, of men."

Scattered among *Mediterranean Cities'* observed strangers and handful of references to an undefined "we" are a few friends the poet names directly: Olga, Rudy, and Rudy's son, Jacob. More frequent is the appearance of an "I" in the poems. We have already seen how this "I' is capable of significant intimacy with friends, as well as quasi-religious ecstasy. It is also capable of great empathy—of observing Italians and Greeks and of feeling solidarity with people in their daily settings, their landscape. In these moments, the narrator becomes a champion of the lives of those he encounters. A prose text by Denby, "Naples Children," gives insight into the attitude embedded in his Mediterranean poems:

> Poor or not, each city proud of its name chooses its own particular kind of luxury and has it. That of Naples is to have the brightest, prettiest, and happiest children; the most everywhere underfoot too, mixed up in everything that goes on, up at all hours, quickwitted, graceful, each one different from all the others and perfectly sociable... Ancient Naples has chosen the sweetest luxury of any city.[5]

Given his strong identifications with people from diverse settings, it is no wonder Denby's sense of home is complicated.

In "Via Appia," the poet uses this empathy and solidarity to move the "I" from a sense of distance to one of proximity. The poem, which chronicles a walk down the famous ancient road, begins dominated by "turdlike" or "fungoid" tombs found near "dead aqueducts, discolored by distance." He names the feeling: "solitude." The stillness here, unlike the pregnant immobile noon in "Paestum," is stultifying:

> by a parked scooter a couple quarrel
> Intently, standing in stillness anonymous;
> The solitude has the face of an actor who
> Sits in his wrapper and hears silence return
> But not yet vanity;

[5] Edwin Denby, *The Complete Poems*, Edited by Ron Padgett (New York: Random House, 1986).

Then suddenly, as if the poet were willfully manipulating the situation with his bare hands, he turns depression into joy: "so giddy, so free/As if one were dead, were dead, the heart becomes."

It is this giddiness that drives the final couplet, where he is able to leave the entire Via Appia scenario behind. The poem ends, seemingly out of the blue, with this couplet:

> At dinner with lively friends, drinking Tuscan wine
> In Rome that night, how I loved the restaurant's shine

We don't know which night Denby is referring to, nor which friends. He does not have space for a fuller picture than he gives, but the fleeting tableau is enough. We see and hear the friends, smell and taste the wine, feel the Roman night. What the poet remembers most of all and leaves us with, though, is not the people, but "the shine" of the restaurant. In the beginning of this poem, as at the end of "Paestum," the "I" is separate, isolate. Yet by conscious literary and moral strength, fortified by memory, Denby rescues the subject from a dark place and returns him to a brighter one.

VI. THE POWER OF SEXUAL METAPHOR

We see in "Via Appia" how the poet is able to will a poem into a more positive position than the balance of its tone would have predicted. In that particular sonnet, he does so by painting a picture of solidarity with friends; elsewhere he uses sexual metaphor. While not surprising that sex should be used to counter death, Denby's word choice and the way he anthropomorphizes landscape and architecture make his sonnets particularly effective. In "Siena," "cool small sane hills" and drowsy palaces provide the backdrop for a surprising observation: "Far above a shaft adolescently swells/To stiff blossom, a tower like a still girl." This unexpected description ignites a series of local experiences "luxurious as memory." The Sienese are "fine-boned"; "they stroll cool and joking" with faces from paintings by the trecento master Duccio. By the end of the poem, the Madonna in a painting—a Duccio, one supposes—is "exalted." The narrator in his turn is exalted by the painting's baby Jesus:

> comes forward like a heaved bell
> The fat pearly Son frowning into the surf-beats
> Of my heart, till where an overwhelmable shore lies
> Citied, in almond-blossoming foam, deep-sea selves rise

As in "Paestum," the narrator experiences a moment akin to religious epiphany, though his enlightenment is more likely of an aesthetic nature. In any event, Denby transforms the moment into ecstatic poetry. Significantly, unlike some of Denby's other sonnets, which hedge back

to grief or madness, “Siena” ends with “an overwhelmable shore” and, in its final line, an image of rebirth: “in almond-blossoming foam, deep-sea selves rise.”

Occasionally, the “I” is allowed to achieve full harmony with a natural setting and its people. In “Segesta,” another Greek temple poem, the “I” sits on a mountaintop, “in the ghost stones/Of a theatre.” Despite being set in a hard place haunted by phantoms, the poem is full of sensation. There are sounds of singing, sheep bells that chime like music, “a reed pipe/Sweet.” In lines six and seven, a goatherd, a youth who smiles and smells of milk, enters, seemingly stepping out of a poem by Theocritus (who is named here). As the narrator earns the boy’s trust, the speaker’s desire rises. “So slowly”—is it “thus, slowly” or “very slowly”?—desire is able to transform the narrator’s recurrent suffering into song:

> Doric tongue, sweet for me as to Theocritus
> The boy’s mistrust and trust, the same sky-still air
> As then; so slowly desire turns her grace
> Across the years, and eases the grief we bear
> And its madness to merely a powerful song;

A vision of the origin of poetry presents itself. The music that dominated the first half of the poem returns, only here it is “merely” a powerful song. Desire is more potent than the song it gives rise to and the grief it transmutes.

VII. DEPARTURES INTO DARKNESS

Inevitably, these poems of travel are also poems of leave-taking. “Brindisi,” for example, is a classic departure poem in the tradition of Horace and Propertius, marking the point at which the narrator not only literally leaves Italy for Greece via boat but also leaves ancient Rome for the ancient Greece that preceded it and in whose historical shadow it lies couched. On the most personal level, the departure evokes a transition from life to death, reminding us of Dante’s passage through the gates before his descent into hell. Indeed, the sonnet begins ominously: “Where nervous I stand above nocturnal ships/The Appian road ends with one pillar at the shore.” The pillar is solitary, like the locked park, Villa d’Este, isolate like the temple at Paestum after sunset; the trip through Italy is over.

Here at the shore, the ghosts of Greece whisper to the poet “in the waves’ lapping lips,” and he in turn addresses the water:

> Harbor, lost is the Greece when I was ten that
> Seduced me, god-like it shone; in a dark town, trembling
> Like a runaway boy on his first homeless night
> Ahead I rush in the fearful sweep of longing

At the beginning of the poem, he stood immobile like the pillar. Now, he is rushing; his insides are in turmoil. For what is he longing? The past—or a past—clearly, as well as perhaps a sense of home. Throughout the sonnets, we have seen the narrator's ability to locate home compromised. Is home to be found in the place he is leaving or the place to which he is going? This question keeps coming up in these quintessential road poems. Unlike the word "lost" in "Mycenae," where the two friends experienced a powerful bonding in the shadows of Clytemnestra and paradoxically discovered they could never be lost while together, here "lost" takes on a darker pallor. The godlike Greece of the narrator's youth *is* lost, and as a result, he is turned into a boy again.

In the final couplet, the poet tries to define the longing that emerges: "A dead longing that all day blurred here the lone/Clear shapes which light was defining for a grown man." Yet how can the longing be dead? Doesn't longing indicate desire, a life-force opposed to death? Maybe his longing is for the dead, or perhaps a longing so strong it results in a kind of numbness, or deadness, in its human subject? Answers may be found in the juxtaposition of light and dark. The poem takes place in darkness: seeing ships in the night, the poet imagines he hears whispers of ghosts. During the day, light had provided clarity, but that clarity was "blurred" by longing. The word "blurred" brings to mind the hazy sea gods of "Trastevere A Dedication," where night was also complicating vision, albeit endowed with a sense of longing that was giddy, forward-looking, desirous of adventure. The longing in "Brindisi," on the other hand, is strange, complex, mixed with dread. Daylight defined the shapes, but a dead longing blurred them, and all that is left is an unknowable desire that returns him to the insecure state of "a runaway boy on his first homeless night." Given the trouble the narrator of these poems has defining "home," this use of the word "homeless," coming at this crucial passage, strikes a disturbing note. Unlike the young goatherd in "Segesta," who knows exactly where he is, and where home is, and has known it for centuries, this boy is without place, stranded in the dark.

VIII. DARKNESS MEETS LIGHT

Denby further builds on the interplay of light and dark two poems later in "The Parthenon." In this sonnet, "homeless" has a positive connotation; it means "universal": "She lifts from men dead into my passing life/A beauty of doubt that is homeless and not brief." "She" is the Parthenon, distinguished from the "Propylea spread like a male hand." What does Denby mean by designating the Parthenon "womanly," except to attack every previous historical interpretation of its architecture as the epitome of male rational intellect? "Her maturity duplicit like a richer kiss" gives a clue as to his interpretation. There is something more complex to the Parthenon than raw logic—"white light/like an intent silence enjoys the

languor/Secret in her dominion." There is a secret—almost like a religious mystery—leading to an erotic or emotional charge, a kiss deeper than that of "her Ionian companions," who are merely rational. The consolation she offers is "a beauty of doubt." This is the opposite of a beauty of clarity, what Frank O'Hara called "marvelous joy of being sure." Here, Denby hungers for something that, in his view, respects the combination of light and dark, (one cannot avoid the term in this terrain: the *chiaroscuro*), the seen and unseen, that represents reality. He finds this coexistence of light and dark again in the next sonnet, "Attica," which offers the poetry of Virgil as a source of solace: "There on brown Egina this light broke a Roman heart/Virgil's, whose voice comforts in our unlimited dark."

We find in *Mediterranean Cities* a struggle between the forces of light and darkness, with no possible victor. In fact, the meanings of light and darkness seem to shift throughout the sonnet sequence. Color itself is carefully calibrated by Denby's critical eye to reflect both his observations and the particular light-and-dark pattern he wants to effect: series of browns and yellows, "slim greens" ("Olevano Romano"), "pastel-hued" ravines ("Sant'Angelo D'Ischia"), and "purple cliffs/Pink and yellow sky" ("Positano"), also black, grey, and ochre. In Rome and Athens, the sky is painted in brighter hues: "Pear-brown Rome, dyed for the days whose blue is sweet" and "Desert blue of Attica's heaven." By and large, however, *Mediterranean Cities* is a world of little color, or of colors that have been bleached by centuries of unrelenting sun.

Tracing Denby's use of light and shadow throughout the sonnet sequence, we uncover a deliberate progression. At the beginning of the trip, darkness is soothing; it provides a place to be anonymous, whereas daylight can painfully reveal one's unacknowledged desires. In the moment of transition from Italy to Greece, which can be seen as symbolic of other critical passages, the darkness becomes a place of doubts and fears. Finally, near the end of the sequence, the poems' light-shadow interplay gives way to a predominance of brilliant illumination. Denby's conclusion seems to be that in moments of darkness, art, nature's quiet beauty, and quotidian humanity, fraught with complexity and an insatiable hunger for life, all can provide a comforting light.

IX. VISIONS OF IRRATIONALITY

Mediterranean Cities' exploration of light and dark also provides a locus for the tensions between rationality and irrationality. In Greco-Roman mythology, Apollo is the god of the sun, which symbolizes the powers of reason. Yet throughout this analysis, we will see phrases—"wonders of senility," "rosmarin's/Savage scent," "seas rainbow-fickle"—that seem to reference an irrational quality. Standing in clear opposition to the Apollonian sense of rationality, this quality falls on the side of the

torments accompanied by darkness, dreams and nocturnal disquiet. The irrational can be thought of as a mode of action or thinking that cannot be explained, engendering anxiety in most subjects.[6] The irrational can also be thought of as opposed to sanity, as a kind of madness.

Chronicling Denby's sojourn, we see that it begins in a kind of pleasant shadow—Trastevere's "summer dusk," in which the narrator, freshly arrived, is happily taking note of his new environment. With "Florence," the scene grows less innocent, as the poet exposes us to an erotic madness, describing the river Arno in the opening line as: "Delicious tongue that poisons as it kisses." By the end of the poem, troubling "shapes" are noted in a withering atmosphere whose destructive power is palpable: "Shapes in the confined landscape where August seethes/Wasting, present Tuscan violence untamed."[7] Hillocks and a plain "lie insidious in the blaze" of the sun. In "Villa d'Este," by contrast, darkness is a cover for pleasurable pursuits. Indeed, throughout these opening poems of the sequence, darkness provides comforting shelter, whereas sun exposes and burns the observer with physical longing.

By the time Ischia is reached in the 12th sonnet, the part of the journey close to the sea, light becomes blinding and is used as a foil for the narrator's darker worries. On a "white beach," the narrator notes "wonders of senility" as an old hermit pokes a lame boy, his servant apparently, with a stick. Although he does not comment, the "I" admits to being "astonished" and describes the elderly man as "smiling weird and ravished." In the poem's concluding couplet, all is resolved and potential loss of sanity ceases to be an antagonist: "So at a wild farmer's cave we pour wine together/On a beach, four males in a brilliant weather."

In the following poem, "Positano," the land itself becomes a site of implicit madness: "the mountain hunches blindly forward/Hugely falling crowds close, and a caverned head/Grovels between foam." The landscape is out of control. Other words of description further paint an unsettled picture: "from blackened lips of shore/Grinding, the waves," "Averse sea," "rosmarin's/Savage scent." Denby finally likens the mountain to grief and jealousy in a marvelously unliteral metaphor: "the mountain of groveled grief/Jealousy falling forever inward unlike ours."

[6] E.R. Dodds in *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), begins with the irrational as action that goes against the best interests of the actor. He then goes on to note that Plato in the *Phaedrus* outlines four modes of divinely inspired madness that can be observed in ancient Greek culture: prophetic madness, whose patron is Apollo; ritual religious madness, whose patron is Dionysus; poetic madness, inspired by the Muses; and erotic madness, governed by Aphrodite and Eros.

[7] "Shapes" is a word to which Denby will return. Here, in "Florence," "slopes of soft olives/A prospect of humped tower and of floated dome"—nature and architecture—are reduced to "shapes" by the scorching atmosphere. As we have seen, "shapes" is the key term at the end of the transitional poem "Brindisi," where longing blurred the few shapes the man was able to define. "Shapes" is a shorthand that simplifies landscape, art, and even people, and it is a simplification against which the narrator struggles.

Stormy weather can often be read as a sign of mental or emotional unrest. Rapid changes in weather convey changes in mood in "Amalfi." The city itself is "candid"—that is, shining, bright—but boatmen's eyes are burning, and bad weather threatens the atmosphere:

> Down the peaks a tempest plunges, flood yells, drowned
> Screams from alleys, then a dripping and warm skies;

The storm has evaporated as abruptly as it arrived, and the shock of warmth leaves in its wake a transformed populace:

> Altered, the throaty voice rising sinuous
> Caresses, antique look deeper than a kiss
> Melting, the longing body smiling like a face
> Sidles heavy-curved; and gratefully it lifts its grace
> As in citizen dusk groups strolling witty
> Provocative meet foolish eyes and sweet;

The poem's last line, "That far in storms Amalfi's hearts would swallow," is ambiguous. It seems to refer to a moment ("eight hundred years ago") when Amalfi was subdued by Pisa and forced to resign its position as a major sea power, but Denby's syntax makes it possible that Amalfi's hearts did the swallowing:

> a Pope
> Old Briton, found the honor here as pretty
> Eight hundred years ago, who watched without hope
> Widen the sea, lilac below his palace
> That far in storms Amalfi's hearts would swallow

In Denby's poetry, weather is often a code for emotional weather, and the storms in this line, combined with the phrases "without hope" and "hearts would swallow," end the poem on a negative note.

In "Forza d'Agro," in Sicily, the irrational results in a sadness bordering on depression that is associated with night. An unidentified "we" are "unguided," "lost," as they wander "past a wild sea-keep." After a hike, they run down the hill, "lost" again even after having been shown the path by a priest and a youth. Though the winter is "black," they arrive safely home (here the temporary "home-base" of the traveler). The poem seems to end with a glimmer of hope as "The lithe girl watching her goats, sparkling and fifteen/Smiles her clear smile." She is not enough, however, to avoid the chilling phrase that completes the fourteenth line: "as sleep and tearing grief return." Darkness is now becoming the natural site of suffering. This nocturnal brand of uncertainty and homelessness that will soon find its fullest expression in the poem "Brindisi."

X. THE GREEK DIFFERENCE

When the sonnet sequence moves to Greece, there is a noticeable shift in visual tone, as well as a stepping away from madness. The "I" of the poems finds his way in a decidedly mundane Athens, "past tennis courts and refuse," but "in noon whiteness" finds Ilissus' trickle on his way to Colonus. Ghosts smile at the narrator's discomfiture; he is able to observe their joy, and the poem ends in laughter. In "The Parthenon," as we previously witnessed, "white light/Like an intent silence enjoys the languor/Secret in her dominion." The only "droop in her candor" may be the shade inside the temple. Her "ample clear" walls are compared to the "straight" and "pure" walls of another temple on the Akropolis. In "Attica," "flowers/Individually blooming in the stone landscape/Firm in brightness, bloom with a deeper color/Heavier fragrance than at home a namesake." Here, the idea of home returns with the suggestion that things—landscapes, nature, life itself—are brighter and more fragrant in Greece than at home (they are *firm* in their brightness), meaning, paradoxically, the narrator feels more at home away from home. After the dark madness encountered in Italy, the light in Attica is so generative that it causes an entire ocean to flower: "And deep blue as violets blooms the Protean sea/Heavy-petaled in the noon's inclusive delight." Not only is it generative but also consoling: although "this light broke a Roman heart/Virgil's," it can give us solace in our dark Brindisian nights of memory and dread.

The "majestic summer" from "Mycenae" is again referenced in "Delphi," where an unidentified "we" immediately observe "Heat on the majestic flank of Parnassus." Without missing a beat, the poem continues, "Blazing noon; sunsick we reach beyond ruins/Cold Castalia's source." Shadow provides the relief in this setting. If we take the sun to represent reason, it is almost too blinding here. "Majesty/Is its vestige in the mountain peace we see," the poem ends. In "Delos," bright white and "Dark pure blue, deep in the light," form the picture. "We" take a boat to the island, the site of Apollo's birth, "in a radiance massive like sex." After noticing that "Left among the Hellenistic marble scum/Glistens a vivid phallus," the poet observes "marsh-born here before/At a palm, cleft-suckled, a god he first came/Who hurts and heals unlike love, and whom I fear;/Will he return here?" The idea that knowledge, one of reason's fruits, is painful, is a classical trope, familiar, for example, from a famous speech in Aischylos' *Agamemnon*. We are caught in a dilemma: light brings burning knowledge, darkness terrifying doubt.

X. DENBY'S SONNET & LANGUAGE INNOVATIONS

Throughout this discussion of *Mediterranean Cities*, it has become increasingly clear the originality Denby brings to the sonnet form. Upholding a modern commitment to experimental use of language, he

often uses ellipsis to create a highly condensed syntax (he would have appreciated that the German word for poetry has as its root the word that means "to condense"). Denby's ellipses appear within a framework that seems non-modern, yet by the time one reads several of the sonnets, it becomes apparent that, through his use of the 14-line form, Denby essentially reinvented it, making it new for another generation or so. The language is fresh, and the classic structure provides an inevitability of scale rather than a strict set of limitations. He does use end rhymes but regularly blurs them. These innovations make Denby's poems a critical stepping-stone in the evolution of the sonnet form towards an ultimate statement of scale—the fourteen-line poem. Indeed, in the decade following the publication of *Mediterranean Cities*, as heralded by the publication of Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets*, line count would become the sole restriction on the sonnet's form and content.

In addition to reviving the sonnet form, Denby also pushes the limits of logical syntax. He mixes archaic or poetic words—"gloze," "capacious," "humped," "insidious," "freaking," "squamous"—with conversational phraseology. He also combines mythological and mundane imagery. His talent for poetic invention can be seen in such comparisons as "luxurious as memory" ("Siena"), "antique look deeper than a kiss" ("Amalfi"), "as remote as meaning" ("Delos"), as well as in such similes as "like a blond savory arm" ("Venice"), "Her maturity duplicit like a richer kiss" ("The Parthenon"), "massive like sex" ("Delos"), and "The rose like our blood in its perishable bloom" ("Mykonos"). These usages of language function in a traditional way—they give us deeper insight into the poet's meaning—but at the same time they are complicated and challenging. They force us to think about each of the comparison's individual terms before weighing the collective result.

Even as he takes the reader through dense, difficult passages, Denby still provides senses of solace within his Mediterranean landscapes. Sometimes, our reassurance comes from the knowledge that, for all the devastating change that can occur in the world, some things remain the same for centuries:

> Dante woke too
> To dawn of rain, thrush, of farmers' and beasts' tread
> Leaving the cold alleys tight about the keep
> Driven diurnally from the mountainhead
> Down to farm
>
> [from "Olevano Romano"]

Other times, as we have seen, comfort comes through art: Virgil's voice can bring peace in our unlimited dark. Still other times, tranquility emerges from humanity itself. In "Sant'Angelo d'Ischia," for example, we find a clear recognition of the post-war setting, intertwined with a recognition that good, or "sweetness," as Denby puts it, can survive so

much evil: "As if in the whole world few people had survived/And man's sweetness had survived a grandeur extinguished." This collective reality supersedes any one individual. It reminds us of the New York "climate" in Denby's early city poem "The Climate." It is floating around and among us, an intangible quality that lives in individuals but is expressed only in interactions and groups.

As we end this journey with the final sonnet of Denby's sequence, "Ciampino Envoi," the word "already" sticks in our throats. That tiny recognition at the beginning of the poem reveals the feeling we have on leaving such a rich experience:

> Flying from Greece to see Moscow's dancing girl
> I look down on Alba Longa, see Jacob's house
> And the Pope's, and already the airplane's curls
> Show St. Peter's, and the Appian tombs' remorse

The sonnet could easily develop an emotion of loss. However, the thought of Rudy Burckhardt's young son, Jacob, spurs a series of humorous observations as the child quickly grows from two years old to three. In August, he runs in a garden; by November, he states "'Forum not a park, Forum a woods.'" Then, without any further description of the airplane trip, the scene shifts back to New York, where both Jacob and the narrator are reinstated. The almost-final thought of *Mediterranean Cities* is a question of continuity:

> Now in New York Jacob wants to have my cat
> He goes to school, he behaves aggressively
> He is three and a half, age makes us do that
> And fifty years hence will he love Rome in place of me?

The poem and sonnet sequence end with a couplet, lightly combining the turbulent emotions that have marked the entire experience:

> For with regret I leave the lovely world men made
> Despite their bad character, their art is mild

"The lovely world men made" refers directly to the classical world—the temples and paintings Denby has seen on his tour and which he may never see again. It is surprising and terrific that he can use the common word "lovely" to describe the great achievements of Western civilization, implying both an intimacy and a sense of criticism. The final line refers to classical artists and their patrons, but it may also refer to the post-war environment; "bad character" is an ironic, but ultimately accurate, way of describing fascism. "Their art is mild," in typical Denby fashion, has at least two readings. One is to bring human achievements—pretentiously great in politics or art—down to earth. Their effect is not so great on the common man, who keeps on living as best he can.

Another, subtler reading of "mild" would take it to mean soothing. The traveler is leaving this world with regret, because the art he found there and the humanity it implies are consoling, and they survive.

*

Pear-brown Rome, dyed for the days whose blue is sweet
Disencoils as a garden would the wreaths and noses
Waists and loose fountains it adores to prodigate
A fair-weather darling as loose as roses
Soft up to the scar, dead Imperial Rome's;
But an American in the exposed ruins
They meet him like a face unrecognized from home
A stare of big men worried about their weight
Gaze of bounty, but too clumsy to have mourned
Or held, listening to the heartbeat which was a fate
Sky-hues that will return, the slope of solemn ground;
And I to whom darling Europe is foreign
Look home from here, to its mystery, with longing

[Edwin Denby, "Rome"]

Stephan Delbos

Cusp Poet: A Case for William Bronk

William Bronk (1918-1999) achieved no small degree of public recognition during his life, including the 1982 American Book Award for Poetry. His work was admired by influential contemporaries such as Robert Creeley and George Oppen, yet his name is not found among the crucial American poets. Considering the sheer volume of work he published over his 60 year career—27 books of poetry and prose between 1956 and 1999—one might think that Bronk would be included in any discussion of 20th-century American poetry. But Bronk's relatively reclusive life and his rejection of poetic politics won him few supporters among the poets and critics of mid-century American letters. Furthermore, his prolificacy and faith to a relatively limited number of themes—desire, death and our inability to know the world—make Bronk a difficult target for complete critical approval, especially when compared to many of his more currently fashionable contemporaries such as Jack Spicer and Frank O'Hara, whose poetries embraced a wider, more occasional range than Bronk's and whose lives were far shorter. Rather than documenting his place in time or conforming to a particular strain of the American canon, Bronk was an essentially philosophical poet concerned with exploring man's limited perception of self and world in what Bronk called "the wilderness of raw consciousness." Today, when avant-garde poetries such as flarf grapple with language's ultimate arbitrariness and the meaning of authorship, Bronk's poems—skeptical, yet consciously crafted—are more vital than ever.

Bronk was born on February 17, 1918 in Fort Edward, New York. The following year, his family moved to Hudson Falls, where his father owned a lumber business. After a brilliant undergraduate career at Dartmouth College, where he was valedictorian, Bronk engaged in a failed stint at Harvard, and was later conscripted to a four year term in the Army. Bronk served much of his military time in Bermuda, after which he returned to Hudson Falls to take over the family business, seemingly unable to break away from familial bonds. Bronk would live in his family's Victorian house for the remainder of his life, pursuing the ostensibly calm existence of an industrious, quietly homosexual, upper

middle class poet maintaining a lumberyard. Bronk never got a driver's license and hardly left upstate New York unless to travel to exotic destinations like the Mayan ruins of Guatemala with his sister, one of his closest companions.

Bronk was, geographically and poetically, an individualist, if a mild-mannered one. But there were two men who played significant roles in Bronk's life as a poet, one as an early mentor and one as a later champion of his work. Sidney Cox, a professor at Dartmouth College, played a crucial part in Bronk's decision to pursue a life in poetry. Cox, a poet and scholar and a personal friend of Robert Frost, encouraged Bronk and provided direction for much of his early work, especially Bronk's book *The Brother in Elysium*, a study of Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, which Bronk finished shortly after he graduated from Dartmouth, but did not publish until 1970, when he was fifty-two.

Had *The Brother in Elysium* been published when Bronk completed it in 1946, the book may have been considered more original and insightful than Charles Olson's seminal study of Herman Melville, *Call Me Ishmael*, published in 1947. Bronk was disappointed about being unable to publish *The Brother in Elysium*, but the book was most important as a sounding board for his ideas about life and writing. Especially in the section on Thoreau, Bronk seems to articulate his own nascent sensibilities as he discovers them in his subject. He describes Thoreau's worldview this way:

> Torn between the presence, yet insufficiency, of this world and the grandeur of what might be thought of as the next, Thoreau did not, as has been charged against him, reject this world and escape it. "However mean your life is," he says in *Walden*, "meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. Love your life, poor as it is. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change." Thoreau turned the old and returned to them... It was enough, for example, merely to be connected with the eternal things, and to perform them with hope and faith as a ritual or a celebration.[1]

The tension Bronk describes as inherent in Thoreau's personality and the early American writer's firm decision to keep in touch with "the eternal things" would come to be one of the driving forces of Bronk's own poetry, and, perhaps unexpectedly, one of the driving forces of his relative obscurity as a poet. For the next fifty years, Bronk would keep in touch with "the eternal things" in a poetry of statement almost wholly devoid of metaphor and imagery, elements Bronk saw as distracting from the most important issues at hand: man's existence in the eternal

[1] William Bronk, *Vectors and Smoothable Curves: Collected Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press) 95.

void of time and space, and the struggle to come to terms with that void.

Bronk's most significant early poem, "The Arts and Death: A Fugue for Sidney Cox," was written shortly after his friend and mentor's death in 1952. In it, Bronk not only mourns Cox, but declares the central theme he would pursue in his poetry for the rest of his life.

> I think always how we always miss it. Not
> anything is ever entirely true.
>
> Death dominates my mind. I
> do not stop thinking how time will stop,
> how time has stopped, does stop. Those dead–
> their done time. Time does us in.
>
> Mark how we make music, images,
> how we term words, name names,
> how, having named, assume the named begins
> here, stops there, add this attribute,
> subtract this other: here the mold begins
> to harden...
>
> Ponder the vast debris of the dead, the great
> uncounted numbers, the long, the endless list
> of only their names, if anyone knew their names.
> Joined to the dead already, to those known
> who have died already, are we not also joined
> to many we would have known in their time–
> to one in Ilium, say, who thought of the dead?
> [...]
> World, world, I am scared
> and waver in awe before the wilderness
> of raw consciousness, because it is all
> dark and formlessness; and it is real
> this passion we feel for forms. But the forms
> are never real. Are not really there. Are not.
> [...]
> We live in a world we never understand.
>
> Our lives end nothing. Oh there is never an end.

Bronk explores a trope familiar to readers of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*: confronted with the vast, formless expanse of perception, "the wilderness of raw consciousness," all man can do to feel secure is name the things that populate his world. This is a loving act that limits, but a necessity if we are to keep our functional sanity. Bronk laments man's tendency to assume that his vocabulary captures reality, when in fact language is an imprecise tool in "a world we never understand."

While lamenting the death of his friend, Bronk connects Cox to "the vast debris of the dead," humans who have preceded us on earth and struggled with the same mysteries. The poem is at once an effective elegy (or fugue, as Bronk would have it) and a statement of concepts at the heart of Bronk's poetry: we are both completely alone in the world and linked inextricably to all living things: past, present and future. Language, paltry as it is compared to the physical world it wishes to render, is our strongest link to that world.

A poem from Bronk's next collection, *Finding Losses*, published in 1955, "The World" is a stunningly concise evocation of the "the wilderness of raw consciousness," as he calls it in "The Arts and Death," though in a more compressed—for Bronk mature—style. Consisting of a single quatrain, the poem is short enough to quote in its entirety:

> I thought that you were an anchor in the drift of the world;
> but no: there isn't an anchor anywhere.
> There isn't an anchor in the drift of the world. Oh no.
> I thought you were. On no. The drift of the world.

Using only 18 words assembled into nearly interchangeable chunks of language, Bronk employs repetition and meter to stunning effect. Typically for Bronk, the poem begins with a statement which is immediately refuted, then explicated. The poem doubles back on itself several times, swaying between the conviction of the initial thought and the equal conviction that the thought is incorrect. The refrain "oh no" expresses both the speaker's recognition that his inner world of impressions and hopes does not cohere with the indifferent physical world, and the resigned desperation of that realization. Bronk manipulates the pacing of the poem, placing "oh no" at the end of the third line, thus emphasizing it before burying it in a caesura that becomes the climax of the poem as the speaker's words literally sink into the drift of the world. Such verbal play and an ability to raise, explore and debate ideas in a short space are signatures of Bronk's mature style.

Besides Sidney Cox, the other most prominent figure in Bronk's life as a poet was Cid Corman, a poet and editor who was the first public champion of Bronk's mature work. Corman, the editor of *Origin*, one of the most influential American literary magazine of the 1950s and 60s, published a handful of Bronk's poems in nearly every issue over the course of twenty-six years. With Corman's help, Bronk's work was read by the most respected representatives of the new American poetry of the time, including Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Donald Allen, as well as hundreds of readers Bronk might not have reached otherwise.

Corman and Bronk's relationship, which was by geographical necessity epistolary, was fraught with disagreement. Corman was a

straightforward editor who—while being Bronk's most enthusiastic supporter, even writing an appreciative book about Bronk's poetry in 1976—pulled no punches in his criticism. Published correspondence between the two poets gives crucial insight into Bronk's method. In a May 20, 1961 letter to Bronk, Corman criticizes a lack of music in Bronk's poetry, and the fact that "The poems have an insistence that can seem strident en-mass…there is a repetitiveness…a tendency to dullness sets in, almost pompousness."[2] Bronk's response casts light onto his approach to poetry.

> If the poetry is "hurt" by that search for, insistence upon, what you call "a world" in your eyes (or ears)—it isn't in mine—Maybe I consider the search—if that's what it is—as more important than the poetry… What I aim to do is to make a statement which has form which is composed of the contents of the statement. I am after "the weight, the texture, the strength," not of words, but of statements…the shape of the rocks as they lie against each other not the sound they make as they tumble together.[3]

Bronk would eventually split with Corman for what Bronk considered several slights, culminating in Corman's inclusion of passages from Bronk's letters in his book *William Bronk and His Poetry.* In Corman, Bronk found and subsequently lost his most open—and influential—supporter.

It is worthwhile to investigate the reception of Bronk's poetry among his peers, and some of the factors which led more or less directly to Bronk's neglected status during his life and in the decade since his death. The 1950s and 1960s were a particular fermentative time in American poetry, when battle lines were being drawn between separate 'schools' more distinctly than before or since. While Allen Ginsberg and the Beat poets were causing a conscious ruckus on the West Coast, Donald Hall, Robert Lowell and other "academic" poets were publishing award-winning work on the East Coast; the so-called New York School poets were writing alongside Abstract Expressionist painters in New York City, and poets associated with the Black Mountain School were establishing their own distinct voice and style. There was commerce between the groups, to be sure, especially between the Beats and the New York School, but mostly there was resigned acceptance and underlying disdain among the different camps of mid-century American poetry.

The tension came to a head in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the publication of two crucial anthologies which would permanently alter the landscape of American poetics. *New Poets of England and America*,

[2] Lyman Gilmore, *The Force of Desire: A Life of William Bronk* (New Jersey: Talisman House) 182.

[3] Gilmore, *The Force of Desire*, 183.

edited by Donald Hall, Louis Simpson and Robert Pack, published in 1957, effectively maintained the lineage from English poetry to modern American poetry, with an emphasis on formal verse. The poets featured in *New Poets of England and America* came to represent the Academic faction of American poetry.

In 1960, Donald Allen published *New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, an anthology which placed poets in separate geographical and conceptual "camps," such as New York School, Black Mountain, and San Francisco Renaissance. The anthology stood (and stands) in direct opposition to Hall's more traditional anthology and helped split the rift in American poetics which Robert Lowell would describe as "the raw and the cooked." As David Clippinger shows in his study of the correspondence between Bronk and Cid Corman, Corman had effectively lobbied for Bronk to be included in *New American Poetry*, but when Corman pulled his own work from the manuscript, Bronk lost his only champion and became the last poet to be cut from the anthology.[4] According to Clippinger, this seemingly minor slight effectively barred Bronk from the landscape of mid-century American poetry.

The clearest reason for Bronk's exclusion from Allen's anthology is geographic: Bronk's life in Hudson Falls made him an outsider to all the "schools" around which Allen organized *New American Poetry*. But Bronk's poetry was further removed from the "new American" poetry and the "new poets" of England and America than he was.

The craft elements of Bronk's poetry are traditional; his more or less regular line lengths, often iambic pentameter, as well as the 'block text' appearance of his poems on the page set his work apart from the more experimental poetics of many of the poets in Allen's anthology. At the same time, Bronk's deeply meditative tone, his skeptical worldview, his reliance on rhetoric and his almost total excision of imagery and metaphor set his poetry apart from the traditional poetics of Hall's anthology. Despite having been published in such mainstream journals as *The New Yorker* and *Poetry*, as well as more independent journals such as Cid Corman's *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*, Bronk, after the 1950s and especially when he finally split with Corman in the mid-1970s, became a solitary voice in American poetry. For the rest of his life he would publish almost exclusively on small presses.

As a respected editor, Cid Corman's influence on the poetic tastes of his time cannot be understated. We can infer that Corman's opinion regarding Bronk's "tendency toward...pompousness" was generally shared by Corman's readership, making Bronk a target for easy dismissal. One of the most often repeated gestures in Bronk's poetry is a short declarative sentence at the end of a poem, reiterating a driving statement and closing with conviction bordering on pomposity. A poem

[4] David Clippinger, "Neither Us Nor Them: Poetry Anthologies, Canon Building and the Silencing of William Bronk," *The Argotist Online*: www.argotistonline.co.uk.

from Bronk's 1996 collection *The Cage of Age*, entitled "Love and Terror," is just one example.

> We are in ourselves like air inside a balloon
> and the shapes of our skin is neither what we are.
> The solids of the world are pictures we make of them.
> All of it will disperse. Do not believe.

"Do not believe" is one of the rallying cries of Bronk's poetry. But the conviction of this statement, Bronk's intellectual conviction that one should not "believe" in the world is tempered by a tenderness which wrestles his steely intellect. This grappling between an intellectual desire to doubt reality and an emotional desire to be in the world *and* of it creates the tense dynamic of Bronk's rhetoric, causing him to continuously rethink his statements, doubling back on them for reconsideration. Nowhere is this tension played out more fully than in "To Praise the Music," from the book of the same name published in 1972.

> Evening. The trees in late winter bare
> against the sky. Still light, the sky.
> Trees dark against it. A few leaves
> on the trees. Tension in their rigid branches as if
> –oh, it is all as if, but as if, yes,
> as if they sang songs, as if they praised.
> Oh, I envy them. I know the songs.
>
> As if I know some other things besides.
> As if; but I don't know, not more
> than to say the trees know. The trees don't know
> and neither do I. What is it keeps me from praise?
> I praise. If only to say their songs,
> say yes to them, to praise the songs they sing.
> Envied music. I sing to praise their song.

This poem, like most of Bronk's work, revolves around a loose blank verse line and the subtle craftsmanship of equal stanzas. Also typical for Bronk is the tension between two conflicting instincts, in this case, between the knowledge that the natural world does not exist as we perceive it, and the desire to praise its beauty nonetheless. This tension is set in the first stanza, where Bronk admits that any statement about the perceived world is rhetoric agreed upon: "oh, it is all as if." At the same time, Bronk admits a desire to praise and even envy the natural world. What is particularly interesting in this poem is that Bronk posits human beings and trees on the same plane of ignorance yet also grants both the ability to create beauty. The sentiment expressed in the final line saves the poem from sliding into a heavy-handed self-assuredness:

despite his doubt that the world exists as we perceive it, Bronk decides to sing of the natural world, to praise it, because it is all we have, even if it is nothing, and it is beautiful.

The main challenge facing Bronk's readers is the difficulty of reconciling his enormous output with the fact that his poetry, from his first book to his last, grapples with a relatively limited number of themes, crucial though those themes may be. Indeed, the most frequently appearing words in Bronk's oeuvre appear to be *life*, *death*, and *the world.* That is not to say, however, that Bronk's poetry is limited nor that his approach to the poem grew stale. In fact, Bronk repeatedly challenged himself to expand the limits of how he wrote. Reading chronologically through his books, from *My Father Photographed with Friends*, written in 1949 (though not published until 1976), to *Metaphor of Trees and Last Poems*, published posthumously in 1999, one sees an unceasing formal evolution in Bronk's poetry, even while the subject of his poems remains relatively constant.

Bronk's earliest work takes a multiplicity of forms, though all of them in the "closed" tradition: couplets, tercets, quatrains and long verse paragraphs. By *To Praise the Music*, published in 1972, however, Bronk was writing only sonnets, broken in a variety of uneven, untraditional ways. In a 1989 interview with Edward Foster published in *Talisman*, Bronk explained his attraction to the sonnet thusly:

> I got interested in [the sonnet] as a satisfying form—you know, the convenient length as it seemed to me then… And I went through a period of many months, maybe a year, with Shakespearean sonnets. Almost every night before I went to sleep I would read one or two and read them very carefully: what's he saying here? How's he doing this? What's he mean by this word? Very close reading, so I suppose it probably formed my mind into thinking in that span…but it wasn't a decision on my part…and I didn't have to force it. This is the way things happen.[5]

By the time Bronk published his next book, *Silence and Metaphor*, in 1975, he had begun to compress his sonnets, composing mostly eight line poems broken into two quatrains. Bronk took this compression to its logical end in the quatrains and tercets published in *Finding Losses* in 1976, and *The Force of Desire* in 1979. By the publication of *Life Supports* in 1982, Bronk had expanded to writing twenty line poems, having seemingly exhausted his exploration of compression, though he would occasionally compose starkly short poems for the rest of his life.

One example from *Finding Losses* will show the pithiness of Bronk's most compressed work, where Bronk's language and thought achieves its purest form possible. Any further compression would lead to complete obscurity or inconsequence.

[5] Edward Foster, *Conversations with William Bronk*, *Talisman* (New Jersey: Talisman, 1989) 41.

> Not yet old, I turn away.
> No, not away; or even turn.
> I look. Nothing is what I see when I look.

The poem maintains the circling intellect of Bronk's best work, the searching statement doubling back, revising, reconsidering itself before the definitive final conclusion. Viewed this way, Bronk's poems illustrate the thought processes of a man with a single-minded intent toward conviction in a world where absolute truth is impossible, as well as the work of a poet concerned with compressing meaning and language to an absolute core.

Bronk's search for truth through poetry, or his resigned exploration of the non-existence of truth, made him an individualist unwilling to follow poetic trends regarding form or subject matter. His geographic isolation and his unwillingness to pander to readers, critics or fellow poets ensured his status as an outsider. As he said in his 1989 interview with Talisman, "I feel more and more and more as time goes on that I don't give a damn. If someone is attracted to the poem, fine, and if they're not, I don't really care. Although once somebody is, I do care."[6] Such sentiments could be chalked up to age, as Bronk was seventy at the time. But Bronk seems to have formed this sentiment—a distrust of fame and a distrust of the American poetry business which favored certain aesthetics over others—early in his career. In a 1961 letter to Charles Olson, Bronk wrote:

> I don't think I am just crying on your shoulder about my personal neglect though it must sound so... I know, of course, that one should not—no rather cannot as a practical matter—expect one poet to really much like the work of another—not a contemporary's anyway—even though I also know that an immense amount of poetic politics in the way of logrolling and mutual back scratching, *pretending* to like each other supports the whole poetry industry in the U.S. today.[7]

This attitude played no small part in allowing Bronk to relentlessly pursue the themes which engaged him throughout his life. While much of American poetry was attempting to address a wider public through contemporary political issues such as the Vietnam War, or to explore novel approaches to craft, Bronk was content to engage what he perceived as eternal questions, whether anyone was reading his work or not. Nevertheless, Bronk did eventually achieve a degree of late fame, which he both relished and distrusted.

Bronk's most obvious mainstream acceptance came at the age of sixty-three, when he was awarded the 1982 American Book Award for Poetry for *Life Supports: New and Collected Poems*, a book of new

[6] Foster, *Conversations with William Bronk*, 33.
[7] Clippinger, "Neither Us Nor Them," 9.

poems Bronk considered experimental, as well as his collected earlier poetry. Bronk was delightfully surprised at the recognition, and readily embraced the more intense schedule of public readings that came with it, at least for a time. Bronk's readings were well attended and enthusiastically received, culminating in a reading he gave in Albany, New York on New Year's Day, 1983 at the inauguration ceremony for Mario Cuomo, the new governor. Commenting on an earlier reading in a letter to his publisher, Bronk wrote: "A large group at the reading—150 John said. Hot and humid. I'm in a cotton shirt with my jacket and then tie removed and drenched through giving a strictly soul performance—Elvis without the bumps and only an occasional grind."[8] Remarks such as these should annul the judgement of Bronk as a pompously hermetic poet.

But Bronk was not altogether trusting of the fame he achieved so late in life. Like many writers who toil for years in relative obscurity before winning public appreciation, Bronk expressed some complaint about taking so long to be discovered. At the same time, he recognized the dangers of fame and its corrupting influence on poetry. As he wrote to a friend months after receiving the American Book Award: "Now, I have been around untouched for so long I'm like one of those corpses they display in the catacombs as incorrupt. In retrospect, being left alone was very good and, I trust, good for the work."[9]

Bronk's reputation continued to spread throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as several small literary journals published issues dedicated to him, including *Talisman* and the British journal *Grossteste*. When he died in 1999 of emphysema at the age of 81, he was eulogized in a long New York Times obituary as "a poet of depth and haunting vision."[10] In his own obituary for Bronk, Robert Creeley wrote, "there was no one else quite like him, so large in his singleness, so separate yet enclosing. One will not see his like again."[11]

*

Only the rare poet's reputation endures death, and fewer are resurrected. No writer can be sure their work will last, and the ravenous need to know one's own literary fate has driven many to despair. William Bronk did not need to know. His early decision to keep in touch with "the eternal things" and his dedication to his own poetry rather than the passing currents of American letters set him apart from his contemporaries and won him few—but a few—dedicated supporters. Poised on the cusp of conviction and doubt, Bronk's voice remains vitally foreign.

[8] Gilmore, *The Force of Desire*, 268.
[9] Gilmore, *The Force of Desire*, 277.
[10] Peter Applebome, *The New York Times*, February 25, 1999.
[11] http://epc.buffalo.edu/documents/obits/bronk.html.

Jeremy M. Davies

Well, You Needn't, Motherfucker: Sorrentino Underground

MISCELLANIES

> The ideal list becomes an object. It not only bypasses or thwarts the combinative processes of language, but it subverts the selective processes of language as well... The *real* is a list: a list is *real*.[1]

Inasmuch as there is such a thing as Gilbert Sorrentino scholarship, "the list" is often given pride of place as an element worthy of examination in his works of fiction, and indeed GS himself rhapsodized on the list-form at every opportunity:

> If the catalogue, or any catalogue or list, is understood to be a system, its entropy is the measure of the unavailability of its energy for conversion into useful work.
>
> The ideal catalogue tends toward maximum entropy.
>
> Stick it in your ear."[2]

And, thus encouraged, there is a tradition in Sorrentino scholarship—inasmuch, etc.—resorted to by Sorrentino himself on occasion, beginning perhaps in his early essay "The Art of Hubert Selby"[3]—to approach GS's work not through a patient progression of thought, beginning with an idea on page one that leads by way of a clear discourse to a summation on the final page, with the intervening pages concerned with the expansion of the initial thought in a linear fashion (ellipses notwithstanding), but by way of a miscellany of somewhat connected, somewhat comical, somewhat resigned "critical vignettes." (See for instance John O'Brien's "Gilbert Sorrentino: Some Various Looks,"[4] or Jerome Klinkowitz's "Gilbert Sorrentino's Super-Fiction"[5]).

[1] Gilbert Sorrentino, *Something Said* (1984; San Francisco: North Point Press; Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001) 356.
[2] Sorrentino, *Pack of Lies* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997) 144.
[3] Collected in Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 114–128.
[4] *Vort* 2.3 (1974); available online at http://jacketmagazine.com/29/sorr-obrien.html.
[5] *Chicago Review* 25.4 (1974): 77-89.

I write at the end of 2009. It has been three years since the death of Gilbert Sorrentino. From a reader's perspective, at a reader's distance, his passing appeared to be met with a smattering of respectful tributes on the part of a particular literary community, and then a longer, louder blast of indifferent confusion from the world at large. His final novel, *The Abyss of Human Illusion*, written during his illness, will be published in early 2010. I do not know what the critical response will be, though I have my suspicious. As in life, Sorrentino "underground" has managed thus far to avoid the reassessments and encomiums writers as prolific and influential as he tend to accrue. There is the sense—though, admittedly, it is difficult to measure or demonstrate such a sense—that the establishment, be it academia or the ever-shrinking world of popular literary fiction, has ignored Sorrentino, and continues now to ignore him.

Certainly he has received more than his share of praise. Certainly he is, "in many circles," considered important. His books have been translated; at least five are now available in French, two in German. There have been the friendly, enthusiastic overviews trying to help readers see just how "fun" and affecting Sorrentino's work is, despite its disdain for realism (and yes: it is fun, it is affecting).[6] There have been, though not too recently, the scattered articles, popular and academic, and even books, focusing, perhaps overmuch, on the myriad ways Sorrentino plays with the novel form, plays with readerly assumptions concerning the "truth" of a given text, "what is really happening" in a given piece of fiction, indeed the relevance and coherence of one segment of text to another (and yes: what American writer, save perhaps David Markson, has done as much to expand our notion of what can or cannot function in/as a novel?).[7] But if we can speak of an author as idiosyncratic and uncompromising as Sorrentino ever being able to "make it," it is clear enough, despite these little victories, that he has not. We need only review the infamous *New York Times* obituary if evidence beyond our own intuitive grasps of the culture will not suffice.

Since there is so much still to be written on Sorrentino, since no definitive career-spanning studies have appeared, since Sorrentino as yet remains underground for most of the English-language community—despite attempt after attempt to reverse this trend, and despite (or because of) the size and influence of his oeuvre, and since moreover it would take a book and not an essay to do the peculiarity of GS's oeuvre justice—it might do to collect, here, in modest tribute, a few unscholarly, unscientific sentences, mainly questions, on the subject of one of the English language's great doctors and despoilers; and indeed

[6] Gerald Howard's gregarious 2006 piece in *Bookforum* being the last such effort to appear during GS's lifetime: "A View from the Ridge: Back in the Old Neighborhood with Postmodern Prole Gilbert Sorrentino." Bookforum, Feb-Mar. 2006. Available online at http://www.bookforum.com/archive/ feb_06/howard.html.

[7] See for instance Louis Mackey, *Fact, Fiction, and Representation: Four Novels by Gilbert Sorrentino*. (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997).

on the subject of how we, his prospective readers, might see his life and work, now that the former has ended: a few possible routes, a few possible nodes of inquiry for those utopian scholars of the future who might find in Sorrentino a fine fatted calf for a dissertation; and specifically some ruminations as to why, indeed, one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century remains by and large a stranger to his own countrymen. If in the process I manage to say one or two things of use to "Sorrentino scholarship," I will count myself singularly fortunate.

VITAL STATISTICS

To speak about Sorrentino without engaging in yet another impotent overview is to speak primarily to the "devoted sons and other deviants"[8] already familiar with his work. One stumbling block, as retailers and publishers will confirm, is the overabundance of available product: Sorrentino was prolific, and unapologetically so—within his output, book to book and even over the course of individual texts, we find an abundance of approaches, forms, constraints, references, and pranks. Sorrentino did not sit still; even when he returned to familiar forms (2002's *Little Casino* and his final novel *The Abyss of Human Illusion*, for instance, share the basic form of anecdotes-with-commentary found in the short piece "Sample Writing Sample" from 1997[9]), he did not do so soon or regularly enough to "brand" himself, popularly, except as insular, a chimera. No wonder then that every writer approaching Sorrentino will find herself sorely tempted to begin with the basics—to offer a guide for the perplexed. We are forever stalled at the starting line. But it can be useful nonetheless to revisit the numbers.

Gilbert Sorrentino (1929–2006), to count only the major publications, is the author of seventeen novels, one meditation or prose poem (which could easily be counted a novel, given Sorrentino's loose criteria), one collection of short stories, eight books of poetry (more or less collected into a single volume in 2004[10]), and one book of selected nonfiction. A number of his books were published, from the late sixties through the early eighties, by larger trade publishers. Gradually these titles went out of print; the majority were acquired by Dalkey Archive Press, which still keeps them available today.

Of his novels, three could be said to have continuous narratives, in that they begin on page one recounting an incident that precedes in the internal chronology of the book the incident recounted on the final page,

[8] As Christopher Sorrentino calls his father's devotees in his lovely preface to *The Abyss of Human Illusion* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2010) xii.

[9] Collected in Gilbert Sorrentino, *The Moon in Its Flight* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2004) 106–120.

[10] Gilbert Sorrentino, *New and Selected Poems: 1958–1998* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2004).

and where the intervening pages are concerned with the progression of events in a linear fashion (ellipses notwithstanding) from the initial stage to the latter.

Of his novels, fourteen are structured implicitly or explicitly as miscellanies, presenting information concerning the thoughts, activities, and—generally—amours of a semi-stable chorus of the same (or similar) characters in discrete segments following no internal chronology but the logic of a list or other ordering constraint (most "famously" *Misterioso*, which proceeds in vignette fashion through the alphabet: a copy of *Absalom, Absalom!* found in an A&P through the lassitude of a woman nicknamed "ZuZu").

Of his novels, two get their titles from William Carlos Williams. One from Henry James. One Shakespeare. One Flann O'Brien. One Thelonious Monk. (Is it possible I am missing references in his other titles? It is possible.)

Of his novels, and now further entering the realm of opinion, perhaps none could be described as being concerned with imaginary personages who possess, "as the phrase has it, redeeming qualities....ameliorated or softened by interjections of 'warmth' in the guise of characters, events, or locales."[11]

Of his novels, perhaps all could be considered comedies. At least as much as *The Duchess of Malfi*. At least as much as *The Making of Americans*.

Of his novels, perhaps all could be considered a form of literary criticism.

GEOGRAPHY & AUTHENTICITY

Of his novels, or now perhaps "books of prose," all but five could be said to "take place" entirely in New York City, which is to say, in the main, Brooklyn or Manhattan, occasionally the Bronx, and indeed to hold a character's abandoning New York City, which is to say Brooklyn or Manhattan, occasionally the Bronx, for a place of greater safety ("moonlight in Vermont!"[12]) in almost as much contempt as their staying put.

Of the five books of prose that could be said to "take place" outside New York City (I posit: *The Sky Changes* [1966], *Splendide-Hôtel* [1973], *Blue Pastoral* [1983], *Under the Shadow* [1991], *Lunar Follies* [2005]), the astute reader could easily object that they take place at least partially in Brooklyn or Manhattan (literally so in *The Sky Changes*, which uses a progression from this home turf across the country, heading west, for Mexico, and never arriving, as an ordering element; likewise *Blue Pastoral*, which I suspect uses *The Sky Changes* as an

[11] Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 295.

[12] Gilbert Sorrentino, *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971; New York: Pantheon Books; Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991) 243.

ordering element), or object, indeed, that when in a novel or story Gilbert Sorrentino sets his scene outside of New York City, it is not—properly speaking—set anywhere at all, aside from the consciousness (frequently disgusted, frequently bitter, frequently disappointed) and vocabulary (mocking, concise, shorn of simile) of a narrator who is certainly a New Yorker, and who we are invited—at, of course, our peril—to associate with GS himself.

What would a geographically oriented study of the work of Gilbert Sorrentino teach us? If we were to map his novels and stories, which Brooklyn and Manhattan neighborhoods would or would not feature? Were we to walk these spaces today, would they bear any resemblance whatever to the places Sorrentino intended to implicate when he named them in his work? Do his novels make an American circuit, beginning *X* in *Steelwork*, his second, sedentary novel, traveling as far as California in *Blue Pastoral*, atomizing the memory of the East Coast in the *Pack of Lies* trilogy (predominantly written during GS's exile at Stanford), arriving in the no-place California limbo of *Under the Shadow*, returning home in *Red the Fiend* and *Little Casino*, striking back reflexively at the "wild" west in *Gold Fools*?

And then, what do we make of the insistence, over and again in Sorrentino's work, that one is always, and irrevocably, an insider or an outsider as regards place, as regards art? That one is indeed "hip" or not ("many beatniks think of themselves as hipsters, while there are no hipsters at all today, at least not in New York..."[13] he wrote in 1964; matters can't have improved since); that to be on the outside and pretend to be "in" results, quickly enough, in losing one's soul, becoming obscene. "In" meaning: literature, New York.

To return to GS's essay, "The Art of Hubert Selby": Selby is praised for his "impeccable" ear for speech:

> Only a fool can be misled by the heavy-handed vulgarity of so many popular prose writers who mistake one brand of grammatical aberration and slang for another.[14]

"To anyone who knows..." GS goes on, Selby's choice of one bar over another for Tralala—his low-class *Last Exit to Brooklyn* prostitute—to hustle in, is perfect: she chooses a spot "strictly for the tourist,"[15] since this would be her proper habitat. And yet, jumping ahead to 1993, in one of Sorrentino's wonderful aphoristic essays, we find: "Journalists are always bad writers because they think that fiction is an elaboration of reality, like reporting."[16] Nothing strange about a writer refining or contradicting a point made thirty years before—and certainly Sorrentino

[13] Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 118.
[14] Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 116.
[15] Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 117.
[16] Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 340.

was not praising Selby's work solely on its merits as fiction that "got it right"—but just a few entries later in this same 1993 piece, we find:

> The wry, cynical, smart, sophisticated, and glittering New York depicted in Hollywood musicals and light comedies of the thirties and forties was really, in some magical way, what New York was really like up until about 1950. Nobody who was not there believes this.[17]

And then, indulge me, a step backward to 1972: In a piece on the death of his familiar New York "Bohemia," we again find Sorrentino's familiar rage at the ersatz: "It was a 'hip' world, and that word as currently employed and as it was then employed, means two different things."[18] And once more:

> If one has never heard Bach, then Mantovani is fine. If one does not know the work of Williams or Pound or Olson or Duncan or Weiners, then Donovan and Leonard Cohen are poets... Art is ruthless. This fact is not tolerated today. The young are handed perverted goo which is passed off as art.[19]

So: "Nobody who was not there"; "If one does not know the work of Williams...": this concern, this *morality* of essentials—geographical, aesthetic—is never far from Sorrentino's poetics...this writer who nonetheless listed his own "artistic necessities" as "an obsessive concern with formal structure, a dislike of the replication of experience, a love of digression and embroidery, a great pleasure in false or ambiguous information, a desire to invent problems that only the invention of new forms can solve, and a joy in making mountains out of molehills."[20]

In Sorrentino, we see this conflict between a love of elaborate falsification and a disgust for the false fought to a draw over and again. This is, for the reader, unsettling. This is, as well, deeply unfashionable, as it must needs be. Ask Wyndham Lewis, if you can find any of his books. It is one thing to expect our "experimental" fiction to demonstrate that this or that emperor has no clothes—who here is frightened by literary subversion? We know the culture does not care. What is not often remarked upon, with regard to Sorrentino, is his insistence that there are no clothes for any of us to don. He knows whom he is addressing, and he does not spare us—nor himself. Writing is a losing battle. Sorrentino's is an intelligence inspired by, enraged at, the unforgiving, inevitable naught of the failure of imagination.

[17] Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 340.
[18] Gilbert Sorrentino, "If one has never heard Bach, then Mantovani's fine." *Crawdaddy*, 20 Feb. 1972: 46.
[19] Sorrentino, "Bach."
[20] Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 265.

CLICHÉ

"No art can succeed when it is willingly mistaken for reality," Jerome Klinkowitz says, summing up Sorrentino's attitude toward fiction (calling GS, incidentally, "The Man Who Hates His Story").[21] What then, in an art form that may not be allowed to replicate experience, whose only strength lies in its spuriousness, constitutes authenticity, honesty? Is it enough to remind the reader that words are words and not images? To steer away from representation?

> The reader will see that what I am driving at is that these words that he is reading—are words.
> [...]
> The difference between a good writer and a bad one—or, the difference between a writer (take your choice out of the millions around) and an artist—is that the former thinks the words are pictures, and so on. He thinks they "represent" things, and take their place. The artist is a slave to the fact (it takes a great while to realize this) that they represent nothing, and you pay homage to them on their terms.[22]

Of course it isn't enough, because language, like thought, like any medium, is inherently inert, stubborn, lazy. *Unlike* stone, however, or silver halides, language also defines our function as human beings, our interaction with the phenomenal world and one another. It is a grave thing, then, to sin against your medium as a writer—to propagate "perverted goo" in the guise of art, to rely on a pernicious consensus rather than test the margins. It has consequences, Sorrentino tells us, far more profound than merely constructing an object of no value.

Here is a generative constraint you might use in your own work. Do not write a single phrase that could be identified as a cliché or a product of received language—and be ruthless in so identifying your usages—without calling attention to your "lapse." No matter how awkward it might seem, no matter how it might undercut your intentions, leave no laziness, no cheapness unemphasized; expose yourself to your own and your readers' ridicule. Do so, in fact, so often, that even those phrases that are plausibly your own—inasmuch as we, like musicologists at a plagiarism trial, can sift the "received" from the "invented"—begin to lose value, begin to cheapen by close association with the cheap. What is the effect? Is this honesty?

The word "phrase"—"handy phrase," "awkward phrase," "tired phrase," "such turns of phrase," "Now there's a turn of phrase!"—is a basso continuo in, to take one example, Sorrentino's *Pack of Lies* trilogy. It occurs so often, as its various narrators double back to bite the tails of their accidental/intentional clichés, that a full citation would be wearisome. You will find similar locutions in most of Sorrentino's novels:

[21] Jerome Klinkowitz, "Gilbert Sorrentino's Super-Fiction," *Chicago Review* 25.4 (1974): 79, 81.

[22] Sorrentino, *Imaginative Qualities*, 37, 169.

> Let's leave him a moment—in that lovely phrase of the novel...[23]
> [...]
> A wondrous phrase, yet all methinks devoid of meaning...[24]
> [...]
> The Drummer ignores [Cheech] and "strains every fiber of his being" toward Professor Kooba.
> It's a great relief to me that that phrase is in quotes, Curtin says. A *great* relief.[25]

We know it is in itself a cliché to point out that we are all, as users of language, implicated by the use of cliché. The culture, the language, speaks through us, wrestle with this angel (!) as we will. Language, to Sorrentino, is facile, but it is also the enemy. Blobs of text disgorged by a thousand hacks bob up in his mind, same as any mind; Sorrentino the collagist presents them unaltered, often, to our eyes—and the undiscriminating reader passes over them without so much as a bump. Until, that is, Sorrentino forces this bump: you the rube, have swallowed another mouthful of dreck, so eager were you to move through your meal. The effect over time is, at best, discouraging. How many writers can we name who have taken as their primary theme (what a field day, indeed, Sorrentino would have with "theme"; note too the opacity of the phrase "field day") the inviolability of the writer's art? We can say there are writers who are daunting in that their prose achieves effects we cannot ourselves achieve, who resist emulation, who have claimed a corner of the tablecloth as their own, redefined what can be done with writing in a way that seems too novel for appropriation—but who, among our greats, has stood at the gate (gate?) holding his hand up, palm out, indicating that we dare not pass? Is there not, in Sorrentino's work, an underlying caveat to all his readers that they would do better, perhaps, to remain on the far side of the page, and not inch their pens into what is, after all, a specialist's domain?

Language is the enemy, because to use it for aesthetic effect is to tip yourself into an arena where your very human decency (presuming one has begun the game with any) is endangered by your medium: to write pabulum is to let it circulate freely in your thoughts and enter into your life, you plague rat. For one's language to be refined to the point where the "absolute falsity of the representation of reality"[26] is clearly delineated is all the honesty, all the morality, literature can give us...and it is *still* not enough, since the glorification of this "falsity" can as easily calcify into a new form of cliché. Yes, art is ruthless.

[23] Sorrentino, *Imaginative Qualities*, 220.

[24] Gilbert Sorrentino, *Blue Pastoral* (1983; San Francisco: North Point Press; Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000) 98. Of course, *Blue Pastoral* is centered on a quest to find, just so, the Perfect (Musical) Phrase.

[25] Gilbert Sorrentino, *Crystal Vision* (1981; San Francisco: North Point Press; Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999) 150.

[26] Sorrentino, *Moon*, 107.

Sorrentino's gatekeeping, then, which could certainly be mistaken for posturing—as perhaps (who can say?) it on occasion is—is as much a self-indictment as an attempt to warn away the pinchbecks and poetasters that (can we agree on this?) crowd the medium with inanity, rotting "the mental health of the state,"[27] unleashing Williams's "black smut" upon our literary corn... Sorrentino is implicated, in pointing out our inadequacies—as readers, writers, users of language—for having, himself, preceded us into a purview where there can be no innocence, no victory, and no respite. Is he *beating down straw men*? *Shooting fish in a barrel*? *Preaching to the choir*? We who listen and aspire are guilty; Sorrentino is guilty of wanting to teach us.

"So to speak, as it were, after all, in sum, and finally."[28]

SHANTY IRISH (AN INTERLUDE)

The word "shanty," independent from or adjacent to the word "Irish," appears—at a rough estimate—around thirty-three times in the works of Gilbert Sorrentino; a whopping seventeen in *Aberration of Starlight* alone, in the mouth—primarily—of the monstrous grandmother figure who returns, distilled to a greater degree of monstrousness, in *Red the Fiend*. Usage is not restricted to those two novels, however:

"Experience shows that the overwhelming sandwich favorite among shanty Irish is ham and potato salad on a seeded role with mayo."[29]

Is thirty-three more or less than expected?

THE NARRATIVE OF NEGLECT

> Sorrentino is himself at once hard to place and exemplary, a writer who insists vehemently on the uniqueness and autonomy of the literary work, and whose willing embrace of marginality seems only to confirm his place of honor among experimental writers in the U.S.[30]

Inasmuch as there could be said to be such a thing as Sorrentino scholarship, it is a commonplace—and we cannot object to the utilization of commonplaces in discussing an author who used received critical and literary language as eloquently as any Braque or Picasso did their newspaper clippings—that he has not received the recognition he

[27] Hugh Kenner on precisely what Pound sought to avoid; from his *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (1951; London: Faber and Faber; Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) 46.

[28] Sorrentino, *Moon*, 108.

[29] Gilbert Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew* (1979; New York: Grove Press; Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996) 245.

[30] Joseph Tabbi, "Matter into Imagination: The Cognitive Realism of Gilbert Sorrentino's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*," *The Work of Fiction: Cognition, Culture, and Complexity*, eds. Alan Richardson and Ellen Spolsky (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004) 167.

deserves. Indeed, in William McPheron's *Gilbert Sorrentino: A Descriptive Bibliography*—covering the years 1960–1990—the bibliographer states in his introduction that Sorrentino's career "reflects the fate of classic American modernism in contemporary literary culture," and "mirrors [the] erosion of commitment to serious literature."[31] The thesis of the bibliography—which is certainly a polemical work—is as follows: Where once Sorrentino would have been recognized as a giant of American letters, he has been forced into a marginal position because of the increasing commercialization of the publishing industry, and indeed the absorption of the poetics and "experimental writing" communities into the academy, whose tastes have long since parted ways with the so-called high modernist tradition GS represents.

Thanks to the detail with which McPheron records the circumstances of every one of Sorrentino's initial book publications, reading *Gilbert Sorrentino* is a rather novelistic experience—GS's novels, their panoply of fictional writers making bad choices, prime us to read it as such—with our protagonist again and again falling foul of bad luck or hubris in his attempts not only to get his work published but be rewarded for this both monetarily and with some amount of respect by the publishing industry and "world of letters." His fist novel, *The Sky Changes*, was acquired by Hill and Wang after three other trade houses rejected it. *Time* magazine, of all places, declared it would run a very positive review with a featured picture of Sorrentino; the review was killed, however, with no explanation, immediately after being filed. Hill and Wang declined to further publicize the book after this setback, and so *Sky* languished, necessitating that GS start more or less from scratch in placing his next novel, *Steelwork*. (It found a home at Pantheon through friends, along with *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*.[32]) This story, with variations, is repeated throughout *Sorrentino*—and other examples of editorial and/or writerly cupidity are in no short supply.

Certainly, if we take commercial "penetration" as a measure of the culture's grasp of a given writer's work—high advances, this-many-thousands of copies sold—then Sorrentino has made barely a blip, aside from the wavelets put out by the relative success of *Mulligan Stew* (interestingly, McPheron does not record the advance for this title[33]), still GS's best-known novel. Sorrentino was reviewed consistently, though there is often to be seen an inversely proportional relationship between the enthusiasm of a given review and the review outlet's circulation; and with several long-standing cheerleaders aside, these reviews were often confused and discomfited, particularly as GS put more and more

[31] William McPheron, *Gilbert Sorrentino: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Elmwood, IL: Dalkey Archive Press 1991) vii.

[32] McPheron, *Gilbert Sorrentino*, 8, 14.

[33] McPheron, *Gilbert Sorrentino*, 37.

distance between himself and what could be mistaken for realism.[34] In terms of critical work on Sorrentino, McPheron's accounting lists 113 articles up through 1990, most of these not on Sorrentino himself but citing his work as an example of *Homo metafictionalis*, and one of which is in fact a vengeful poem by Rachelle Owens titled "To an Arrogant Fart."[35] More often than not, those pieces centering exclusively on Sorrentino's work were published in special issues devoted to him (*Review of Contemporary Fiction* 1.1; *Vort* 2.3).[36] In the twenty years since, I can only find evidence (at the UMI ProQuest archive) of five dissertations focusing, in any significant way, on Sorrentino's work.

Does this, however, constitute neglect? Certainly Sorrentino's writing does not "feel" as though it is part of the contemporary discourse on fiction, difficult though it is to qualify something like influence. That Sorrentino himself *felt* neglected during his lifetime is clear enough: "Artists, in old age, should not appear eagerly grateful for belated attention to their work. A decent courtesy is more than sufficient."[37]

Neglect is especially difficult to gauge vis-à-vis Sorrentino since so much of his work is precisely an attack on those institutions from which a writer of his stature might expect a certain amount of attention, belated or otherwise. Sorrentino, in his work, is always the "insider": the reader is the mark, being instructed on the long-con of literature. What, effect, then, would "success," even celebrity, have on GS's work? To what degree was GS's great theme his own reception, or lack thereof—better put: his own irrelevance—as evidenced by the career-spanning vitriol he spooned over his own imagined authors and artists, their coteries, their reviewers, their careers?

And: Must discussions of the neglect or perceived neglect of a great writer tend always toward the axis of: *He brought it upon himself / Without neglect he would not have been a great writer*? The language available to ask these questions seems to pull without fail toward one of those poles—and it is worth noting that Sorrentino himself was a master of this same whinging rhetoric. In any case, Sorrentino certainly *wrote* his own neglect in a way few other writers have dared. He understood it, even encouraged it—not so much in "real life" (I know nothing about Sorrentino in "real life") but by so lovingly constructing a rhetorical universe, in his fiction and elsewhere, where art—real art, his art, the art of his chosen peers and predecessors, for which "the audience...is miniscule and numerically constant"[38]—is extraneous to the world, and can only exist in the shadow of the soul-denying pap branded "art" in its place...with the genuine article therefore held in contempt for not itself being soul-denying pap.

[34] McPheron, *Gilbert Sorrentino*, 135–191.
[35] McPheron, *Gilbert Sorrentino*, 210.
[36] McPheron, *Gilbert Sorrentino*, 195–217.
[37] Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 343.
[38] Sorrentino, "Bach."

What is more interesting than debating whether GS's notion of the world's relationship to art has any basis in reality—clearly it does, and then occasionally does not—is noting quite how fundamental was Sorrentino's pessimism, and how this has, perhaps, colored his reception. He wrote against the neglect of art, toward the neglect of art. Where someone like William H. Gass (four years older than GS) as tirelessly and ferociously advocates the same basic, formalist agenda as Sorrentino—art is useless, and the only function of the artist is to make art; to comment, as an artist, on anything other than this "making" is to court disaster—he does so in what is, by contrast, a wholly encouraging, loving, sensual mode:

> [N]ot the language of love, but the love of language, not matter, but meaning, not what the tongue touches, but what it forms, not lips and nipples, but nouns and verbs.[39]

And yet, Sorrentino's review of the above-quoted book ends with the following statement:

> *On Being Blue* celebrates both language and that which it represents and carefully draws our attention to that difficult middle ground on which the writer finds himself in lifelong struggle to join the two without sullying or smearing the clarities of either.[40]

And in Sorrentino's own *On Being Blue*—if I may call it that—*Splendide-Hôtel*, likewise a plotless paean to the word, we find:

> The false poet has written a false novel, the language further corrupted. This rubbish will sour and destroy the world.
> [...]
> The language [the audience] employs to make these demands is dead, a smell of putrefaction hangs over it.
> [...]
> There is no politics but the manipulation of power through language. Through the latter's constant debasement.
> [...]
> His language is that of instruction booklets on the installation of air conditioners. In his more elegantly turned phrases, one hears the echoes of commercials.[41]

Language, again, is the enemy. To a not-irrelevant degree, that makes *us*, the readers, the enemy as well. Sorrentino asks us to be as ruthless as he. As ruthless as art.

[39] William H. Gass. *On Being Blue*. (Boston: David R. Godine, 1976) 11.
[40] Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 192.
[41] Gilbert Sorrentino, *Splendide-Hôtel* (1973; New York: New Directions; Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1984, 2001) 9; 10; 17; 47.

IS THERE A LITTLE OF THE SCENT OF A BULLYING BOYS' CLUB TO ALL THIS?
Perhaps.

SHOULD ALL ASPIRING WRITERS NONETHELESS READ THE FIRST TWO PAGES, AT LEAST, OF IMAGINATIVE QUALITIES OF ACTUAL THINGS?
Oh yes.

THAT OBITUARY
The *New York Times* obituary of Sorrentino[42] seems at first glance emblematic of his reception during his lifetime. It is a petty and ill-informed piece of work, a hatchet-job in the noblest tradition—inasmuch as the unlettered reader will see in it not an attack, but a generous tip of officialdom's hat to a fusty, unimportant writer whose passing need not warrant so much as a sniffle. The last laugh in the obit, worth quoting in full, is given to a *Financial Times* review written twenty-two years before GS's passing (did the clipping happen to be at hand? perhaps already tacked to a nearby bulletin board? goodness knows no one had reviewed the guy since, right?):

> Martin Seymour-Smith, writing in the *Financial Times* in 1984, wrote that Mr. Sorrentino had "attracted extravagant praise from a few but no notice from most critics or readers. This suggests that he might well be a writer of very high quality. But in my view he is not."

John O'Brien, Director of Dalkey Archive Press, commented later in *Golden Handcuffs Review*: "What kind of obit is this? 'Here's a writer nobody read and here's a critic saying he wasn't worth reading.' As Gil would have said, 'Sweet bleeding Jesus.'"[43]

And yet, the obituary is such an impressive work of focused and directed indifference that now, years later, it has been suggested that the piece was a plant: that GS himself, or some other member of the little "deviant" horde of Sorrentinophiles, was trying, here, to be certain that death would not elicit any of the vacuous revisions we often see in postmortem appraisal. Where, exactly, would praise get us, this late in the day? "A decent courtesy is more than sufficient." It would not be proper praise, but pity. Let us be consistent, if nothing else. Seen in this light, the piece fits squarely in the Sorrentino oeuvre. What else could it be but parody? A mincing and mealy-mouthed and rather funny

[42] Anthony Ramirez, "Gilbert Sorrentino, Novelist and Professor, Dies at 77," *New York Times* 22 May 2006: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/22/nyregion/22sorrentino.html.
[43] Quoted in Douglas Messerli, "The Shape of the Gesture: Three Pieces on Gilbert Sorrentino," *Golden Handcuffs Review* 1.8 (2007): 299.

expression of the way art, or let us say literature, has a way of turning us "foul and greedy and mean,"[44] whatever our ambitions toward—what?

THE "LAST BOOK" AS GENRE

At the end of his life, the story goes, laid up in a hospital bed, the filmmaker Stan Brakhage, waiting to die, composed his last short by scratching away the emulsion from a length of raw stock, one frame at a time, with his fingernails.[45] Seeing this film, *Chinese Series*, if we had not heard the above, would still—as with any last or posthumously published work—be, for an adherent, a fan, a moving experience. Even for Brakhage, by no means a neglected artist, staying alive and producing more work was the best, perhaps only response to a commercial establishment that considered him irrelevant (except, perhaps, when a neat trick might be stolen). Work does not convince. Occasionally, example does.

Sorrentino's last novel, we're told, was written under similar circumstances. His son, Christopher Sorrentino, tells us that GS continued working as his health failed, fully aware, at the end, that this project would be his last.[46]

The chapters or vignettes in *Abyss* are finely composed, on a par with Sorrentino's earlier work. They belie the desperate circumstances of their composition. But as with *Chinese Series*, we "devoted sons and other deviants" are inevitably primed by anecdotal evidence to read into Sorrentino's fifty flint-strike vignettes all the exhaustion and effort of a man fighting to "get it down" as his body leaves him, as it were, in the lurch. The overarching narrative of *Abyss* can only be one of decline: the opening half is strong and concise, "healthy"; it persuades us to feel that this slim final work will have to be counted as a late masterpiece, as tight and mean and ineffable as anything we've ever had from GS. The second half, however, becomes more diffuse. The vignettes become longer, less focused: the book evolving, as it progresses, from terse descriptions of disappointment, into its embodiment.

Of course, it is impossible to say whether the sections of the book are presented in the order of their composition—but the temptation to read the book that way is irresistible. *Abyss* seems to tell us there simply wasn't enough time: the narrative, such as it is, moves from perfect control to dissipation. It's this that makes *Abyss* the saddest, the least hopeful of Sorrentino's works. Certainly there's humor here—Sorrentino with ashes in his mouth is still funnier than a gaggle of

[44] Sorrentino, *Pack of Lies*, 111.

[45] Fred Camper tells us, "The material that he scratched on black film was first printed with each frame repeated twice, and then printed with each frame repeated only once," as per Brakhage's instructions: http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/BrakhageS.html#Chinese.

[46] In the aforementioned preface to Sorrentino, *Abyss*.

"comic novelists"—but there is also a distance, a resignation that feels new. *Abyss*'s quiet, bitter rage at the insufficiency of life, of art, and of our reactions to life and art, is no longer the same old contempt for "the fake." Yes, there are failures and phonies here, artists as ever singled out for their pettiness and vacuity, but now it seems—as the title, from Henry James, indicates—that they never really had a chance.[47] Given the opportunity, we're told, these homunculi (mostly nameless, mostly old, mostly alone) would make the same mistakes, waste the same time, hurt the same people, produce the same shit—there isn't a way out for the human animal; though one can, with precision, delineate how far short we've fallen of our ideals. This book has no ending: only a death. The final fillip, the "kicker," the resolution that's missing must be located out here in the phenomenal world: there is no more Sorrentino, and there will be no more Sorrentino novels. The writer has finally been subsumed into the frustration and regret of his characters. Christopher Sorrentino's preface makes the book into a fractal: here are more portraits of the failed, and each a miniature of the novel—and this is perhaps what *makes* it a novel—as a whole.

Might we say that *Abyss* is a success as a last novel, even if it might fail as a late masterpiece? Is the genre of "last novels" another which we might say that Sorrentino mastered, as he did the languages of so many other debased forms? Here, whatever our perspective, we may find his radical, aesthetic pessimism collapse into its own bile—and subside.

MODELS

Inasmuch as there could be said to be such a thing as Sorrentino scholarship, something that has not been often enough discussed (but what is "often enough?"), or taken as a point of entry into his oeuvre—though he left the door, as they say, wide open—is GS's use of sources both outside and within his own fiction as structural models. In *Something Said*, the selected nonfiction, we find a brief 1982 review of Jules Renard's *Poil de Carotte*, that "reserved and unsentimental work about an unhappy boy…in an unhappy provincial family…" The boy, Poil de Carrote himself—"Carrot Top"—"is a classic victim"; his mother, Madame Lepic's, "assault on him is relentless… She wars on [the boy] as she would an adult." *Poil de Carrote* has "49 brief sections and a splintered though conventional chronology. Renard has no interest in causality…"[48] It is no great discovery that *Red the Fiend* is Sorrentino's "version" of Renard's novel, right down to the number of chapters; it *is* however fascinating—here and elsewhere in *Something Said*—to see just

[47] Sorrentino said much the same thing of Selby's characters in his "The Art of Hubert Selby."
[48] Sorrentino, *Something Said*, 295–96.

how publicly GS had made clear his interest in the tools Renard left for him.

An obvious topic: Shakespeare and Sorrentino. *The Sky Changes*, still the best American marriage manual, gets its title from *As You Like It* (4.I): "Men are April when they woo, December when they wed: Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives." "Lady the Brach," the first chapter of *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*, takes its title from *Lear* (1.IV). A "brach" is a hunting bitch.

Again obvious: Flann O'Brien. Raymond Roussel. Rimbaud. Williams.

Less obvious: Sorrentinto and Pinget. The *Pack of Lies* trilogy is in many ways a response to *The Inquisitory*. There is the construction of a novel out of an interrogation, in *Odd Number*, but also the use of an established cast of characters throughout the trilogy, many of them originating in other of Sorrentino's novels (and, in fact, in the novels of Nabokov and Flann O'Brien, from which Sorrentino pilfered characters to populate his own universe—and, just as much, to prove a point). Pinget's imaginary town of Agapa seems here to have been dug up and replanted in the U.S., and its sister town of Fantoine gets mention as well—and, indeed, they occasionally combine to make "Gapoine" or "Fagapa." (Do Anglophones still read Pinget?)

Now, wholly obscure: The use of a 1598 catalog of stage properties for the Rose Theatre, London, as an ordering element and inspiration for the chapters of *Rose Theatre*, the middle book in the *Pack of Lies* trilogy. (We have McPheron to thank for revealing this otherwise completely inscrutable reference.[49])

And then: the echoes and doubles within Sorrentino's oeuvre. *The Sky Changes* and *Blue Pastoral.* Grim *Steelwork* and fanciful *Crystal Vision*. The names and scenarios. The eternal return.

GEOGRAPHY & AUTHENTICITY II (AN ANECDOTE)

> Having a distinguished appointment to make, and with the whole English-speaking world to hunt in, [the English Department] came up with a coterie writer of minimum distinction[50]

said pouting Wallace Stegner when Sorrentino was asked out to Stanford in 1982, where GS then taught for fifteen years. This prompted Stegner's threatening to remove his name from the University's famous fellowship and eventually his decision to peddle his papers to Utah instead. ("Any scholar who has to go to Salt Lake to study Stegner will get a bonus by being lured into good country," he wrote three years

[49] McPheron, *Gilbert Sorrentino*, 66.

[50] Wallace Stegner, *The Selected Letters of Wallace Stegner*, ed. Page Stegner (Berkley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2007) 319.

later.[51]) The pages of Philip L. Fradkin's *Wallace Stegner and the American West* devoted to l'affair Sorrentino are another confirmation that GS's powers were so great, or his cabal of admirers so efficient, or reality so malleable to our master stylists, that again we find life, or our records of it, conforming precisely to the meanness of Sorrentino's fiction. In *Mulligan Stew*, published three years before the Stanford tussle, we find Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* referred to as "a coterie novel,"[52] and poor Antony Lamont—himself hired out of *At Swim*'s hardy cast to serve, in *Mulligan* and elsewhere, as yet another ringer in the ranks of writerly also-ran fouling the New York air—laments, as is his wont, that he is doomed to "Obscurity. Not to be even a 'coterie' writer."[53]

Fradkin reports that "Sorrentino taught—'lackadaisically' said one of his colleagues"—no doubt extensive interviews were conducted within the department—"and then returned to New York City. Sorrentino...saw himself as a New Yorker's New Yorker..."[54]

A footnote in Stegner's letters helpfully informs us that GS was "precisely the kind of avant-garde, postmodern, metafictionalist Stegner could not abide."[55]

WORDLESSNESS

Sincerity too is a rhetorical strategy, Mr. Stegner. It is incredible that writers still need to be reminded of this. Wise Hugh Kenner reported, in tracing Hemmingway's decent into self-parody, that "The quest of the one true sentence leads to wordlessness."[56] Kenner too reminds us, on the subject of William Carlos Williams, whose own undervalued fiction is never far from Sorrentino's work, that Williams's poem "The Poem," and his writing generally, "[is] too quirky and tricky for orality, but one of its qualifications for anatomizing its theme is that it knows what a voice sounds like."[57] This is certainly true of Sorrentino as well.

One thing that is consistent through every one of GS's novels, a unity despite the changes of tone and form, is the edge, the bite, the bitterness—*that voice*. "[I]n terms of fiction all voices are invented voices,"[58] he tells us, and the voice he invented, the one that recurs most, whether or not it bears any relation to Sorrentino's "real" voice, takes all the assumptions of fiction—and language—and therefore

[51] Stegner, *Letters*, 66.
[52] Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew*, 41.
[53] Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew*, 248.
[54] Philip L. Fradkin, *Wallace Stegner and the American West* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2008, 2009) 283.
[55] Stegner, *Letters*, 319
[56] Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World* (New York: Knopf, 1975) 155.
[57] Kenner, *A Homemade World*, 86.
[58] John O'Brien, "An Interview with Gilbert Sorrentino," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 1.1 (1981). Online at http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/interviews/show/26.

living—and leaves them without a patch of skin intact. It leaves us, indeed, with very little.

It may be, then, that Sorrentino does not open ways for writing, but closes them. I don't mean by this anything so unhelpful as to imply that one of our greatest authors is "merely a dead end"—just the sort of critical commonplace Sorrentino would disdain, and correctly—but simply that his work may not be generative, as his own idols/models/favourites's were. Joyce, Flann O'Brien, Williams—they are beginnings, and we know this if for no other reason than that Sorrentino built upon what they began. But GS himself came to us, like Diogenes, to debase the currency. Is there any way to be "honest" enough for Sorrentino, in this business where honesty can rightly be dismissed as another way to lie?

Sorrentino is certainly one of our funniest writers—another difficult claim to verify—but there is something misleading in pointing readers firstly toward an appreciation of his humour. It is easy enough, indeed impossible to avoid, the apprehension of Beckett's work, for instance—also damn funny—or indeed Blanchot's—likewise hilarious (is this provocative?)—as being a "writing toward silence," aiming itself at the limits of what language, and its literary subset, can accomplish. No similar claim adheres to the fiction of verbose, "earthy," chameleonic Sorrentino, yet this is the secret vein beneath the seeming carnival of his fiction. Susan Howe has said that most literary criticism is based on calculations of interest.[59] Sorrentino's fiction is bleak, is unpopular, perhaps because it is "high" literature with no interest in romanticizing the literary. Quite the opposite. It is—another priceless means of dismissing an author—"writing for writers" that nonetheless asks that those writers hold themselves entirely accountable for what they write and how they write it. This is not easy, and it is not in one's interests to admit this.

I once heard it said in a writing workshop that characters like Emily Grimes in Richard Yates's *Easter Parade* were portraits of the writer without writing: the misery, the stupidity, the drudgery, all drawn from the author's imagining his life "if he didn't have art." And, whatever the merits of this comment, it may well be that the lure of narrative, for many writers, realist or non, is very much the lure of this same ennobling fiction: that life, such as it is, goes down better in words. But what if, Sorrentino asks us, this is just the quicker way to hell?

Sorrentino's writing, for all its sensuality, is literature that loves literature, but is not broadly *in favour* of literature, as Gass's is. No: The sentences we write have already been written. Fiction has its origins in the cliché, so is implicated in the death of sense and feeling. In the end, the hip and the square, the con and the mark, turn out to be in

[59] Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (1985; Berkeley, CA: New York: North Atlantic Books; New York: New Directions, 2007) 13.

cahoots—they all conspire to break, however temporarily, the embargo of the ersatz. How often do they succeed? More to the point: How often do they like to be reminded of their failure?

Louis Armand

"You do not know my history & will not write it..."

The author of three books during his short lifetime, Lukáš Tomin was something of a René Crevel of Prague's nascent post-Revolution scene in the early nineties. Born in 1966, Tomin was the eldest son of two of the city's most prominent intellectuals—Julius Tomin, a philosopher heavily involved in the underground university, and Zdena Tomin(ová), writer and spokesperson for Charter 77.[1] As part of the communist regime's persecution of dissident families (considered "enemies of the state"), Tomin was deprived of access to secondary education at the age of 15. As a result, he immersed himself in the unofficial culture of the 1970s, attending underground seminars and publishing his earliest writings in *samizdat*.

On the 7th of May, 1979, Tomin's mother was brutally attacked in the doorway of the family's apartment building at 4 Keramická street, by a suspected agent of state security (StB, Státní bezpečnost). As Barbara Day recounts: "Passers-by rescued her, but not before she had been severely beaten. An ambulance was called and she was hospitalized with concussion. The following day Zdena issued a statement connecting the attack with her constant surveillance by the secret police."[2] Several months later, Tomin's father was briefly incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital at Dolní Beřkovice. The threat of further incarceration remained. Meanwhile Tomin himself was placed under surveillance by the *estebáci* (StB)[3] and assigned the codename *Strojník-2* (Machinist-2).[4]

[1] "Charter 77" was published on 6 January 1977, criticizing the Czechoslovak communist government for failing to implement human rights provisions in the country's constitution and in a number of international agreements to which Czechoslovakia was party. It provided the foundation for a broad opposition movement, in part transformed after the Velvet Revolution into the Civic Forum, which provided Czechoslovakia's first post-communist government under the presidency of Václav Havel.

[2] Barbara Day, *The Velvet Philosophers* (London: The Claridge Press, 1999) 40.

[3] Jarosla Spurný, "Trápili je i jejich děti," *CS Magazín* (May, 2004).

[4] Anna Meclová, "Bytové semináře pod dohledem Státní bezpečnosti: Sledování skupiny filozofů v období normalizace," *Paměť a dějiny* 02 (2009): 88.

On the 22nd of October a series of show trials began in Prague—the largest since the 1950s—of members of VONS (the Committee for the Protection of the Unjustly Persecuted—organised to investigate unfounded accusations by the state, against ordinary citizens, of "criminal subversion of the republic in collusion with foreign agents") including Václav Benda, a close friend of the Tomins. After a string of "preventative detentions" and police raids on their apartment, the Tomins finally chose—with strong encouragement from the Czechoslovak government—to emigrate on a five-year visa.[5] On the 1st of August, 1980—in the midst of the worst period of *normalizace*—the family, accompanied by British philosopher Kathy Wilkes, drove by car to the German border and from there, via Switzerland, to Paris and London. Nine months later they received notice that their citizenship had been revoked.

While his father taught Plato at Balliol College, Oxford (ultimately becoming a controversial and at times embarrassing figure within the university), Tomin studied at St Edward's School, then at Oxford and the University of London, before decamping to Paris in 1985 where he completed work on *The Doll* in 1987. For the next several years he divided his time between Paris, Montreal and London, writing prose fiction and (increasingly) stage drama. In 1986, Tomin's mother achieved notice with the publication of her novel *Stalin's Shoes*, followed a year later with *The Coasts of Bohemia*. Tomin himself published a series of poems in the London *Literary Review* and an article on the souring of the Velvet Revolution in the *New Statesman* ("American businessmen offer magic dollars for a bit of eastern promise").[6] After his return to Prague in 1991, he became a regular contributor to *Literarní Noviny*, *Host* and *The Prague Post*.

But Tomin soon found himself in a situation familiar to many former émigrés and their families, accentuated in his case by the decision to write primarily in English. Overlooked by the Czech literary establishment and ignored by publishers in the UK and the US, Tomin naturally gravitated to the circle around *Iniciály*—a newly-established journal devoted to publishing writers under thirty (founded by Ewald Murrer and Jakub Rosen)—and to the international scene then taking form in Prague.

In 1991, Howard Sidenberg—along with artist Kip Bauersfeld and translator Kevin Blahut—established Twisted Spoon Press, with the specific intention of publishing Tomin's first novel, *The Doll*, composed

[5] "Under the direction of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the heads of the secret police made a list of people opposing the régime, especially people who signed Charter 77, almost 80 people who they wanted to force out of the country. All steps of the operation [known as the Asanace campaign] were coordinated by regional units of the Czechoslovak secret police." Pavel Zacek, a specialist from Prague's Institute for Contemporary History, in conversation with Jan Velinger for Radio Praha / Český Rozhlas, 31 September, 2004.

[6] Lukáš Tomin, "Utopia goes to market," *New Statesman*, 8 November, 1990: 11.

from 1985 to 1987 during the author's peregrinations between Rome, London and Paris. *The Doll* duly appeared in 1992, to some notable acclaim. Fay Weldon described the novel as

> A visionary work, by an extraordinary and important young writer. As cultures and languages mix and merge, Tomin meets the consequent literary challenge head on, and actually makes this reader hopeful about the future of the novel.[7]

The reviewer for *Prognosis*—a Prague English-language newspaper that ran from 1990 to 1995—wrote:

> *The Doll* is a sensuous and melodious flow of words that Tomin has mercilessly dragged out of his subconscious, offering the reader a bizarre, uncensored current of his thoughts, pure and true. The result is somewhere between prose and poetry.[8]

Sidenberg went on to publish Tomin's remaining two novels—*Ashtrays*, held by some to be Tomin's masterpiece, in 1993 (with a re-edition in 1995)—and *Kye*, posthumously in 1997 (like *The Doll*, both had been completed before Tomin's return to Czechoslovakia). *Ashtrays*, illustrated by Alf van der Plank, was described by *The Prague Post* as "a linguistic *tour de force*"[9] (an excerpt from the book also appeared in the inaugural issue of the English-language journal *Trafika* that Autumn). Reviewing *Kye*, four years later, Anthony Tognazzini wrote of Tomin as "a fine formalist whose narrative experiments are bold and intriguing."[10] An unfinished fragment, "Kye Too," was published in the literary broadsheet *Semtext* in 2000, and reprinted in the *Prague Literary Review* in May 2004.

Without ever having received the recognition his work warranted, and which his early reviewers suggested was immanent, Tomin committed suicide in 1995 at the age of 32. His body was discovered at the foot of a cliff in the Šárka valley; a private memorial service was held at the church of Saint Antonin on Strossmeyerovo Náměstí.[11] Acknowledgement of Tomin's importance for Prague's post-'89 renaissance (the reinstatement of the city as one of the chief European centres of modernism and the avant-garde)[12] has had to wait more than a decade. In an interview for *Host* magazine in November 2009, Czech poet Vladimira Čerepková described Tomin—in one of the very few

[7] Lukáš Tomin, *The Doll* (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 1992)—publisher's blurb.
[8] Tina Pohlman, review of *The Doll*, *Prognosis*, 5-18 March, 1993: 7B.
[9] Michael Halstead, "Book Review: Ashtrays," *The Prague Post*, 23 March, 1994.
[10] Anthony Tognazzini, "Tomin's Final Novel," *The Prague Post*, 26 November, 1997.
[11] Day, *The Velvet Philosophers*, 69.
[12] Cf. Antonín J. Liehm, "Some Observations on Czech Culture and Politics in the 1960s," *Czech Literature Since 1956: A Symposium*, eds. William Harkins and Paul Trensky (New York: Bohemica, 1980) 134.

recent public pronouncements about his work—as one of the crucial figures to have "emerged" after the Velvet Revolution.[13] At the time of writing, however, none of Tomin's novels has yet appeared in Czech (although translations of both *The Doll* and *Ashtrays* have existed in typescript since the early and mid- nineties), while his dramatic and poetical works remain largely unpublished in either language.

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In a radio interview in 2005, Tomin's younger brother Marek spoke of the experience of growing up in Czechoslovakia during the period of *normalizace* (a situation most explicitly dealt with in Tomin's last, uncompleted, prose work "Kye Too"):

> The thing about the 70s as compared to the 50s, one didn't see the same kind of crimes, they can't be compared. I mean, then, it was Stalinism: people were disappearing. People were being executed. People were being sent to work camps, to uranium mines. These are things that weren't happening in the 70s. But, we didn't "know." Quite simply, Charter [77] never knew what the next step was going to be. The father of my best friends was Vaclav Benda, and I remember when he was put on trial with several others from the Committee for the Protection of the Unjustly Persecuted [VONS], and he was given five years.
>
> My brother and I, we weren't sure our parents weren't going to be arrested the next day. We had several amazing plans of course because we messed around as kids and we had a "plan" for escaping from the country(!) and we said if our parents get arrested we won't allow ourselves to be taken to a children's home, we'll escape and roam the world for the rest of our lives, away from communism! So, the atmosphere was such: at times it was very sinister.[14]

Biography aside, such "plans" for escape are a recurring theme in Tomin's work. In *The Doll*, we encounter a loosely plotted story about two "children"—Cathy and Thomas—who travel to Spain to erect a monumental "doll"—a symbol of "hope, desire, aspiration"[15] which diminishes as the novel progresses and as the two protagonists suddenly discover themselves transformed (through intimate revelation or violation) into "adults," surrounded by social conventions worthy only of contempt.

> When five Cathy and Thomas set out for Spain to make a doll. In the Pyranees, the wolves protected them, escorting them down to Pamplona. There, afraid of publicity, they turned back. Alone now, the children walked on, collecting every bit of cloth they found on the way. Most of it

[13] Interview with Tereza Reidlbauchová, *Host* 9 (2009).
[14] Marek Tomin interviewed by Jan Velinger for Radio Praha/Český Rozhlas, 11 January 2005.
[15] Pohlman, review of *The Doll*, 7B.

> was later discarded. It was to be a monumental work, the Doll. Back in Berlin they thought of putting it up on a hill. In Aragon, perhaps.[16]

Like the characters of Bataille, these children and their various doppelgängers throughout *The Doll* (and later works) are steeped in the perversity of "innocence"—a concept all too easily mystified in a world stripped of political vision. Wandering across Europe, Cathy and Thomas's quest to build the "doll" gives way to self-flagellation, confusion and dissipation, overseen by an angry childlike prophet ("ISABHUDALI") dressed "in a huge yellow translucent shirt"[17] (incidentally the colour of *The Doll*'s cover: we suspect, of course, that the one is the effigy of the other; it is the text, in fact, which is the "doll").

A martyrised "allegory" of itself, *The Doll* is like an unredeemed child's fantasia, replete with its Maldoror-esque gigantism, its symbolic parricides, its incest, its deranged ecstasies, its polymorph obscenity, its sublime and apocalyptic id-like irrationality. Tina Pohlman, reviewing for *Prognosis*, was led to suppose:

> Had Sigmund Freud written a novel to portray his vision of unresolved developmental conflicts and unharnessed ids and libidos, it probably would have been something like Lukáš Tomin's first novel *The Doll*...an entrancing, perverse journey into an erotic surreal world...[18]

What Tomin began in *The Doll*, however, was more than simply a Freudian allegory about escape from, e.g., political "normalisation." Ever affected by the paternal insistence that "a philosophy which hides isn't worth its name," Tomin's early writing is partly an examination about the secret life of what we call "ethics," and of a literature whose open avowal of humanism remains closed in the disavowals, concealments, metaphors of *allegorical* form—a form most often associated with "dissident" writing. What appears in *The Doll* to be simple allegory, therefore—even of "a belief in the futility of any attempt to find a worthwhile goal" (as one critic has it)—becomes the foundation of a formal *critique* of allegory and of that culture of moral instruction that, following the end of communism, failed to amount to a transformative social force. In the *New Statesman*, Tomin clearly expressed his view that the Velvet Revolution had failed in this regard:

> There has been so much talk—most recently of Charter 77—of moral politics, firm stands, unconditional defence of human rights of people everywhere. So it is curious how quickly yesterday's fearless defenders of the underdog turn into gutless undersecretaries of the powerful.[19]

[16] Tomin, *The Doll*, 7.
[17] Tomin, *The Doll*, 55.
[18] Pohlman, review of *The Doll*, 7B.
[19] Tomin, "Utopia goes to market," 11.

In certain respects, the *form* of *The Doll* devolves from this stance. Where allegory simplifies into archetypes and instructs by indirection, *The Doll* complexifies: by a "sharp rhetorical gesture"[20] it generates narratives—bifurcates—multiplies—it places a question mark over the very notion of *instruction*. Rather, it demands *thinking*. It is the perversion *of* allegory. If it is comparable to the novels of Breton and Pinget, it is perhaps because *The Doll* counters the didactic entropy of a *literature* that has been reduced to merely describing its own circumstances.

It is out of this critique of the allegorical mode that arises Tomin's technique of "extreme realism" (as distinct from a *surrealism*). Critics have always been quick to notice the formal aspects of Tomin's work, for the simple reason that they are often conspicuous. Reviewing for *Rain Taxi*, David Auerbach observed, for example: "Tomin leaves his characters half-drawn...forcing the reader to puzzle out the connections and distinctions between them. His drastic switches of style abandon cumulative effects for a series of instants, sometimes with heavily compressed plotting or circular passages of dialogue..."[21] We are—to borrow phrases from Tom Clark (on the writing of Kit Robinson)—"left hanging by his unfinished lines, our urge is to complete them for him, to meld non sequitur into non sequitur, creating a new kind of sense."[22]

But Tomin's non sequiturs are not part of a puzzle that ever resolves itself, or can be resolved, in the direction of an underlying moral (and one must include in this any "anti-moral"). Tomin's fragmentations might be described as "naturalistic," as an "extreme realism," because they exist within constellations that are constantly generative *because* bound to an underlying relativity. A relativity which is fundamental to the nature *not* of described reality, but of the *reality of description* (whether it be called objective or subjective hardly matters)—which is to say, of *language*. The two, of course, become interchangeable, and throughout each of Tomin's novels we encounter a preoccupation with the ways in which such realities are composed.

From the outset brutalism, simultaneity and montage play an essential role in Tomin's work, alongside a tempo or cadence which serves a structural as well as aesthetic function (Gregorian chant). The concretion of linguistic reality evokes, at times, comparison with the film philosophy of the French *nouvelle vague*. André Bazin's "ontology" of the cinematic image, for example.[23] Or Godard's "découpage." If we are able to speak meaningfully of Tomin's work as any kind of allegory, it would have to be (as it is in the later Godard) at the level of an "allegory

[20] Tomin, *The Doll*, 52.
[21] David Auerbach, review of *The Doll*, *Rain Taxi* (Spring 1999).
[22] Tom Clark, "Shimmering Nets," *The Poetry Beat: Reviewing the Eighties* (Ann arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1990) 14.
[23] André Bazin, "Ontologie de L'Image Photographique," *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* vol 1: Ontologie et langage (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1958).

of language"—the *congelation* of forms, of "images," "themes," "characters," and equally their dissolution—a surface kinetics of interpenetrating "figures," between what we might call a semiotic and a semantic order without ever allowing the two to merely *correspond*.

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Tomin's second novel, *Ashtrays*, is sometimes read as a product of the "literature of exile." Set in a type of psychogeographical Paris that becomes the topos of a drunken delirium, *Ashtrays* serves as an extended prologue, or *introit*, to Tomin's third novel, *Kye*—which in turn functions as a form of re-statement, *ad infinitum*, of an abortive gesture of completion (escape or return).

> Suffusion. Salò. Salpêtre. Sardonique. Sojourn. In this city of cold rails. In this labyrinth of worms. In this triangle of corpses.[24]

Tomin's exile-Paris calls to mind a passage from Stephen Rodefer's "Four Lectures," wherein he notes that "Language, which also binds together and extends, including as it isolates, is a city"—a city "which even before Baudelaire had been a ready-made collage or cut-up of history, constantly remaking itself—a work of art founded on an anthill."[25]

> Am I losing my balance in favour or against something? Or arbitrarily, like a wind imprisoned? Days and days of white paper sheets and no human face to kiss. Oh yes, cheeks and limbs in dreams, bodies arched in the fury of passion. The dog fed. Often it shits and pisses in the bathroom for lack of exercise. Then she beats it. I'm afraid to walk now, Hadimira, as I stand on a corner making you up. The passersby are kids playing ball. When I was a child I played ball. For the moment, the inclination of my body is to the left. I have to push my entire water-weight in the opposite direction to keep me from falling. The stones on this corner are friendly, and sway but little. Once I move, however, I shall lose them. The street, though narrow, is too wide to jump. The space between this wall and the one opposite is impossible to cross for the sheer strength of the leftward drive. I want to walk straight ahead into rue du Bourg-Tibourg, cross rue de Rivoli, pass Eglise St Gervais to my left and the Hôtel de Ville to my right, cross the Seine three times, walk up the Boulevard St Michel, and lie on a bench in the Jardin de Luxembourg… A screaming accordéoniste wishes us a Merry Christmas. Joyeaux Noël, putains de riches, Joyeaux Noël, putain de Chirac, Joyeaux Noël, putain de Monde…[26]

In *Kye* the setting shifts from Paris to London, framed by a type of retrospective awareness of a "back there"—an ambiguously fictive

[24] Lukáš Tomin, *Kye* (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 1997) 15.
[25] Stephen Rodefer, *Call it Thought* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008) 3.
[26] Lukáš Tomin, *Ashtrays* (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 1993) 37; 78.

"other place" we are invited to imagine as Prague before-the-fall ("guilt about Czechs about the Second World War and '68") from which the protagonist is exiled "for POLITICAL reasons."[27]

By the end, the protagonist/narrator of *Ashtrays*—Suma ("an underground poet, a friend of the powers of darkness, an enemy of sunrise")—discovers his doppelgänger in the figure of "I"—"a travelling salesman who hires his boats in unknown waters... Tenderly we merge."[28] Across the English Chanel, this chthonic boatman transforms into Kye ("I Kye. / Together I and Kye...")—penman-poet, Suma's double, like the swordsman Kai of the *Mabinogion*, "Kye of the underbelly region,"[29] Suma-mind Kye-body of bogus dualism...

> It is all as it should be, the cars and the fumes and no time. Plodding through bodies on their way to. On their no way. Kye is as he should be, headscarf or no, eyescarf for pirate, a cheek scar. Shoulders swept forward, sea-wide legs, prowling grin on face. Totally BALANCED. A dagger blue-tacked on belt, secure. Chest as broad and solid as the Wall of Hunger. Golem-like lightness.[30]

Preoccupied with *continuous instances* set in inverse relation to one another, the two books (*Kye* and *Ashtrays*) act out a *chiasmus*. Metaphors of turning and reversal abound—plugholes, ashtrays, diseased vaginas, symbols and systems of entropy; the bottom of a glass or an uncrossable ocean; the whole cosmos of sensory derangements. Suma, whose name is pregnant with philosophical allusion, is something between a defrocked Aquinas and a bar-stool Zarathustra, the agent of a negativized will-to-power ("=absence of will is it?") whose ongoing efforts at "transcendence" (martyrdom?) constantly bring him back to the point of starting out, of instigating his own failure, of becoming—as it were—Kye.

> Never has a poet's love gone further, behind closed doors. In spaces minute, in spaces large. Standing up, sitting down, lying down, on all fours. On the back, on the belly. Trapped. Hidden from the multitudes, I cover my face with shame. With my sticky, grey, jelly-like shame. Whereby I progress. Whereby I reach. Always, nearly always, I reach. In my trap in my freedom in my hut in my cell. In my virgin. Secular thoughts banished I contemplate, thy womb. In my virgin. In my brainstorm. In my deadness. In my hunger.[31]

Between each statement and re-statement we encounter a Baudelairean *espace de damnation*. If Prague is constantly absent from these novels as a proximate geographical setting, it is nevertheless omnipresent as a

[27] Tomin, *Kye*, 68; 12.
[28] Tomin, *Ashtrays*, 117.
[29] Tomin, *Kye*, 10.
[30] Tomin, *Kye*, 12.
[31] Tomin, *Kye*, 14.

trope (the *locus* of a chiasmus; the metaphorical sea, the mirror, between the image and its reflection). Prague, from *práh*, means "threshold." The odyssey of these dislocated geographies, though fragments of "sense" strewn about like the debris of some fallen higher world, returns us incessantly to a type of "anti-romance" by accumulation—one threshold piles up on another, "like invisible ghosts, forming congestions"—washing machines / Oxford dictionaries / lipsticks / empty paper / crude awakenings / summer afternoons[32]—a thwarted prodigality whose irrational/forensic objectivism counterpoints a metaphysics by *(in)fractions*.

> This, he thinks, is the destiny of someone crouched in a box.
> In a small dark space.
> With no holes to look through out.
> With not a sweeping gesture to go by.
> With rabbit-like persistence in hide-outs.
> Like glued to the inside of a tambourine.
> Without the deep echo of a bass drum.
> With only the rattle of metal and the tin sound of the skin.
> Unlike the baroque expansion he will know later. Unlike the arching of backs in ecstasies of passion. Unlike the flowing of juices the screaming of pain the howling of pleasure the swimming the running the voluptuous resting. Unlike the cutting of wood with great sweeping movements, unlike the axe bringing down the sun.[33]

We are always somehow on the verge of something "baroque" that never quite materialises in any fully stable form—always recoiling from, sidestepping or bluffing the demon of analogy. "Like that postcard you'd shown me" / "like a dried-up skeleton afloating on the river of her dreams" / "like a fossil" / "like charcoal" / "like a cockroach in an old boot" / "like a madman in a barn" / "like a map of a large country impossible to visit..."[34] Situations condition but do not determine: one thing does not *lead* to another; everything is rather *détourned*. Yet this "irresolvable" dialectic exists only as long as we believe it does—as long as we insist that writing must, in a sense, be *like* something.

*

It is perhaps for these reasons that—almost unique in a literary culture dominated by surrealism, structuralism, phenomenology and so-called "magic realism"—Tomin's writing represents a species of provocation. In the 1990s there is no doubt that this work advertised its "foreignness." Both minimalist and excessive, austere and carnivalesque, formalistic and formless, *The Doll*, *Ashtrays* and *Kye* evoke apparently contradictory

[32] Tomin, *Ashtrays*, 113
[33] Tomin, *Kye*, 28.
[34] Tomin, *Kye*, 27.

comparisons to both Rabelais and Beckett.[35] Tomin at times claimed that he was "above all interested in 'silence,'"[36] a *compositional* term which could just as easily describe a refusal to elaborate as the gravity of a philosophical stance—let alone of an existential one.

Certain critics, still impatient with a "literature" that refuses to disclose itself, have interpreted this *silence* as indicative of emptiness at the core of so much sound and fury—something which has doubtless contributed to a more general *silence* among Prague's literary historians (literary historians of the English-speaking world have, of course, tended to be interested only in the exotica of translation when interested at all in European writers; of the poignancy of "witness" c1989—"the lyricism," as Tomin says, "of wet slime"[37]).

In the context of post-Revolution literary nationalism, Tomin's writing carries no instructive "message"—it remains alien, unassimilated and ostensibly unassimilable. Against the poetics of tribal evocation, Tomin's is a poetics of *dispossession*—above all of the dispossession of linguistic certitudes *by means of* the ideological machinations with which they are imbued—"where the inevitable is a succession of evitables."[38] Towards the end of his life, Tomin appears to have increasingly examined—and untimately to have succumbed to—the situation of what Iain Sinclair has term the "reforgotten."[39]

In the fragmentary "sequel" to *Kye*—a short, incomplete, text entitled "Kye Too"—Tomin directly addressed the topic of his childhood experiences of post-1968 (after his family had returned to Czechoslovakia from a one-year stay in Hawaii, where Julias Tomin lectured on Aristotle and Plato at the university, subsequently to be branded an "imperialist agent") and the early days of *normalizace*.

> He left America in the tree, peeled her off snakelike, left her there to rot. He practised remembering his Czech and forgetting his English. He practised his accent, hardened it, udded the a's and egged the e's. Rolled the r's like an opera singer, shortened everything, flattened everything. Changed his skin.
>
> Became a Pioneer. Red scarf round neck and Sonia in heart. Learned Russian. Was good at it. Began to charm comrade deputy directress. Comrade deputy directress was also the Russian teacher. At least as far as I could tell. Then. He spoke to her in Russian to charm her. To charm her to charm her daughter. It worked. Until. Until father the philosopher was proclaimed an imperialist agent and went to work at the turbines. Aristotle and Plato were imperialist agents. Father was an imperialist agent, too. Then Sonia stopped talking to him stopped seeing him stopped listening to his songs.

[35] Or why not make the comparison a more contemporary one—for example, to another former "Prague writer," Joshua Cohen, and to the Polish-Australian émigré Ania Walwicz?

[36] Qtd in Louis Charbonneau, review of *Ashtrays*, *Prognosis* 4-17 February, 1994: 2B.

[37] Tomin, *Kye*, 22.

[38] Tomin, *Kye*, 27.

[39] Iain Sinclair, *Lights out for the Teritory* (London: Penguin, 1997) 24.

> Hey, Sonia, but I am a Red Pioneer, like you are. I wear a red scarf and I know Russian and I stand guard by the monuments to our glorious dead.
>
> Yeah, but your father is an imperialist agent.
>
> But Sonia.
>
> Mummy says so. And mummy knows. And mummy says we oughtn't see each other any more. See?
>
> Father, why are you an imperialist agent? I mean I am a Red Pioneer, I wear a red scarf and a badge, see? Why do you work at the turbines, dad? Why do you read Aristotle and Plato when you work at the turbines, dad? Don't hit me, dad. Are you a bad man, dad? I mean why do you have all those books in English and Greek and Latin, dad? Comrade deputy directress says that. And Sonia. Sonia is her daughter. I like Sonia very much. Don't hit me. Why do you work at the turbines, dad? Why did we go to America? Where are you going, dad, say something, hit me. Dad.[40]

Inevitably parallels are implied between post-'68 and post-89, centering on Tomin's alien linguistic status.

> Kye is a retard, Christian said to Samuel, he can't even speak Czech. This was when the tanks had ceased to be amusing. He's an American retard and a hippy. This was when long hair had to be cut. This was when long hair became imperialist ...[41]

Within the chaos that was the post-Revolution publishing scene in Prague, Tomin (in a surreal, if only partial, analogy to his father's previous situation as a philosopher) indeed came to occupy a type of zone of silence, at least as far as the literary establishment was concerned. It was a zone to which his own writing was in a sense "native," and yet from which he himself longed "to be rescued." A silence that fed his increasing suspicion that writing itself might be rendered mute, that for all the politics of dissidence and traditions of literary and linguistic deviancy, his mother tongue had come to perform upon him yet another programme of *normalization*.[42]

During the four years following Tomin's return to Prague, he was unable to complete any further novels, descending by stages into a writerly paralysis coupled with alcoholism. We may only speculate about the extent to which Tomin foretold the silence to come.

> With an ending.
> Try to be homeward try to be sane.
> In the river.

[40] Lukáš Tomin, "Kye Too," *The Return of Král Majáles: Prague's International Literary Renaissance 1990-2010 An Anthology*, ed. Louis Armand (Prague: Charles University, 2010) 809.

[41] Tomin, "Kye Too," 807.

[42] See Richard Burton, *Prague: A Cultural and Literary History* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2003) 191-2. Burton includes Tomin alongside Stanislav Neumann, Jan Alda, Vladimír Burda and Jiří Pištora in his list of "normalization"-era intellectuals known to have committed suicide, however he provides no substantive causality between the one and the other.

Of your choosing.
Secure the wranglings of madmen.
On the boat.
To a nowhere.[43]

[43] Tomin, *Kye*, 22.

Lou Rowan

If Only the Imagination...

> The act is disclosed by the imagination of it. But of first importance is to realize that the imagination leads and the deed comes behind.
>
> —William Carlos Williams, *Korah in Hell*

Rothenberg and Robinson's brilliant concise but compendious introduction to romanticism opens *Poems for the Millennium*, *Volume Three*, to the broadest reaches of engagement:

> Lying behind the present gathering is a sense that the most radical and experimental works of our time—in poetry and across the arts—belong to a continuity that stretches back two centuries and more, along with a presentiment of the dark turn the world has taken in the new century and millennium opening before us.[1]

The three volumes of *Poems for the Millennium*—vast collages of exemplar, context, and commentary—afford us measures of our particular experience and our experience in history.

Take carnage: Whitman's "debris" in his "song of the bleeding throat:"

> I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
> And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
> I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
> But I saw they were not as was thought,
> They were fully at rest, they suffered not
> ["When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed"]

Jerome Rothenberg more than a century later:

> Little hills & holes now
> & beneath   upon   among them
> broken mirrors kettles pans enameled teapots

[1] *Poems for the Millennium*, *Volume Three*, *The University of California Book of Romantic & Postromantic Poetry*, eds. Jerome Rothenberg and Jeffrey C. Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

> the braided candlesticks of Sabbath
> prayershawl scraps & scraps of bodies   bones
> his child's   he said   leaping
> into the mud the pool of bones
> & slime   the frail limbs separating[2]

A tradition of looking at corpses not glory, and a 20th-century development and intensification: for Rothenberg there is no "But," no opening to or question of reconciliation.

In the dense, rewarding essays of *The Fire*, Robin Blaser records for us his experience as a generally-ignored artist more fully engaged with history than the shadow-people making it:

> We need to consider why it is that the tradition of our culture has come into question. In simple minded moments, I think that the financial surface is our answer to the pain of the question... The discourses of the arts and of the sacred have to do with the otherness of the world, of being in the world. Otherness is the *fandango* itself and not the *fanfaronade* we have thought it...
>
> [On Spicer:] The public, the political, the social are all forms of thought and experience, and according to Jack's argument, these forms must begin again because we are inside the death of these forms, the "fix" of them. Here, the operative, performing nature of poetic language comes into play. Jack's poetry takes on the experience, so exact to our present condition, that where we are is equally an experience of not being there at all—of disappearing and destroyed men—of fallen hierarchies and broken honesties, like towers, that once were governments.[3]

Blaser connects the artist's work to the growth-pattern of our awareness, quoting first the anthropologist Elizabeth Cobb:

> She says, "I became acutely aware that what a child wanted to do most of all was to make a world in which to discover a self. This ordering reverses the general position that self-exploration produces a knowledge of the world." Furthermore, while observing the "passionate world-making behavior of the child," she noted that "accompanied by a population of toys, fauna and flora, and artifacts that do duty as 'figures of speech,'" she became "keenly aware of these processes which the genius in particular in later life seeks to recall." Edith Cobb in her interest in biological psychology moves to describe what she names a "cosmic sense," which in a separate essay, Margaret Mead describes as "a human

[2] Jerome Rothenberg, *Tryptich* (*Poland/1931*, *Khurbn*, *The Burning Babe*) (New York: New Directions, 2007) 170.

[3] Robin Blaser, *The Fire (Collected Essays)*, edited by Miriam Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 82-83; 130. We are more than fortunate to benefit from Miriam Nichols' editing of Blaser's collected works [Robin Blaser, *The Holy Forest (Collected Poems)*, edited by Miriam Nichols (Berkeley: University of California, 2006)]. Her essays on Blaser, her documentation of his work, his reading, the relevant aspects of his biography personify resourcefulness. As important are her masterful essays elucidating the work.

> instinctual need for a perceptual relation to the universe" ... In this context I am arguing not for my pretensions as a poet, but for what poetry reflects, if it is entered. That the poet does the job of entering this world and continues through his life to record that entrance is a fact, not pretense—that it is personal, original and singular is also a fact.[4]

We can see this pattern in Rothenberg's prolonged approach to the Shoah. First he created the serial poem *Poland/1931* to which Blaser's title for his own serial applies exactly—*Poland* is an "image-nation" by an artist who'd not yet been to Poland. And Rothenberg's "passionate world-making" was partly a game, which "if I were to play it from within, I had to perform some part of it in costume."[5] And, "With *Poland*, looking back, I could indulge a high degree of play in a way I couldn't or wouldn't in the case of *Khurbn.*"[6]

Blaser's "Image-Nations" follow a similar pattern: they are sprinkled from the beginning with images from his youth in Idaho blended with his myriad entrances to language fused with the history of language and with direct echoes from historic "companions," but it is not until "Image-Nation 24 'Oh pshaw'" that a prose-poem *narrates* those early experiences. He creates a world of the spirit before populating it with "facts."

Rothenberg's collage is Blaser's parataxis, and vice-versa.

Rothenberg and Robinson help us to connect the most vital modern poetry to "deeds":

> Rather than monumentality, [romanticism's] character is mobility. The centrifugal direction of such an imagination leads—happily unchecked—not only to its repetition in ever-new situations, but to its outcome in nonaesthetic realities: both the "liberation theology" of twentieth-century Latin America and the ecological movement, for example, have their roots in Romanticism.[7]

And Curtis White's *The Spirit of Disobedience*, rooted explicitly in Thoreau and romanticism, makes explicit the connection between art-life and "lived"-life, between the secular *sacred* infusing Blaser's, Rothenberg's, Spicer's, Williams' et al's work and our personal and social history:

[4] Blaser, *Fire*, 6; Blaser's italics.

[5] Jerome Rothenberg, *Poetics and Polemics*, eds. Rothenberg with Steven Clay (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008) 59.

[6] Rothenberg, *Tryptich*, 223.

[7] Rothenberg and Robinson, *Poems for the Millennium*, *Volume Three*, 5. That Jack Spicer appears (for whatever reason) nowhere in the three volumes of PFM only illustrates the point that these (albeit massive) collections are crucial witnesses to our most vital modern poetry, not complete documentation. The potential power of art is brought home by my favorite anecdote about Spicer: he hated New York City, and was certain the cause of its perniciousness was Dylan Thomas's living there!

> I would like to introduce two ideas that are essential to what I am calling the spirit of disobedience. These are two ideas simple enough to state but more complicated to demonstrate. They both involve old delusions of American liberalism. The first delusion is that liberal/left politics, in both theory and action, is somehow independent of a need for the spiritual. To the contrary, I think I can show that it has always, whether it has known it or not, been dependent on assumptions that are finally spiritual... The second point is related but runs in the opposite direction. That thing—Reason—that liberalism has always assumed to be a secular force, the gift of its Enlightenment heroes of science and philosophy, is also finally spiritual but in the worst possible sense, it is *religious.* Reason is that thing that liberalism has itself always claimed to despise: a baseless and destructive enthusiasm.[8]

A sincere politics will be "based" on the readiness art and imagination afford, not the intolerant blindness of "analysis." The *New York Times* ran lengthy "insider" analyses of the extended rational decision-process leading to Barak Obama's tragic, nightmarish escalation of his war upon Afghanistan: the charts, the maps, the "probing," the jargon ("off-ramps," "success criteria," and ((yes)) "hearts and minds"). What might have happened if these good liberals had used their imaginations: what if they knew the history as well as General Giap knew George Washington's guerrilla campaigns before defeating us Vietnam? What if they had imagined themselves on the wrong end of a Hellfire missile's "surgical" strike? What if their field trips had included seeing touching smelling the debris of "enemies" and innocents pulverized by their technological surgery? I wish we knew. But always and always:

> My heart rouses
>   thinking to bring you news
>   of something
> that concerns you
>   and concerns many men. Look at
>   what passes for the new.
> You will not find it there but in
>   despised poems.
>   It is difficult
> to get the news from poems
>   yet men die miserably every day
>   for lack
> of what is found there.

[8] Curtis White, *The Spirit of Disobedience* (Sausalito: PoliPointPress, 2006).

Ali Alizadeh

Rupturing Dante:
John Kinsella's "Divine Comedy"

THE NEW: A THING OF THE PAST?

The problem with modern/contemporary poetry, I believe, is that most of it is neither modern (that is, new) in style, voice and prosody, nor conceptually, philosophically and discursively contemporary. I believe—to misquote Gandhi—truly modern/contemporary poetry would be a rather good idea; but very little of it actually exists. While for the so-called general reader, today's poetry signifies difficulty, inaccessibility and obfuscation, it seems to me that most of the poetry that gets published and publicised is in fact generally accessible, communicative, and only tentatively challenging and/or unconventional.

A recent recipient of the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, Jen Hadfield, for example, may seem an unusual, and perhaps excitingly different, choice for the award due to her identity as a "Generation Y" woman; but her poetry is nothing if not a loyal continuation of the traditions of British nature poetry. Her poetics entails a whimsical, pseudo-mystical, pastoralist discourse that can be traced back to Romanticism. Furthermore, the recently appointed Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, Carol Ann Duffy, may also appear as a contemporary, indeed new and even radical, pick for the position; but, again, it is Duffy's cultural *identity politics*—her, for example, gender as well as sexuality—that indicate her difference, and not her poetry per se which is, for the most part, comic, melodramatic and rather tailor-made for the abovementioned general reader.

There are, in other words, far too few examples of today's poets engaging in the sort of supposedly abstract and difficult poetics which Roland Barthes believed constituted "the *improbable* character of modern poetry."[1] Poetry, it seems, has become all too *probable* since Barthes's making his observation in 1950s. Gone are the days of esoteric visionaries and their obsessive apostles. As Terry Eagleton has noted in his semi-elegiac *After Theory*, the modernist movements that had earlier in the 20th-century "transformed European culture," eventually "ran out

[1] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972) 134.

of subversive steam."[2] As part of this expiration of dissident energy, a good deal of modernism's experimentalist, iconoclastic desires were co-opted by the cultural (in our case literary/poetic) mainstream; while the more intransigent elements were forced underground and confined to an ever-shrinking avant-garde.

And yet, I would like to argue that a truly modern, radical and subversive poetics is still possible. In this paper I would like to propose that contemporary poets can rejuvenate the avant-garde and revive the rebellious commitments of the Modernists—to seriously challenge the power of the literary centres and the dominant cultures—if their poetics is situated *within* the traditions, forms and themes they aim to transgress. In my view, it is often taken for granted that contemporary/post-modernist poets must actively reject and refuse to participate in common and conventional uses of genre and language; that is to say, to work *outside* of conventions / traditions. As Raymond Williams has observed in the context of Modernism and the early 20th-century avant-garde, however, it were the concepts and ideas "contained within 'pre-modern' forms of art which then in certain conditions led to actual and radical changes of form."[3]

I believe progressive and avant-garde poets cannot aspire to interrogate and unsettle the status quo without an engagement with the "'pre-modern' forms" of poetry; and they cannot aspire to initiate the sorts of "radical changes" that Williams has in mind if their work does not acknowledge, and interact with, the power and history of the pre-existing forms and the dominant cultures. Through *rupturing* and hence transforming the situation of literary conservatism from within—an event intrinsically grounded in the very site that is to be sabotaged by the radical poet—a truly and effectively modern/contemporary poetry can be achieved. This piece discusses one such event, contemporary Australian poet John Kinsella's recent subversion, and in many ways conversion, of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*.

THE EPIC & THE POST-MODERNIST POET

Before discussing what is meant by the term "event" here—a meaning derived from the writings of philosophers Jacques Derrida and Alain Badiou—and explaining how Kinsella's "distraction" on Dante's epic poem performs such a radical break with/through poetic tradition, I would like to propose that Kinsella's comprehensive "take"[4] on *The Divine Comedy* is but one example of the many modernist and post-modernist projects using—and, in a sense, *ab*using—epic poetry as a platform for threatening the power of poetic establishments.

[2] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) 56.
[3] Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 2007) 39.
[4] John Kinsella, preface to Purgatorio, *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography—Three New Works* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008) 3.

It may initially seem surprising that the epic poem, that seemingly most outdated, enervated and stolid of literary genres, should have provided the space or the situation for a great number of vital discursive innovations and literary radicalisms in the modern and post-modern milieus. Wouldn't a less mainstream, more anti-authoritarian genre (satire or parody, say, or a more "natural" type of text such as the letter or the journal entry) be more suitable to an anti-hegemonic, anti-elitist literary project? Why did the defining texts of literary modernism have to be either attempts at reviving epic poetry—Ezra Pound's *Cantos*—or novels based on epic poetry—James Joyce's *Ulysses*—or a long epic-like poem such as T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" which begins with an epigraph from *The Divine Comedy*? How could a genre reasonably described, in the words of Tom Winnifrith, "as antique as a dinosaur,"[5] be seen as a vehicle for transgressing the conventions and inducting the new in literature?

One explanation for this apparent paradox can be found in the epic's unflinching connection with—in fact, arguably, the genre's very existence as a compendium of—history. By history I don't so much mean historiography—that is, the concrete discourses through which the past has come into being—but the abstract and conceptual notion of the past, or past-ness; and no other literary field (with the possible exception of historiography itself) can be said to be as singularly dedicated to signifying the past as the epic. Since the new/the modern can most readily be formulated in an opposition to the old/the traditional, it should come as no great surprise that for the authors committed to, as Pound would have it, "making it new," the stereotypically ancient genre of epic poetry provided, and continues to provide, an almost archetypal, and perhaps convenient, concept of the old, against which the modernist/post-modernist poets can mount their resistances.

In the epic, history emerges. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the literary—as opposed to oral—or "secondary" epics. At the end of Book VIII of the *Aeneid*, for example, the mythological motif of Venus's shield *becomes* Rome's history: It goes from being the "glittering" "gift of a goddess" to becoming "Italy's story" and "the destinies and the fame of [the hero's] descendants."[6] While during the epic's pre-Roman infancy we can detect the influence of a mythmaking oral parentage, during the genre's secondary phase—starting with Virgil, at least in the Western tradition—history replaces supernatural mythology. Primary epics, according to Lascelles Abercrombie, belong to an age when "the idea of history has not arisen, when anything that happens turns inevitably, and in a surprisingly short time, into legend."[7] In the secondary epics, however, "the idea of history" solidifies and fantastical

[5] *Aspects of the Epic*, ed. Tom Winnifrith (London: Macmillan, 1983) 110.
[6] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Patric Dickson (New York: Mentor, 1961) 187-191.
[7] Lascelles Abercrombie, "The Nature of Epic," *The Epic: Developments in Criticism*, ed. Ronald P. Draper (London: Macmillan, 1990) 112.

legends subside. As Andrew Fichter has noted, "the most basic element of the epic from Virgil onward [has been] its consciousness of history."[8]

It is precisely this "consciousness of history" which was of interest to the Modernist poets who, in the early 20th-century, attempted to, in Pound's words, "resuscitate the dead art / Of poetry."[9] On the one hand, these poets aimed to transform the moribund state of poetry by forging links with the (perceived) grandeur and exuberance of past epic poets; as Michael Andre Bernstein has observed, Modernist epics such as the *Cantos*, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* and Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*, "include history"—after Pound's famous remark—to "preserve the collective longing through which the past retains an immediate fraternity with the deepest needs of a succeeding generation."[10] More pertinently for my argument, the epic also provided the Modernists with the weapon for challenging a number of existing cultural paradigms. H.D. (Hilda Doolittle)'s *Trilogy* and her *Helen in Egypt*, for example, attempt a feminist rehabilitation of a number of marginalised and/or vilified female figures of Western myth such as the Biblical Eve, Mary Magdalene and Helen of Troy, by interrogating and refuting the perspectives that have authored and authorised misogynist misrepresentations.

Less interested in establishing a "fraternity" between the past and the present (after Pound) and more enthusiastic about unsettling the dominant cultural paradigms (after H.D.), the post-modernist poets who emerged in the aftermath of the failures and successes of Modernists were and continue to be as preoccupied with the epic as their predecessors. In sympathy with the Marxist thinker Walter Benjamin's famous view of "official" history—of the sort that appears in traditional epics—as something predicated on an "empathy with the victor [which] invariably benefits the rulers,"[11] post-modernist writers have approached narrative genres (such as the epic) as a medium through which the dominant versions of the past may be not only contested but also rewritten from a non-hegemonic position. The post-modernist technique of intertextuality, for example, as defined by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, expresses "both a desire to close the gap between the past and the present of the reader and to rewrite the past in a new context."[12]

Derek Walcott's 1990 epic, *Omeros*, is one of the best-known examples of this post-modernist relocation of a past narrative to a "new

[8] Andrew Fichter, "The Dynastic Epic," 165.

[9] Ezra Pound, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th edition, eds. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005) 1298.

[10] Michael Andre Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic (*New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980) 274.

[11] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 259.

[12] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History*, *Theory*, *Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 118.

context." On the one hand, as Joseph Farrell has observed, Walcott's rewriting of the Homeric tale in a Caribbean setting entails a desire to *reconstruct* history, "to piece together the fragments of a broken past."[13] But what makes this post-colonial text much more—and much more effective—than a simple modern homage to, or an idiomatic renovation of, the *Iliad* (similar to, say, Christopher Logue's *War Music*) is that Walcott's epic disrupts the European tradition by articulating the reality of the non-European, and by so doing it *deconstructs* its given history. In *Omeros*, the Caribbean poet, as Robert D. Hamner has observed, injects his own "creole reality" into the Eurocentric episteme, and by so doing he "exploits, parodies, complements, transforms, and occasionally transcends his original sources."[14] Although I share Hamner's view that *Omeros* is not as revolutionary a departure from tradition as one may witness in some other post-modernist revisions, Walcott's epic is, at the very least, in Jason Lagapa's words, "a layered narrative that juxtaposes the postcolonial present with the colonial past"; and through this apposition, *Omeros* becomes more than a mere replication of Homer's narratives and can be seen as, again as Lagapa has noted, "an epic poem which acknowledges the complexity of history and its representations by providing multiple perspectives and temporal contexts."[15]

A more radical, and, in my view, more successful example of a contemporary transformation of the traditional epic is the American avant-garde poet Alice Notley's 1996 *The Descent of Alette*. Embedded in Notley's poem is an inherently agnostic, anti-authoritarian objective; to produce, as Susan McCabe has observed, an answer to "the aesthetic question of whether women can write the epic."[16] According to Notley herself, her "interest in the long poem had to do with taking it away from men."[17] To perform this literary, feminist contest—or to, as McCabe would have it, "break into" "masculinist tradition"[18]—Notley has rewritten one of the classical motifs of traditional epic narratives, the journey to the Underworld/Hell (present in all the major epics of the West, most notably, of course, *The Divine Comedy*), from the perspective of a modern female speaker, in an openly experimentalist,

[13] Joseph Farrell, "Walcott's *Omeros*: The Classical Epic in a Postmodern World," *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, eds. Beissinger Margaret, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Wofford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 287.

[14] Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997) 128; 166.

[15] Jason Lagapa, "Swearing at—not by—History: Obscenity, *Picong* and Irony in Derek Walcott's Poetry," *College Literature* 35.2 (2008): 116.

[16] Susan McCabe, "Alice Notley's Epic Entry: 'an ecstasy of finding another way of being.' (Line From Woman Writer's Long Poem *The Descent of Alette*)" *The Free Library* (Jun. 1998): par.2, online, Internet, 26 Apr. 2009: http://www.thefreelibrary.com/_/print/ PrintArticle.aspx?id=20968534

[17] Brian Kim Stefans, "Brian Kim Stefans Interviews Alice Notley," *Jacket* 15: par.11, onine, Internet, 26 Apr. 2009: http://jacketmagazine.com/15/stef-iv-not.html

[18] McCabe, "Alice Notley's Epic Entry," n.p.

anti-naturalist voice. Here the linguistic playfulness—or what Lara Glenum has noted to be Notley's "disrupting the teleology of English grammar"[19]—is not an end in itself, but one method for rupturing the phalocentric epic or, as Glenum would have it, one of "a series of tactics to radically disrupt the epic form."[20] Among Notely's other "wide-ranging methods in remaking the epic"[21] is her revisionist repository of images and symbols. In *The Descent of Alette*, the Snake, for example, is no longer "the most overt symbol of the phallic," but an evocation of an ancient Middle Eastern (pre-Oedipal and pre-phallic?) female attribute, "not only emblematic of the ancient matriarchy but of female prophecy, of the oracular."[22]

By subverting the sexual affiliations of iconic symbols such as the Snake, and by, perhaps most significantly, not only appropriating but also profoundly unsettling and, indeed, "taking away" the epic narrative (of, in this case, a Dantesque journey to Hell) from an exclusively male authorship, Notley has produced what I believe to be, alongside John Kinsella's reworking of Dante's entire epic, a thoroughly convincing and indeed revolutionary post-modern epic. As I shall shortly demonstrate by closely reading two poems of Kinsella's 2008 *Divine Comedy*, it is through both a thorough engagement with as well as a contemporaneous rupture of the epic genre—and most definitely not via a convenient gainsaying of the ancient art—that some of the most progressive poets of our era have seriously contested and undermined the centres of poetic authority and literary establishment.

THE EVENT: RUPTURE & REVOLUTION

John Kinsella's recently published *Divine Comedy* does not merely mimic or bring up to date Dante's canticles but, much more significantly, it disrupts and ruptures the medieval poem's core ethical values—such as egoism, homophobia, religious fundamentalism and anthropocentrism—and by so doing launches a comprehensive literary attack against the dominant cultural values of our time according to which the natural environment is deemed inferior and expendable, and the Others—in Dante's case, the non-European, non-Christian—are vilified and punished for their Otherness. Kinsella writes to undermine an all-encompassing Western (human) ego and its concomitant hegemonic instinct to trump all other ethical considerations in the name of our so-called survival needs. By so doing he does not only argue against the assumptions of Dante's original epic; he subverts and transforms the epic poem.

[19] Lara Glenum, "'I see' 'with my voice': The Performance of Crisis in Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette*," *Jacket 25*: par.8, online, Internet, 26 Apr. 2009: http://jacketmagazine.com/25/glen-notl.html

[20] Glenum, "'I see' 'with my voice,'" par.3.

[21] McCabe, "Alice Notley's Epic Entry," n.p.

[22] Glenum, "'I see' 'with my voice,'" n.p.

I believe Kinsella's work constitutes an *event*, as do Notley's and, to a lesser extent, Walcott's. Kinsella's *Divine Comedy* is not only a major contribution to the growing body of post-modern epic poetry, but also an unapologetically militant, and in many ways unique, subversion of existing traditions. I would therefore like to briefly define this notion of "the event"—as a transformative rupture—according to the philosophers who have provided me with the contours of this definition. I shall then aim to demonstrate how Kinsella's recent rewriting of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* in the environment of an ecopoetic, anti-pastoralist rural Australian lexicon foments such an event.

The term *rupture*, as a defining feature of an event, makes a relatively early appearance in post-modern thought. In his "Structure, Sign, and Play"—the essay delivered at John Hopkins University in 1966, considered by some as the official unveiling of the concept of deconstruction—Jacques Derrida begins by defining the term "event" as something that is both "a *rupture* and a redoubling."[23] Since, as Lee Morrissey has observed, Derrida's choice of the word "rupture" may have been inspired by contemporaneous commentators' discussion of the recent Algerian War of Independence,[24] this latter historical event may serve as a suitable example for explicating Derrida's concept of the event.

As an anti-colonial struggle, the Algerian revolutionaries who opposed French rule demanded, and eventually achieved, a clean break—rupture—from the European centre. At the same time, however, their struggle could only exist within a colonised or, in this case, French-dominated space. In other words, there would be no need for a war of independence in an independent realm; and this struggle could not possibly eventuate its desired rupture without echoing and intensifying the reality of the situation of colonisation. As proposed by Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 movie, *The Battle of Algiers*, one of the Algerian radicals' most devastating attempts to end French power took the form of three Muslim guerrilla woman "redoubling" Frenchness—assuming European dresses, fair complexion, blonde wigs, etc.—to deceive the paratroopers at check points, proceeding to infiltrate the cafés populated by French colonisers and detonating bombs concealed in beach baskets.

While my example may seem unnecessarily violent—for this discussion of the literary/textual radicalism of post-modernist poetry—it should be pointed out that for Derrida an event is (to use one of his key phrases) *always already* violently disruptive. In his 1972 discourse on the event of writing, "Plato's Pharmacy," for example, he describes Plato's metaphor for the written word, *pharmakon* (potion), as

[23] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 278.

[24] Lee Morrissey, "Derrida, Algeria, and 'Structure, Sign, and Play,'" *Postmodern Culture* 9.2 (Jan. 1999): par.12, online, Internet, 15 Jun. 2009: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/v009/9.2morrissey.html

something possessing a "violent movement" and the "power of maleficent penetration, [with the] ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside. The *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it."[25] Here the event (of writing) is a "supplement" to the situation (of the spoken word) because, as Plato would have it, the event is no more than an addition, and therefore external, to the "natural" pre-existing situation. The "artificial" written text is therefore, as Plato would further have it, secondary, inferior, parasitic and dangerous to spoken language.

It is this notion of danger—as signified by the *pharmakon* metaphor's connotation as a poisonous potion—which indicates to Derrida that the supplement (event) cannot in fact be outside the situation, and this observation provides the impetus for Derrida's (in)famous subversion and dismantling of Plato's position. According to Derrida, the event could not possess the ability to pose a threat to a situation if it is not in fact firmly sited *within* the very conditions it threatens—in the same way that the Algerian female bombers had to place themselves within Frenchness in order to effectively trick and threaten French colonial power—whilst, at the same time, the event is emphatically not a "mute, stupid simulation" of a situation either.[26]

This understanding of the event as a "dangerous supplement" corresponds with—and may have in fact inspired—Alain Badiou's 1993 definition of the event as "a hazardous, unpredictable supplement."[27] Whilst Derrida's above argument would be sufficient for my analysis of John Kinsella's epic "rupture and redoubling" of *The Divine Comedy*, I would like to further outline and make use of the latter philosopher's concept of the event as Badiou's work is more directly related to this essay's topic of poetry and artistic radicalism. As observed by Alex Ling, in the light of the "evental importance" that the thinker has placed in the arts, "the real nexus of Badiou's dialectic lies with the artistic condition, or to be more precise, with the 'subtractive' poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé."[28] For Badiou, "the expressly *literal* arts—those arts of the letter: of poetry as much as theatre and the novel" are of particular interest,[29] as their linguistic composition provides the opportunity for a direct, verbal transformation of the language of the hegemonic situation without a reliance on perceived visual, metaphorical digressions (of visual arts, dance, cinema, etc.).

25 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination.*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004) 111; 113.

26 Derrida, 115.

27 Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002) 67.

28 Alex Ling, "Can Cinema Be Thought? Alain Badiou and the Artistic Condition," *The Praxis of Alain Badiou*, eds. Paul Ashton, Paul Ashton, and Justin Clemens (Melbourne: re.press, 2006) 292.

29 Ling, "Can Cinema Be Thought?" 293.

According to Badiou, the event is something "which compels us to decide a *new* way of being."[30] This "*new* way" can only become apparent, and we may only decide to open/follow such a path, through a violent rupture with tradition—among the examples that Badiou provides are the French Revolution and the Cultural Revolution in China. As such, the event is—to use one of Badiou's key phrases—a *truth-process*, as a result of which a truth (of, in the case of the French Revolution, the possibility of the creation of a new form of government—a republic—in place of monarchy) can be accessed and put to practice. But what is also significant is that, to persist with the example of the French Revolution, a republic was a new idea *only* in late 18th century France (the history of this form of government stretches back to Ancient Rome and had also been revived immediately prior to the 1792 declaration of the First Republic in, of course, the newly founded United States of America) and therefore the newness, radicalism and efficacy of this historical event depended *entirely* on its occurrence in a specific socio-political situation, i.e. France of the *ancient régime*.

As such, Badiou describes the event as an "*immanent break*."[31] This event is immanent, because it can only exist "*in* the [specific] situation, and nowhere else"; and, at the same time, the event is also a break as its (new) truth is absolutely antithetical to "the prevailing language and established knowledge of the situation."[32] As an example of such an event in the arts, Badiou cites "the Hayden-event" which:

> concerns the musical situation and no other, a situation then governed by the predominance of the baroque style. It was an event for this situation. But in another sense, what this event was to authorize in terms of musical configurations was not comprehensible from within the plenitude achieved by the baroque style; it really was *something else*.[33]

The event of Hayden's advent of the classical style was, in other words, absolutely situated within the pre-existing, and domineering, baroque style in so far as it transformed the latter style from within; but neither was Hayden's transformation of the musical situation a continuation of the latter style. It was something unmistakably new and different—"*something else*"—and hence "incomprehensible" to those adherents of the baroque style untouched by Hayden's evental supplement. As another example of a Badiouian reading of an artistic event, "the Meyerhold-event," as analysed by Oliver Feltham, occurred when the maverick Russian director decided to, for example, employ the hitherto ignored "plasticity of the acting body" in his infamous biomechanical

[30] Badiou, *Ethics*, 41.
[31] Badiou, *Ethics*, 42.
[32] Badiou, *Ethics*, 42-43.
[33] Badiou, *Ethics*, 68.

exercises; and this event precipitated "the beginning of the transformation of the situation called 'theatre.'"[34]

More specifically, what makes Hayden's and Meyerhold's advents revolutionary events—as opposed to merely "creative" or "innovative" footnotes in the history of the arts—is that in both cases the artists realised—that is, understood and also brought into being—what Badiou has termed "the void."[35] According to Badiou, there exists a "'situated' void" or an "absence" at the foundation of every situation, and it is through the "naming" of—acknowledging and deploying—this hitherto unnamed and repressed notion that a situation is ruptured and transformed.[36] In the case of Hayden's disrupting the baroque style of music, this void was "a genuine conception of musical architectonics" which, when manifested in Hayden's work, resulted in "a wholly new" concept of musical composition.[37] In the case of Meyerhold, one of the unacknowledged principles of theatre was, as previously mentioned, the potential malleability of the actor's body which, when invoked by the radical director, resisted, and broke theatre free from, "the constraints of mimesis."[38] The void is, in other words, a crucial element of a situation which has been systematically ignored, and even intentionally suppressed, by the situation's (conservative) elites—Badiou's clearest example of such a void and its revolutionary appellation is the naming of the proletariat by Marx[39]—and it is through recognising this absence and activating the unrecognised that radical artists challenge, transform and even occasionally supplant hegemonic traditions. It is this definition of the event which leads me to claim that John Kinsella has broken with and transformed *The Divine Comedy* by naming the fundamental "voids" in Dante's seminal work.

THE FLAMES OF PURGATORY

Even a most casual reader of Kinsella's *Divine Comedy* would note that his poem's title is palpably similar to the title of the canonical epic, and that the new work's title is, at the same time, a revision of the medieval epic's name. Irrespective of the semantic implications of the removal of the definite article, it is clear, from the outset, that Kinsella's project is one in which simulation and alteration occur simultaneously. The overall structure of Kinsella's *Comedy* is also both similar and different to Dante's. The Australian poet's work is also divided into three canticles with identical titles to the Florentine poet's, but Kinsella has changed the

[34] Oliver Feltham, "An Explosive Genealogy: Theatre, Philosophy and the Art of Presentation," *The Praxis of Alain Badiou*, eds. Paul Ashton, Paul Ashton, and Justin Clemens (Melbourne: re.press, 2006) 248.
[35] Badiou, *Ethics*, 68.
[36] Badiou, *Ethics*, 68.
[37] Badiou, *Ethics*, 68.
[38] Feltham, "An Explosive Genealogy," 248.
[39] Badiou, *Ethics*, 69.

sequence of the journey so that, unlike Dante's spiritual travels, his begin in Purgatory before covering Paradise and concluding in Hell. Finally, Kinsella's verse maintains the three line stanzas of Dante's *terza rima*, whilst eschewing the original poem's syllabic meter and rhyme scheme.

Such experiments with the form and structure of *The Divine Comedy*, however, do not amount to an event in and of themselves. They would produce some kind of "parodic," at best mischievous, playfulness if they were not complemented by a committed and incisive subversion of the discourse of *The Divine Comedy*. It is not only through a relocation of the narrative of Dante's journey from the Christian Afterlife to a rural environment in contemporary Western Australia, but, more crucially, due to an assiduous and engaged rewriting of the content of each individual line of each canto of each canticle of Dante's epic that Kinsella punctures the moral premise of the original text/situation and, by so doing, he causes a poetic event. I shall consider two instances of the Kinsella-event's disruptive rewriting of Dante's cantos to demonstrate that while Kinsella's epic is indisputably immanent to—firmly situated in—Dante's text, it also ruptures the medieval poem by naming and reviving the central voids—the natural environment and the non-European—in Dante's moral universe.

In Canto XXVI of *The Divine Comedy*, we may recall, Dante and Virgil cross paths with a group of shades passing through one of Purgatory's purifying flames. The ghosts are baffled by the effect Dante's shadow has on the fire (I will be using Allen Mandelbaum's 1982 translation):

> While we moved at the edge, one first, one after,
> and I could often hear my gentle master
> saying: "Take care—and do not waste my warning,"
>
> the sun, its rays already altering
> the coloring of all the west from azure
> to white, was striking me on my right shoulder.
>
> And where my shadow fell, it made the flames
> seem more inflamed; and I saw many shades
> walking, intent upon a sight so strange.
>
> This was the reason that first prompted them
> to speak to me. Among themselves they said:
> "He does not seem to have a fictive body."[40]

It seems that, by the virtue of being alive and having a corporeal, non-fictive body, Dante is automatically more sinful than the shades and

[40] Dante Alighieri, "Purgatorio Canto 26," *The World of Dante:* lines 26.1-26.11, online, Internet, 17 Jun. 2009: http://www.worldofdante.org/comedy/dante/purgatory.xml/2.26

hence the shadow of his un-cleansed flesh intensifies the burning. The souls—among them earlier medieval poets Guido Guinizelli and Arnaut Daniel—are guilty of "unbridled lusts" and are being subjected to the flames to be cleansed of the so-called venal sins committed by their bodies when alive.[41] Here the flames are a direct consequence of these shades' former transgressions. To use this metaphor, the fuel for the cleansing flames in Purgatory—as opposed to the punitive fires of Hell, reserved for the so-called mortal sins—is the sinners' acceptance of their wrongful acts, or (as may be expected in a religious poem by a Catholic author) their professed guilt. As Guinszelli admits to Dante, in Purgatory the shades "through their shame abet the fire's work."[42]

The best-known aspect of this canto is perhaps Dante's homiletic exchange with the aforementioned poets, one of whom (Guinizelli) he refers to as "the father of me" and the other (Daniel) as "a better artisan of the mother tongue."[43] The narrator's reverence for these earlier masters, however, does not diminish the narrative's rather vocal condemnation of their perceived sins: the group of shades to whom the older troubadour belongs is seen to be shouting "Sodom and Gomorrah," as the first master's ghostly companions howl the name of Pasiphaë,[44] a female figure of Greek mythology associated with sexual taboos such as bestiality and anal intercourse. What sets Dante apart from, and positions him above, these guilty figures is his repudiation of "unbridled lusts," his chaste devotion to the ghost of his real-life object of (unrequited) desire, the Virgin Mary-esque Beatrice, "a lady [who] has gained grace for me"[45]; and it is, of course, her grace which compels Dante to continue climbing Mount Purgatory to gain salvation and meet her prior to their journey to Paradise.

Kinsella's rewriting of this canto comprises three poems in his *Divine Comedy*. The first poem, "Canto of the Cradle to the Grave (26: reignited, the lustful),"[46] begins with an obvious imitation of the stanzas of Dante's canto, prior to an equally obvious digression from the original:

> Moving forward as one on the brink
> with the marvellous maestro informing
> me: "Keep your guard: stay crafty,"
>
> the sun's firmament kickstarting,
> right-handed, ragged as occidental tut-tutting

[41] Joseph Gallagher, *A Modern Reader's Guide to Dante's the Divine Comedy* (Missouri: Liguori, 1999) 112.

[42] Dante Alighieri, "Purgatorio Canto 26," *The World of Dante:* lines 26.81, online, Internet, 17 Jun. 2009: http://www.worldofdante.org/comedy/dante/purgatory.xml/2.26

[43] Alighieri 26.97; 26.117.

[44] Alighieri 26.40-41.

[45] Alighieri 26.59.

[46] John Kinsella, "Canto of the Cradle to the Grave (26: reignited, the lustful)," *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography—Three New Works* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008) 121-123.

blue aspersions cast against the blank sky;

and so I toss my umbra into flames
like torchlight, dead red, tantalising
cheap energy marvelled at by *customers*.

The quest for top-dollar, eternal energy
lured me to parley with small birds commercing
with the flames: "Sun lights up a winter's day!"[47]

As it can be seen, the first eight lines of Kinsella's revision closely resemble Dante's canto. For Dante's "And where my shadow fell, it made the flames / seem more inflamed," for example, Kinsella has written, "and so I toss my umbra into the flames / like torchlight." Yet this simulation is not intended as a simple modern idiomatic makeover, but, I believe, as a declaration of the post-modern text's being situated within the medieval work—Derrida's redoubling. As soon as this situating/redoubling has been clearly established, Kinsella unsettles the simulation: not only have birds replaced Dante's shades but they are now seen, more significantly, as "*customers*" of a natural resource. In place of Dante's conventionally Judeo-Christian hatred of homosexuality and other supposedly unnatural sexual vices, Kinsella inserts a *lust*—the "quest" for cheap energy sources—which the radical environmentalist poet finds as pernicious as the medieval Christina poet would have found homosexuality. Kinsella's insertion of his own ethical concern, however, is not simply an exploitation of Dante's schema; it ruptures and subverts Dante's work.

Kinsella's importation of environmental ethics into Dante's moral cosmology is an event because it names, as Badiou may have it, a void. This void—a foundational albeit repressed component—is ecology. As observed by many commentators, Christianity (as with, perhaps, most/all organised religions) is "ecologically problematic."[48] According to Anne Elvey (after Val Plumwood), Christianity's "narrow focus on life after death and a world beyond this world of earthly habitation denies the interconnectedness of humans with nature."[49] Although Elvey goes on to advance an attempt at reconciling a version of Christianity with an understanding of environmentalist ethos, she can't deny that in Christianity—as with any other religion in which the creator/creation paradigm has a foundational role—the created (that is, the Earth and the natural environment) are deemed secondary and inferior to the creator and to those created in this creator's image, i.e. humans, in whom the

[47] Kinsella, "Canto of the Cradle to the Grave (26: reignited, the lustful)," lines 1-12.
[48] Anne Elvey, "Beyond Culture? Nature/Culture Dualism and the Christian Otherworldly," *Ethics & the Environment* 11.2 (2006): 64.
[49] Elvey, "Beyond Culture?" 64.

creator has, munificently, "bestow[ed] agency."[50] This "theo-centrism," therefore, "crosses over to an anthropocentrism."[51]

The Divine Comedy is one of the most vivid examples of such a "crossing over." Dante's anthropocentrism governs, for example, the gamut of symbols, similes and metaphors in each canto. In the canto under discussion, for example, the flames are nothing but the metaphoric manifestation of the humans' apparent sins. Fire as natural phenomenon has been entirely deprived of agency and turned into a mere image with absolutely moral and poetic implications. The fuel for the abovementioned flames in Dante's Purgatory is, as mentioned before, the (human) sinners' "shame"; not wood, coal, oil, uranium—nothing, in other words, with a physical, earthly and environmental reality.

It is this anthropocentrism that Kinsella's naming of the void in Dante's text (the physical source of fire) disputes and ruptures. By articulating the flames as a form of "cheap" "top-dollar" energy—in place of a symbol of moral reification—Kinsella breaks away from Dante's narrative and ignites a discourse about the science and politics of burning fossil fuels, global warming and nuclear energy. He, in other words, completely transforms Dante's canto. Not only does the theme of the canto change—from lust for "unnatural" sexual practices to lust for energy as a market commodity—but the entire ethical outlook of the narration is subverted. As it soon becomes apparent in the new text, Kinsella is suspicious of, and ultimately rejects, the very premise of moral purgation. The shades/birds in Kinsella's take on Dante's canto, for example, do not admit to perceived moral shortcomings and do not win the approval and respect of the poet; they instead voice the hypocrisy and inefficacy of precisely such smug, self-serving admissions:

> Clean air, no need for Kyoto or eco-tardy
> hold-us-backs, we've got it all here: reverent
> as organic farmers, responding ardently.
>
> The foreign minister says the ripostes of nay-sayers
> are emotive, their tut-tutting a throwback
> to darker ages: Indians glow, Ethiopians want to.
>
> The neighbour has cleared the dead wood.
> He lit a fire in a high wind and stood back as flames
> burned separated from their fuel. He'd claim the air was cool.[52]

According to Kinsella, the individual acts of personal purgation—by "reverent...organic farmers" and by "Vegetarians...so caught up in their

[50] Elvey, "Beyond Culture?" 68.
[51] Elvey, "Beyond Culture?" 68.
[52] Kinsella, "Canto of the Cradle to the Grave (26: reignited, the lustful)," lines 16-24.

own shadows and festive / kissing"[53]– not only fail to reverse or even mildly alleviate the environmental catastrophe of global warming, but they provide a useful defense for the elites such as Australia's foreign minister who reject the "emotive" "nay-sayers"—radical environmentalists—by claiming that there is "no need for Kyoto" because "we've got it all [organic farming, 'green' nuclear energy, etc.] here." Claims to purgation and repentance, therefore, in fact contradict and defer a true renunciation of the "lusts," and, even worse, they justify potentially catastrophic, anti-environmental industrial practices such as "treatment and disposal of [nuclear] waste" as advocated by Ian Palmer, the Professor of Mining Geology at the University of Adelaide, and quoted in the epigraph of Kinsella's poem.[54] The pro-nuclear scientist appears in Kinsella's poem, shouting "Sodom and Gomorrah."[55] This call, however, no longer signals to a perceived sin, as was the case in Dante's sanctimonious text; it is now only a blunt, melodramatic attempt at diverting the poet's—and the reader's—attention from the real sin which is, finally, the selfish, duplicitous desire for the "treatment and disposal" of one's feelings of guilt.

Kinsella's comprehensive subversion of Dante's discourse—the post-modern poet's repudiation of the morality of cleansing of sins advanced by the medieval poet—cannot be reduced to a tendentious hijacking of an "eternal masterpiece" by a contemporary poet with "an agenda." As Kinsella's verse makes it clear in almost every line of every stanza of every poem, his rupture of Dante's work is never subsumed by a domineering volition to convey certain beliefs. Kisnella's revisions of Dante's cantos remain, whilst rejecting the old epic's religious moralism and anthropocentrism, deeply embedded in and committed to *The Divine Comedy*. In the above stanzas, for example, the reference to the global demand for nuclear power and Australian uranium—"Indians glow, Ethiopians want to"[56]—rephrases Dante's analogy for his shades who "thirst" for brighter flames "more than / an Indian or Ethiopian / thirsts for cool water"[57]; and, as it can be seen in the citations, Kinsella's revision corresponds with the exact line of Dante's canto in which the original situation appears prior to its being ruptured and transformed by the contemporary poet.

THE DREAMTIME VS. THE COLONISTS

As mentioned earlier in my general definition of epic poetry, history—as subject matter and/or discourse—plays a vital role in the formation of the

[53] Kinsella, "Canto of the Cradle to the Grave (26: reignited, the lustful)," lines 31-33.
[54] Kinsella, *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography*, 121.
[55] Kinsella, "Canto of the Cradle to the Grave (26: reignited, the lustful)," line 34.
[56] Kinsella, "Canto of the Cradle to the Grave (26: reignited, the lustful)," line 21.
[57] Dante Alighieri, "Purgatorio Canto 26," *The World of Dante:* lines 26.20-22, online, Internet, 17 Jun. 2009: http://www.worldofdante.org/comedy/dante/purgatory.xml/2.26

genre, and this is also the case with Dante's epic. Although many existing readings of *The Divine Comedy* have reduced the work to an allegorical system, it would not be difficult to argue convincingly, as C.K. Williams has, that Dante's epic is in fact "profoundly immersed in his vision of history."[58] In the canto under discussion in this paper, for example, we have encountered not only the poets Guido Guinizelli and Arnaut Daniel—two "real life," historical characters—but we have also been exposed to the text's own inherent historiography, i.e. the temporal/causal, and importantly, eulogising connection between Dante's *lingua vulgare* and the putative "father" and "better artisan" of this literary dialect.

As such, Kinsella's revisionary project, as with his treatment of the themes/motifs of the environment, both reflects and repudiates Dante's celebratory "vision of history." By including what has been excluded from Dante's historicism, and by refusing to eulogise his own "founding fathers," Kinsella transforms *The Divine Comedy* by supplanting the narrator's positionality—his spiritual triumph over the sins of Hell and his ascent, via Purgatory, to the virtues of Paradise—and instead ruptures this very perspective by naming the marginalised and oppressed historical voids. This particular aspect of Kinsella's subversion of *The Divine Comedy* provides the space for the articulation of a new and different history of Australia.

Kinsella's choice of *The Divine Comedy* as a potential vehicle for promoting an alternative version of Australian history may initially seem baffling. How could the story of Australia—and of the specific location in Western Australia which has been focalised through Kinsella's epic—be seen as situated within Dante's medieval European epic? Kinsella's answer to this fundamental question, although never explicit, is one of the key arguments of his *Divine Comedy*. According to the Australian poet, it seems, the Western-Christian mind and morality, so vividly constructed in Dante's canonical work, are in many ways directly responsible for the "discovery" and invasion of Australia by Europeans and the resulting decimation of the civilisations of the indigenous peoples of the land. In other words, Kinsella seems to have detected (some of) the origins of the ambitions and doctrines that led to the often-brutal creation of Australia (first as a British colony and then as a "White" nation state) in *The Divine Comedy*; and by summoning these origins he disrupts and undermines the situation of Western moralism/imperialism.

In the second part of his rewriting of Canto XXVI of Purgatory, a poem titled "Canto Interpolation: and so, entering the property...,"[59] Kinsella replaces the ghost of Dante's Provençal troubadour with the

[58] C.K. Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness (*Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998) 15.
[59] John Kinsella, "Canto Interpolation: and so, entering the property...," *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography—Three New Works* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008) 124-125.

figure of the 19th century British colonist Robert Dale Ensign, known for leading an expedition for agricultural land in Western Australia, then called the Swan River Colony, in 1830s. Kinsella's insertion of this historical "shade," highly reminiscent of Dante's own impression of the troubadour, is a haunting fusion of a (troubling) recognition of the history of the poet's own people (the progeny of the early Anglo-Celtic settlers and farmers of the region) with a lyrical, "magic realist" relocation of Dante's trope to a Western Australian wheatbelt:

> ...and I ask who, whose lament
>
> is burnt by the sun's concentrated, dying flame,
> who succours beneath the dead grey arching York gum,
> who has his face in the dirt, who steps backwards
>
> at granite's narrow passageway, whose eyes
> are fixed on the sun, burnt blind, unable to quench
> what he so adores, who leans on the shade
>
> of others I recognise, their shapes horse blankets
> of this proposed equine precinct? "I am the shade of R. Dale.
> Ensign of the 63rd Regiment. Soldier. Explorer.
>
> Travelling companion to the head of the warrior Yagan—
> *anthropological curiosity* I offered to sell for twenty pounds.[60]

That the head of an Aboriginal resistor to British invasion was decapitated and sent to London as "*anthropological curiosity*," grotesque as it is, is an indisputable fact of the history of the colonisation of Australia. The tale of the macabre travel of head of the Noongar warrior Yagan is a particularly well-known example of early colonial callousness and barbarity. So far into the poem, Kinsella's conjuring the ghost of ruthless European imperialism has defied neither the conventional narrative—of the European triumph over the indigenous peoples of the colonised worlds—nor Dante's trope of a transparent communication between the living author and a lamenting ghost in the process of burning away his sins in a "concentrated, dying flame." But at this point Ensign's cathartic admissions are suddenly interrupted by an image from the Aboriginal Dreamtime:

> In the overlap of fates, the young warrior Walwalinj
> comes together with the girl Wongborel cross-valley
> as time ends, sealed together by night.[61]

[60] Kinsella, "Canto Interpolation: and so, entering the property...," lines 21-32.
[61] Kinsella, "Canto Interpolation: and so, entering the property...," lines 36-39.

As the reader has been informed in the first line of this poem, the physical site that is the setting for Kinsella's revision of this canto of Purgatory has been named after the British explorer—as Ensign Dale Court—who also, according to the poet's introduction to this section of the book, changed the name of the most prominent mountain in the region from Walwalinj—the name of a mythical figure sacred to the region's Aborigines—to Mount Blackwell.[62] Kinsella's breaking off the British colonist's account with the above sacred narrative revives the erased Aboriginal signifier, the mountain's original name, and this naming of a void, as Badiou would have it, unsettles and weakens the (Eurocentric) situation. The ghosts of early colonists, who earlier in the poem were preoccupied with cleansing their sins and seeking redemption, are suddenly captured by the sight of the emerging Dreamtime spirits, overshadowed by beings such as the Wagyl, a serpent who, according to Aboriginal mythology, created some of the region's rivers and much of its geomorphic features:

> Locked to their terraces, scrabbling for the summit,
> I hear explorers and farmers lamenting: "Why do they
> move so freely?" The Wagyl cuts impervious
>
> rocks of shadow with a differing register
> of light and dark. Chaotic and fractured
> gum bled from dead York gum
>
> reflects our labours, inflects the rates we pay.[63]

The sap that "bleeds" from the trees is as "chaotic and fractured" as the version of the colonist's and settler's "labours" that has been presented in Kinsella's poem. In Dante's original canto—and in a great deal of traditional epic poetry—we are offered precisely an orderly and wholesome version of history, e.g. Dante's loyalty and reverence towards the literary heritage of the earlier poets in Canto XXVI of Purgatory. In Kinsella's revision of the same canto, however, the abrupt manifestation of the (non-Christian) Dreamtime myths and motifs topples not only the Europeans' self-serving, moralist desire for purgation, but also the supposed historicity of their discourse.

By the end of the poem, as it can be seen in the last clause of the above quotation, "we"—that is, contemporary Australian author and readers—have to "pay" for what has been "inflected" by the past. In Dante's canto, the shades of the lustful could find salvation by simply surrendering their confessed sins to the cleansing flames of Purgatory. In Kinsella's canto, on the other hand, such a wishful freedom from the sins of the past is not desirable. The early European settlers' monstrous,

[62] Kinsella, preface to Purgatorio, *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography—Three New Works*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008) 3.

[63] Kinsella, "Canto Interpolation: and so, entering the property…," lines 40-47.

indeed genocidal, invasion of Australia may be a *fait accompli*, but in Kinsella's epic, the revival of Aboriginal truths in the context of European colonial history has the power to fracture and subvert the triumphalist, jingoistic narrative of "progress" and conquest.

CONCLUSION

In his introduction to *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* (2009), Kinsella expresses a predilection for poems that even when "conservative in form are often radical in content."[64] It has been the argument of this paper that Kinsella's own *Divine Comedy* fits this description perfectly: the epic's intimate yet partial simulation/imitation of Dante's work is classically "conservative in form" whilst the rupturing of this conservatism with the articulation of the eco-political and the invocation of the Aboriginal is certainly "radical in content." And, as such, Kinsella's epic is nothing short of an event.

Perhaps the full implications of any event cannot be assessed until some time has passed and the event has exerted a public influence, but it can be seen that *Divine Comedy* has already begun fomenting the kinds of reactions one may expect from an iconoclastic work. Almost immediately after the appearance of the book's preface in the literary supplement of *The Australian* newspaper, for example, letters of complaint arrived from readers who were dismayed by Kinsella's poetics. An Italian language academic complained of Kinsella's impertinent focus on the "shortcomings" of "one of the pillars of Western literature"[65]; while another poet berated Kinsella for the latter's "hatred of Dante."[66] Although the public's reaction to Kinsella's epic has not been overwhelmingly negative—during the writing of this paper, for example, the book was shortlisted for the 2009 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal—it can be safely assumed that the poetic establishment on the whole is not likely to be particularly receptive of Kinsella's challenging project. According to the book's reviewer in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for example, Kinsella is "a black belt in obscurity" for letting "the deaf poetics of the Language School inform his vision like so much mist."[67]

It is perhaps inevitable that a work like *Divine Comedy*—with its dense and intricate citation of the minutiae of Dante's cantos, not to mention the palimpsest of references to ecological and political realities of Western Australia—would seem "obscure" to a general reviewer in a daily newspaper, and that the epic's non-mimetic voice—which may or

[64] Kinsella, introduction, *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* (Camberwell: Penguin, 2009) 2.

[65] Antonio Pagliaro, letter, *The Australian—The Australian Literary Review Edition* 1 Oct. 2008: 26.

[66] Alan Wearne, letter, *The Australian—The Australian Literary Review Edition* 1 Oct. 2008: 26.

[67] Richard King, "Dante, Set Among the Sandgropers," *Sydney Morning Herald* 18 Oct. 2008: 39.

may not be so closely associated with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry—can seem unsatisfactory for such readers. But for the reader interested in a radical and truly modern contemporary poetic event, Kinsella's revision of *The Divine Comedy* provides a superb example of a post-modernist subversion of convention and hegemonic literary tradition. As such, the Kinsella-event, as Badiou may have it, is committed to "claim the power, based on its own axioms, to name the whole of the real, and thus to change the world."[68]

[68] Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002) 83.

Michael Rothenberg

"The Real & False Journals"

excerpts from Book 5

FURTHER NOTICE

I can't live in this world
And I refuse to kill myself
Or let you kill me

The dill plant lives, the airplane
My alarm clock, this ink
I won't go away

I shall be myself—
Free, a genius, an embarrassment
Like the Indian, the buffalo

Like Yellowstone National Park.

22:ix:56

—*Philip Whalen*

POWER OF ATTORNEY, 12/29/2000, HARTFORD ST. ZEN CENTER

Joanne Kyger: There's nothing wrong with dying
Nancy Victoria Davis: Let's celebrate with champagne
Philip Whalen: I'll have mine warm

ZEN HOSPICE: THE PERILS OF EASE, JANUARY 12, 2001

San Francisco, Zen Hospice, across from Page St. Zen Center
today Baker Roshi came with his first wife and a new disciple

Russell Smith was there, and Ottmar, new resident teacher
at Hartford St. Zen Center (Issanji)

Baker Roshi asks Philip if he is being taken care of.
Philip says everything is being taken care of,

"Michael Rothenberg makes everything possible!"
"I try!" I say from my chair pushed away from Philip's bed
now surrounded by Buddhist priests.
"You don't try," Philip says, "you produce!"

*

Meet with Silvia, manager of hospice,
to discuss details of Philip's health,
the daily assessment,
and arrangements for his death

*

At Philip's bedside, I tell him it calms me to hold his hand

"It does?" he says alarmed, "I hope not too much"
What is too much? I ask, Is that possible?
"Yes, if you get too calm your blood pressure
drops and then you die."

*

Old face
gristle & bone, thick (won ton)
Milk- "good stuff"
hold hands

sleep, snore
"It's difficult to leave"—Baker Roshi

THE MAN IS SWEET/THE DOG IS LOVABLE

jennifer: *can I get you anything?*
philip: *mnhmnannnaaam*
michael: *you want to get out of here*
philip: *you're a good boy, Michael...you always know what I mean when I'm...stoned*
michael: *I love you too, Philip*

He occurs to me as a Great Man

Something out of the ordinary

Reminds me of my dog, Bandit
A nasty dog who snapped and growled
        then had a stroke and became lovable

Philip is a very sweet man
Maybe he hasn't always been

January 13, 2001

MORE FROM ZEN HOSPICE DIALOGUES
(or Near Death Experiences: Conversations with Philip Whalen)

Philip says I'm spoiled, self-indulgent, and gluttonous
(or something like that)
because I don't get up early in the morning.
I just don't like to get up early.
He says the whole idea of "early" is where I'm getting messed up.
The moral: "Get up at 5am no matter how early it is."

*

To An Inquiring Nurse

Nurse to Philip: How are you?
Philip: It's a fiasco!!!
Nurse: What's a fiasco?
Philip: It's glass, very thin, with a flat bottom...ask any winemaker.

*

"Picking my nose and looking for socks"
(from Philip's description of himself as a boy
in the morning getting ready for school.

Michael: Do you wear socks when you sleep?
Philip: Only when I can find them.

*

In the morning while combing out tangles from his sister's hair
Philip's mother would say:
"Don't toss your head around so much when your sleeping."
His sister's hair was very thin, "half the size of the thinnest hair."

And his mother would leave a light on in the hall for his sister
because she was scared of the dark for "god knows what reason"
She would lie in bed and rock her head back and forth singing:
"Tobango, tobango, tobango, tobango..."

*

Philip asks the nurse: "What happens if there's a fire in the room?"
The nurse asks, Are you really worried about fire?
Philip replies, "Yes, I'm a certified paranoiac."

*

Have people always thought you were funny?
"I suppose, but they didn't know I was crying inside"

*

Connect the dots
Dream becomes picture
Every picture tells a story

Configured
Reconfigured

Upper and lower dentures in blue cup by sake, fungal cream
Potato chips, bitter dark cooking chocolate chunks

*

Asleep in a cherry-picker surrounded by nothing he knows
Witch Hazel doesn't feel as good as he thought it would
Nothing tastes as good as he remembers

Planter's salted peanuts
"I'll tell the world!"

*

Sores, itches

Picking his nose looking for socks
In the dim Dalles morning of his childhood

10am January 16, 2001

CONVERSATIONS WITH CRISTOPHER ROBIN

Philip: There are words all over my head.
Michael: (rubbing Philip's head), No, there's nothing there.

Tonight Philip and I had our talk about death and dying
"It's disconcerting lying on a precipice"
What's beyond the precipice?
"Nothing. I don't know"

I promise to take his ashes, spread them on Mt. Hood

The serious issue of ashes settled, he says,
"Now we're supposed to move into the parlor
and have tea and crumpets or raspberry strudel"
Do you want tea?
"No, it's always too hot when it comes out. Then it's too cold"
I feed him vanilla ice cream, chocolate chip cookie
and fresh raspberries
He washes it down with milk then sleeps

January 16,2001

PHILIP WHALEN NOD TEST

Vipasana meditation
Indian meditation
Foot massage, insight meditation

*

SIRENS!!

"Hide the dice
and don't give your right name"

*

Control Board on his bed
with different buttons and switches

Which button is for reality?
"It's all reality"

*

"Tell people my story"

*

"ampmeter, gasmeter, pedals, choke"

(driving his bed)

*

Amida Budda
Candle to light incense
Morning Zen
Esalen massage oil
Beginning with foot bone 199

"Oil from Esalen,
which means you've been running around the roadside
collecting herbs and rosemary leaves"
What kind of touch do you like? asks the German masseuse
"You do the thing and I'll tell you if it hurts"

*

He imagines he's back at Hartford St.
looking for a bronze Buddha (thumbs touching), and incense
No, I tell him, we're at Zen Hospice
"Oh"

*

"How about some more Coca Loca?"

*

I tell him he kept nodding out, stoned on morphine
over the past few weeks, I couldn't talk to him
Then twenty minutes later after sitting silently with his eyes closed
he looks up at me, "How about that?"
What? I ask
"Was I nodding out just now?"
No, I think you were just lying still with your eyes
closed thinking, resting.
Why do ask?
"Just checking to see if you thought I was on the nod"

Then we describe the eyes fluttering, head dropping
characteristic of a real nod
and that in the hospital it also involves sewing in the air,
drinking from an imaginary cup, and not being able to
hold a conversation

*

Arches fallen long ago

*

"TAXICABS ON FIRE!!"

*

"She's better than anybody imagines"
Philip Whalen on Joanne Kyger

*

I tell Philip how much I liked cooking
as a teenager in my mother's kitchen
stoned
when she was away on weekend vacations with my father
"That sounds very messy," he says
When she came back she march around the house
looking for evidence, trying to find
that one stain of sauce, something...

Then a hospice worker knocks LOUD at the door
She walks in. Philip asks: "Are you Michael's mother?"

*

I was just so clumsy
"You have to be careful, Michael. It's the Bodhisattva way. Stay awake!"

*

January 16, 2001
Gregory Corso died today

"Goodbye, Gregory!"

*

Bath, pain patch
Schedule round the clock
Companion in the room
Offering milk, ginger ale

Reorientation after naps
Where you are
Why you think you are
Where you are as opposed to
          where you actually are
Where you're not

Sleep will take you there
That's all he needs to know sometimes
That it was sleep delivering him though time and experience
That brought him to this other place
No better or worse
    only different

1/21/01

THE PERILS OF APPRECIATION, JANUARY 22, 2001

Michael: People adore you
Philip: They like to rub on me
Michael: Just as long as they don't rub you out

ZEN HOSPICE NIGHT

Tonight I sleep on a chair
in Philip's room at Zen Hospice
because he no longer knows where he is and gets afraid

*

He says,
"You might think I'm out of my mind but
You and Michael McClure tease me to my wit's end"
About what?
"About where I am and *how to get out of her*e!"

That's when we spoke about the breaking down

of reality, sickness, dying, electrolytes

Tonight we also spoke about the precepts & karma

*

He smiled when I asked him what prayer
I should say over his ashes. I thought there
must be the right prayer for that. Any self-respecting
religion ought to have a prayer for that, I thought
"Find the prayer you want. Look for it. The one you want to say. . ."

*

The Infinite Hotel:
About Kanter on NPR

"Philosophy & Mathematics illusory constructs
not comparable to Buddhism" Philip says about Kanter

January 22, 2001

*

I told him John Suiter called
"Did you tell him I died of a common cold?"

*

Waking from night nap
"Iridescent Celery"
What is that?
"I thought it was a good idea. You could see what you're eating"

*

"The problem with you is you need to have more babies"
To slow me down and straighten me out?
"Exactly. You need to build a dynasty"
(or industry I can't remember exactly which he said).
"An empire."
I need money
"Yes, women like security. You just make them think you have money
and you have Cosmos visit you on weekends"
Then I'll end up with alimonies & child support
"You don't have to do that. You put yourself on top"

I'll have to get a prenuptial agreement
"They're petty"
I guess
"You have to find some woman who lives in New York & goes
to Sante Fe to have fun"
I like Suzi Winson
"So do I"

*

Do you think
I have a Peter Pan complex
"No, you will always have a youthful spirit"

January 23, 2001

*

He spoke with Baker Roshi
about gifts and things for people

Large Butterfly ornamented chop &
Transmission paper should say *Kirigami* on it

*

Buddhism & The Arts
"The research of which
I take a dim
view of..."

*

"I've lost my body image"

*

I ask for clarification of a phrase he uses
"The trouble with you is..."

"The trouble with you is a favorite expression
of Ginsberg & Kerouac. Great straight forward
The trouble is I haven't done this so I ought
I have made trouble for myself because
I have not done this..."

"I don't understand why you pay attention to my silliness?"
Because I like a good story

Your suggestion of a dynasty actually gave me
a positive feeling of possibility

"Ugh"

*

Michael and Amy came by

*

"Let us become spiritual"
in response to more discussion on the ongoing battle for
painkiller reduction

*

Michael Wenger relieves me at 10pm
I'll see you tomorrow Philip
I sing: "Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love ya, tomorrow it's only a day away!"
Philip interjects: "48 hours away"

January 24, 2001

ETERNAL BONFIRES

Call Philip
Tell him I'm going to meet Ottmar at Hartford St.
to help find his things in his room
Philip says to bring him his seal & transmission papers

"Transmission papers are in top drawer of
red dresser under Buddha things
Seal is old man standing beside a deer holding branch or something.
It's to be sent to Baker Roshi"
"But you ought to come now!" he says
"They're supposed to be bathing me in green tea!"
"I feel I'm entering the Eternal Bonfires"
Is that how you feel?
"That's what I'm observing, my dear child"
So then I'll come now and get things later
"Good"

So I race to town frantic because I think he's dying now
Hannah, the hospice nurse, greets me at the door
I tell her about Philip's emergency call
She tells me how much fun she has been
having with him this morning

Philip: Oh, you're here to do your hospice thing
Hannah: What hospice thing?
Philip: Ease me into death?
Hannah: Not you, you're too attached to life
Philip: How ironic!

I go up to Philip's room
Reassure him about property, money & books
Tell him I'm working on his dynasty
He smiles...and babies
And regarding your dynasty, you have me, I tell him
"That's something"

Ottmar comes to hospice to visit Philip
He asks Philip for 3 books from his library for Hartford St.
Blue Cliff Record
Book of Serenity
Shōbōgenzō
I assure Ottmar if necessary I'll buy the books for Hartford St.

Ottmar offers to put a stone for Philip
in the Hartford St. Zen Center garden
"Is that okay, Philip?" he asks
"If it's a good one"

Ottmar reassures Philip
that he has already given seal and transmission papers
to Baker Roshi, (wrapped nicely in red paper)
Who is the figure on the seal?
"Holding the Peaches of Immortality to give away to the folks
who don't want to go further"

*

"We can't get out of the Fish Box. Hail, Columbia."

*

"I have agoraphobia & fear of burning oil"

*

About hearse, casket, coffin
"How will I get out?

*

Chinese food
He likes green peppers
I like broccoli
We trade

His Fortune: You have a deep appreciation of the Arts & Music
My fortune: A modest man never talks about himself

*

"Where is everyone? How will we entertain them? They all seem to be
busy somewhere knitting socks. The bed is too small."
He slides down, we pull him up. Sometimes, he helps,
Sometimes he wonders, "Where am I?"
and why he can't reach me or anyone

Funny thing about you, I tell him, is that you seem to want
to be alone and then you're unhappy about being alone
"Something like that"

*

"And ask Shrader about medicine that keeps my prostate from blowing up"

Pause

He sighs, leaning back in bed, blindly eyes the railing
I am seated beside him.
"As Lewie said, has it come at last to this?"

Pause

About Ottmar: "No false images of Karma going on"

Pause

"Maybe you would put me in a chair
where I can go and see things and smell things.

I don't care how many people see me do this.

"You can sell tickets to lines of people as long as they keep their respectful distances."

"And you can get Pinkerton Men to make sure I don't make a break for it. But I don't have that kind of ambition."

Later

Be here tomorrow, I say on leaving
"Why?"
I don't know...I need time
"So do I. So I'll be here...and consider a beach with a big rock on it where I can sit"
I'll remember

January 25, 2001

DETACHMENTS
(Manuscript, *Goofbook for Jack Kerouac*)

"Like looking at the frames of a movie, feels like
it's got dead batteries. It's going nowhere"

Philip is lifted to a chair and sits up for the 2nd day in a row.

Doorbell rings
"Pink"
What?
"That doorbell sounds pink. It's disgusting."
And how about the other manuscript I want to publish
Invisible Idylls?
"A fake piece of Cocteau"

"Spitballs" is what you called them.
"I wouldn't get attached to that term"

But I like these works
"They get you all wound up for nothing"

Last night I shaved his head & chin, my first time
"Detachments"
You still have your eyebrows, I said, so I did alright
"That's because I rolled them up & hid them until you were done"

PINK
"How awwwwfullll!"

What do you want to call these books?
"I think it's madness"
Carl Jerome suggests that is the title of the book
"No, it's madness to publish them"
Has anyone every said you were mad?
"No, not really but then there was_____ who said he always
thought I was half-crazy and now he's sure I'm totally crazy"

FOOT MASSAGE & DUMB BROADS

Hannah, the hospice nurse, comes in with Philip's drug
She wants to know how he wants his medicine
In juice, papaya nectar, water, ginger ale?
"Fuss, fuss, yammer, yammer, dammit, just give it"
She gives it to him with juice in a tiny plastic cup
then gives him an assortment of chasers for the bitterness
She leaves the room

Later Hannah returns and leans over the railing
of Philip's hospital cage,
How are you doing Philip? This is Hannah,
I hope your medicine begins working soon.
Is there anything more I can do for you?
"You know the way you're draped over that railing, all close and
caring? You should go over and give some of that to Michael.
He could use it."

He knows what I need that sick old buzzard high on tincture of opium

"I don't know why women could think men are so wrong
to call them dumb broads?"
Well here comes another one, I say
In comes a volunteer who took foot massage classes
She rubs Philip's feet, he falls asleep
He wakes up when she's ready to leave and asks
when is she going to rub his feet
She says, I have
"Oh," he says, I thought you were in the kitchen
stuffing chickens & baking cookies"
But I can massage your feet again sometime, she says
"Now, would be fine."
So she does

Drifting off, “I imagine it could do someone a great deal of good
to lounge around in a marble palace”

TINCTURE OF OPIUM

“Fix them toes,” he sings
And when it’s all over, the massage and the broads
He gives me instructions on how to make bagels
And tells me that Ezra Pound loved Arabs

And when it’s all over, recipes for medicine administrations
Multiple changing of sheets, bowel aches and cleaning
I recommend a shave
You’re looking kind of grisly
“Yes, it would be good to shave”
How about now?
He grabs me by the hand, pulls me into his face
“You know you’re sweet but you make some untimely suggestions”
I’m working on averages, I say
“Well your averages just took a slide”
I laugh until I choke
Then he presses his thumb and forefinger together in the air
What is this? I ask
“Pinch”
Oh, you mean to keep me awake?
“Yes”
I never thought meditation would be so hard, I tell him
“It’s harder than you would suppose”

February 1, 2001

I WANT TO BE ALONE, WHY AM I SO LONELY!

“You left the room, nothing to eat no beer in the refrigerator!”
So I kiss his forehead
“WHY did you do THAT???”
Because I’m in love with your skull
I KNOW, EVERYONE’S IN LOVE WITH MY SKULL!!!!
WHY DON’T THEY JUST LEAVE ME ALONE, I HAVE TO PEE!!!
Go ahead, I’ll get someone to change you
“You say that and they don’t come for ten thousand years!!!!”
I love you too, Philip, see you later

February 5

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

I received a note from a magazine last night that said
they would no longer include Big Bridge among
their recommended sites
They didn't think we published POETRY

"GOOD"

*

There's a letter from someone who wants to interview you on Haiku

"HAIKU IS JAPANESE POETRY FORM USING
17 JAPANESE SYLLABLES"

They want to know about Jack's haikus...

"HE THOUGHT HE WAS WRITING HAIKU"

*

Days went by of his bitching at me and then one day he asked for me
I said, *I am* me
And he said,

"HOW DO I KNOW IT'S YOU FOR CERTAIN?"

I said, let me turn on the lights, get your glasses, and I'll hold your
hand and I did. He said,

"I'VE BEEN HAVING A TERRIBLE TIME"

*

My birthday is February 17th. I'm going to be fifty. You don't care much
for birthdays do you?

"NO, SEEMS LIKE TOO MUCH FUSS OVER SOME
TRIVIAL THING"

Did you used to have birthday parties when you were a young boy?

"YES, BUT WHEN YOU CAN GO OUT AND BUY ICE CREAM
ON YOUR OWN. IT DOESN'T SEEM SO IMPORTANT"

February 7,2001

FENTANYL PATCH

A poor man with a coin purse for beggars
awakens from painkiller sleep at Zen Hospice, Page St.
"I want to go home"
Where, Hartford St.?
"Yes"
You can't go home there's no one there to take care of you
"Who's here to take care of me?"
I'm here. Silvia's here. Inell's here. Hannah's here. Phyllis.
And all these volunteers to rub your feet
"Send me one of those people who rub your feet"
I'll be right back
Looking up and down the hall for a volunteer during shift change
A voice echoes from the poor man's room
"My feet! My feet! My feet! My feet!"

February 9, 2001

THANKS FOR SHARING

(for Phyllis)

How did you get so sick? Nurse Phyllis says
"I didn't get sick, I died. I was in my closet getting something
Then fell down and killed myself"

*

I'm going to miss you
"We're all going to miss each other"

February 15, 2001

PEANUT BRITTLE

"About 40 women tried to rescue me in my life"
What happened?
"It didn't work"

*

I'm sorry you're going through this
"It's karma"

*

What about romance?
"It's all imagination"

*

"Where are my glasses? Why do you always hide my glasses?"
Well... I...
"Why are you defensive?

*

"How about a peanut?"
Open up!
"Why are you so bossy?"

*

"I've got something in my nose and I can't get it out."
I apply a damp Q-Tip swab, cautiously—
I never know how deep the hole goes on someone else's nose
"It goes right out the other end into a big pile on the bed"

February 17, 2001

LETTER TO ALICE

Dear Alice,

I just realized that I didn't read the complete note you sent. Some of these e-mail strings just go on forever and I get lost. But I see that I never gave you an update on Philip's health.

First know that he always loves to hear from you and you can call him any time. His number at the hospice is: 415/861-1035. He's feeling a bit abandoned for no apparent reason right now, so all the friendship we can muster will help. He's now off all pain killers and refuses any kind of opiate or mind altering medicines. His system seems stable from the outside but there's no diagnostic process at the hospice. His personal doctor in a meeting with Philip, hospice nurse, Leslie was there, me and the social service worker, basically boiled it down to the idea that his best guess is that Philip might live 6 months. Philip is not in agony and has had some intestinal wackiness but it seems to be under control. We

work on this day by day. One day it's Lomotil and the next day it's salami and pickles. He's a jewel and he's getting lots of love.

Call when you can. He loves getting phone calls from Paris!

Best,
Michael

February 17,2001

SHOPPING LIST

Polident, incense, Kuan Yin from Hartford St.

Do you want to be moved to a chair?
"No I want to suffer"

nerves, irritable (getting better?)

Steady guests, clinging,

root of President is "to sit"

"Everyone comes to see me on weekends out of guilt"

TENDER NAPS

knock...knock...knock
"Come in if you dare"

Land shark...Pizza delivery...Western Union...Land shark

It's Michael McClure
"Oh, god, no!"

Land shark...Singing Telegram...Land shark

When it rains it pours
What's going on? Michael says
"I'm having trouble processing.
'Processing' is what they call living now
Like meat!"

Bath Time

"She's got a bit of greed"
To steal the moment
To own the moment
They come with gifts and kisses, red lips on drawn shy cheeks
It's all a bit of a shock, the tenderness

"And the plums, Mr. Williams, don't forget we need plums!"

February 19,2001

"LOVE AMONG THE RUINS": PART TWO: THE DATE

"I love him
That's why I do it
To make him happy"

Sitting Philip up with his legs over side of bed

"OW!"

"Where's my salami? Remind my belly that my throat ain't cut!"

Now that I know you love me, you can lie down

OLIVES

"Why is it so hard for people to go to the Safeway to get a SALAMI?"

(drop Jennifer note to see how she is)

6.8 Quake
Wonder what the ground's like?
"Oh, that's very interesting geology Puget Sound area, Seattle
"mud, rock, dog shit...
Mattel block construction...

Wait 'til Mt. Ranier blows"

"ferns, frogs, willow trees all coming back to Mt.
St. Helen's in spite of it all"

And Hospice?
"They go to school read *Egyptian Book Of The Dead*
taught by a Tibetan Swami then go volunteer at Zen Hospice
It's all getting way too fashionable"

"I told her, I'm not a couch potato who pays the phone bills
for babies & scuba diving lessons"

Was there ever a time when there was no sin?
...a volunteer asks...

"Yes. Before the birth of Our Lord the Savior"

"Oh heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns!"
Love Among The Ruins, Robert Browning

"Browning had a remarkable vacancy."
Meaning?
"Absence of redeeming social importance."

February 28, 2001

VISIT THE TWICE BORN

"Born dead, what they used to call a blue baby"
Poison Oak
"Morbid Passions"
Getting ready to go to New York
"Have you got everything packed, cufflinks, collar stays?"
Collar stays lost on floor in dark thinking god doesn't like me
"He's susceptible"
Holding me up by the heels & beating on me
"Twice born, twice too often"
Shaggy tree story about Buddha under tree
How many times will I have to be reborn?
"As many times as there are leaves on this tree"
One man says this is terrible
Another man says this is wonderful
Poison oak—Prednisone or Calamine
"It could be leprosy"
Give me a hand
"Twice born, twice too many times"
Olives from Saudi Arabia
Peanut brittle from Ohio
What's the cure for susceptibility?
"Cynicism"

March 13, 2001

PHILIP & I AGAIN

I was washing the dishes and turned on the disposal
I dropped a knife in the disposal
The blade was spinning around
I tried to grab the knife to get it out

"You should have thrown a potato in"

Fortunately the knife was turned blade down and only bruised my finger
I don't know why I was oblivious to what I was doing
I turned off the disposal, took the knife out
Mindless

"Batting off the demons with one hand, eating deviled eggs with the other. No, I will not be able to attend the class of 1951 reunion."

April 16, 2001

APRIL 25, 2001 CHILLING WITH THE MAN

Lying there he looked up at me and asked, "Why is my head cold?''
Because you have a head, I said.
"That was a good answer"
I shut the window

TELEPHONE MESSAGE

Hi Michael, it's Mary from Hospice By The Bay
I want to talk with you a little bit about Philip
We're really thinking about some future plans for him
You know to like increase his rehab and
We really want to talk about the future with him
because he's um, doing, you know, he's really stable, he's doing so much better, he's clearly not actively dying
....

Friday May 4, 2001

BE MORE DYING

Be “actively” dying qualify for hospice
Be “just dying” qualify for extended health care
in maximum security file cabinet
Urine pool, feces, public body classified, legalized, certified
every 3 months with the ultimate goal to be quickly
and inexcusably dead

Venerated Monk wakes in lake
Floats on hospital bed where fish leap over rainbows
He can’t find the brass bell to wake him from the panic
of unexpected dislocation
This is not the mind he knows
Now praying to wake

Be more dying the system says
Practice death rattle for next visit, re-certify for warm bed,
          massage, dolmas, peanut brittle
Die with dignity, but quick
According to regulations

          “Hurry up please it’s time!”

This bed is for people “actively dying’
You’re passively dying. No not dying, you’re living!
You’re living not dying!
You’re dying and living at once!
We can’t have that! Which direction are you going in?
We need to know so we can send your charts to the state,
get reimbursed for this burden of you

Be more dying or we’ll put you on the street
Be more dying, be more meat
Be less spirit, be less conscious
Be out the door, not in the lobby lounging,
flaunting good humor and will
Don’t act like Bacchus, be morose, hang your tongue down
Roll your eyes toward the void, be blisters and horror
We’ll drape ourselves over you, moan, moan!
    Be more dying!
Groan out loud, evaporate
Then everything will be better

          May 10, 2001

JOE'S BIRTHDAY SUGAR JOURNEY

Michael: Where do you want to go? I'm driving.
Philip: Try to explain that to yourself.
Michael: Are you trying to confuse me?
Philip: Confuse you? I can't even confuse myself.

May 15, 2001

FREAKS IN EXILE

Michael: Would you give me a Buddhist name?
Philip: Mordecai McGee
Michael: Are you kidding?
Philip: Buddha is everywhere. You have something against the Irish?
Michael: Fine. I accept it but it will reflect on you.

*

Philip: One of these days a rocket is going to explode over San Francisco. And stars are going to fall out of it
And people are going to say, "There goes Michael"

*

Mordecai McGee: Some people like your work
Some people like your publicity

Om Ah Hum

May 18, 2001

Stephen Muecke

"Something Wrong? Oh, Must be Ghost..." Writing Different Existences

When old Paddy Roe, from Broome, used to speak of ghosts he would call them "living ghosts," as in the title of one of his stories.[1] These beings would "belong" somewhere, or he would have a line like, "something live in this country, you know" (55). These beings do not exist in some alternative realm to which the shades are banished, but remain in contact *with* us in this world, and not just anywhere, only in particular places, on the track to a waterhole, or in a gully where some crime might have been committed. This Aboriginal world of the Nyigina and Yawur peoples of North-West Australia is not subject to some kind of Manichean divide.

Paddy Roe taught me about the encounter with strangeness. What is strange? A species of tree "in the wrong place"; a dog with ears like a donkey and a big woolly tail: it gives people going fishing before dawn a big fright, but when they come back to look at the place where it was, there are no tracks, "oh, something wrong...must be ghost." Or when they hear babies crying, where there are no babies:

> Only baby crying—
> He's a living ghost you know—
> Well they only just say *wirang*—
> *Wirang* you know he belonga there—
> (soft) *Wirang* you know he belonga there—[70]

Ghost as we say in English, or *Geist* as they say in German: mind, spirit. Something ephemeral or not quite there, which the *maban* (the clever man) can see but not us ordinary people. Or we are just accorded a glimpse, and this is a true story: I was sitting on the beach looking out at the Indian ocean one day years ago, and thought I saw, (out of the corner of my eye) a figure leap out of a breaking wave onto the rocks. Must be *ngadjayi* Paddy Roe told me later, and as he described this

[1] "Living Ghost," in Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983) 66-74; hereafter cited in the text by page number.

being I translated for myself: water nymph, and I felt blessed in some strange way by the experience.

OTHER EXISTENCES

The spirit is that which is neither dead nor alive, yet is surges up into the zone where we think we are (we call it "our world" or "reality" for short). Valuable spiritual stuff is being generated all the time like green ghostbuster gunk: songs are handed down, culture is not just maintained but *invented* through the agency of death and the method of the glimpse of the half-there, the half-alive. It is your old great-aunt, now dead, who taps you on the shoulder as you are sleeping; and in the middle of the night Old Butcher Joe might wake you up singing in the camp at Minariny: over and over, he is memorising the song. The night sky is thick with too-bright stars. Other worlds. In ours the fire is low, you add a branch.

Other existences assert themselves however vestigially. It must be possible to go further than this—again Manichean—subject/object polarisation, that philosophically impoverished to-ing and fro-ing between who is subject or object of whose inquiry, and take the opportunity to think about the varieties of modes of existence offered by the relation of living *with* such other beings, who offer both poetry and heart-thumping encounters with strangeness in the night.

Relations signalled by prepositions—*with*, *against*, *by*, *for*—are true modes of existence and offer a wide variety of relations. The ontological is not just defined by the act of nomination, giving names to distinct things—*dogs*, *air*, *happiness*—as if all variety is inscribed in the nouns. The relations are as real as the things, and other connecting words like *and*, *if*, *because of*, also signal specific relations, something the radical empiricists like William James taught us:...what he called "a feeling for *or*, a feeling for *because."*

The point is that the ontology of prepositions immediately takes us away from the kind of all too familiar inquiry in the philosophies of being: it exists or is doesn't. *Are ghosts real? No, of course not, darling.* That tradition can be contrasted with one that might be based on the verb "to have" instead of "to be." With being you are on your own. But when you *have* something, you are in a kind of possessive relationship; you are connected *with* it. One might ask, "tell me what you have and I will tell you who you are." But relationless, you might claim being or non-being, but you are still nothing, because you are cut off.

Reminds me of all those "having" suffixes in Australian languages - ***tjarra*** the proprietive suffix in the Western Desert. There, fore example, the Ngaanyatjarra peoples are so known because they "have this"; they are the ones who say "ngaanya" for "this."

The preposition, as its name perfectly well indicates, *prepares* the *position* that has to be given to *what follows*, giving the search for

meaning a definite inflection, which will allow one to judge its direction or its vector. Latour:

> Just like prepositions, regimes of enunciation set up what is to follow, without impinging at all on what is actually said. Just like musical scores, the regime merely indicates which tonality, which *key* one has to get ready to play the next part in. So this is not about looking for what is *underneath* the statements, their condition of possibility, or their foundations, but a thing which is both light and decisive, their mode of existence: it tells us *"What to do next?"*[2]

What we have to do next is find a way of *writing with* that respects the various modes of existence implied by different kinds of relations: the feeling for *with*, for *because of*, the feeling for *thus*. Let me reiterate the philosophical point. The world is not a bipolar one where everything is tending towards either the status of the objective or the status of the subjective. We can be both more inventive than that, and also respectful of different modes of existence so as not to reduce them to either of those poles. Certainly reductions can and are performed, all the time, and with more or less success. You can reduce AIDS-preventing condoms to a crime against human fertility, sure, or you can reduce a Catholic Mass to a set of objectively defined ritual functions. In the first case you have failed to respect what medical science can do, and in the second you have failed to respect the specific mode of existence of a religion.

So for me this implies writing with a kind of multirealism in mind, a writing which is not about reduction, but about respect for that "feeling for with," which is also a respect for what brought us—all kinds of beings—together "in this life." The great Aboriginal thinker David Unaipon said: "Everything that exists has some life apart from itself."[3] He was speaking of the "Water Spirit…as the most multiple spirit of all," and how she gave us the Green Frog.

An ethnographic writing that is a writing which is not founded upon the faithful reflection of the presence of the nominal object. It is contingent upon the action and reaction that is implied in a negotiated relation. *Writing with* is stories exchanged, not a stealing of authority or even authorship. Authority, in turn, is not in some transcendent position detached in its Being, but in the strength of the relation that we *have*. This is not a relation as some ineffable "in-between," it is real pathways where knowledge gathers strength and becomes public thoughts and public feelings. *Writing with* is not import/export in the knowledge business, it is *keeping things alive in their place*, where the place may

[2] Bruno Latour, "Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les différents modes d'existence*," *The Speculative Turn*, eds. Graham Harman, Levi Bryant and Nick Srnicek (Melbourne: re.press, 2010).

[3] David Unaipon, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press at the Miegunyah Press, 2001) 53.

the be the ethnographic text as much as the place where Unaipon's Green Frog emerges from the Water Spirit in all her multiplicity.

So I am talking about ghosts and their continued habitation of this world we like to think of as absolutely modern. Ghosts could be, if you like, the phenomenon of the dead remaining with us, and we seek to keep their memory alive. Why is their history not irrelevant to our present concerns? In other words, to think of the problem more generally or theoretically, the "status" of the dead can neither be their total disappearance, without which nothing would be understandable and society would break down (that is, if the dead did not make their presence felt at all after death); nor their unchanging presence, without any modification, as if the dead had only gone away temporarily, down to the local store, for instance.

So death (or the spiritual) is not an absolute, nor a transcendence to another state. So it cannot have a unitary value, always the same, which we might *want to* attribute to singular god. "You make my life meaningful," one says to a god or to an adored loved one. Then suddenly that person is gone. A spouse is lost after so many years of togetherness it seems that the value had become permanent. A community loses a valuable leader whose absence creates an ethical (if not moral) void: the bereaved start to drift, asking themselves, "what can we *do* next?"

Some of us felt a bit like that at Paddy Roe's funeral. We had the service under the old Tamarind tree and then moved down to the cemetery. We took turns shovelling the red earth onto his coffin as the women, and some men, cried. The Catholics repeated the Hail Marys endlessly, people made more speeches, and I remember Franz saying, "I guess we'll have to let you go, old man," like Paddy himself used to say, sitting under his old Tamarind tree, sending us off so he could have a break.

Teresa sat on a chair at the head of the grave and we took turns to say a few words to her and embrace her. When it was my turn she held on strongly, it was a bear hug, and I thought after a while I should get away and let someone else have a turn. I felt someone tap on my shoulder. But she hung on to me. After a minute we let go and I looked around to see who was waiting. No one there. I found Krim and asked him, did you tap on my shoulder? No, he said. I thought about the quality of that tapping. Real, imaginary, symbolic? It had the quality of certainty, even if I wanted to think it hadn't happened, it was still kind of definite. Maybe he was letting me know I could write about it, tell you about it, and I know it is also a way of saying that he will never leave me, and that he is always there, he belongs there.

Michael Farrell

An Australian Classic: Robbie Walker's "Okay, Let's Be Honest"

Three recent anthologies are framed around the idea of the "classic" or essential Australian poem.[1] The following aims to bring to attention a poem by the Aboriginal poet, Robbie (or Robert) Walker. The poem, "Okay, Let's Be Honest," was anthologised by Kevin Gilbert, in his *Inside Black Australia*, and is a memorable and original critique of Australia.[2] It's a poem for anyone who doesn't think of Australia as heaven, and challenges the contemporary assumption that it's all right to criticise "society" or "government," but not Australia in general. It is, in other words, a classic. What follows is a reading of this poem.

When I first read Walker's poems in Gilbert's anthology, his biography had a stronger initial effect on me than his poems: Walker was killed in Fremantle Prison in 1984 at the age of twenty-five. He apparently suffocated due to pressure on his chest from prison guards. The guards were never charged. Walker's death was one of those investigated by the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Royal Commission between 1987 and 1991. The circumstances of his death are an unforgettable fact. I've found two of his poems unforgettable also: "Okay, Let's Be Honest" and "Solitary Confinement."[3] They are, I think, the major aesthetic achievements of his too brief life.[4]

[*] First published in Blue Dog 7.14 (2009).

[1] *Australian Classics* considers stories and novels also. The three anthologies are: *Australian Classics: 50 Great Writers and Their Celebrated Works*, ed. Jane Gleeson-White (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2007); *100 Australian Poems You Should Know*, ed. Jamie Grant (Prahran: Hardie Grant, 2008); *60 Classic Australian Poems*, ed. Geoff Page (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009).

[2] *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry*, ed. Kevin Gilbert (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988). The poems are published under the name Robert Walker.

[3] "Solitary Confinement" is also in the anthology: it tells of Walker's prison experience in further detail.

[4] Robbie Walker, "I see them only as a beginning," *Up*, *Not Down*, *Mate!: Thoughts from a Prison Cell* (Adelaide: Charlotte Szekely and the S.A. Justice Freedom and Hope Workgroup, 1987) 3. There were poems in his cell the night Walker died, but they were apparently thrown out, Commissioner L.F. Wyvill, *Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: Report of the Inquiry into the Death of Robert Joseph Walker* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1991) 82; 91.

The poem "Okay, Let's Be Honest" appears simple and straightforward. The language is simple—but strong (in both senses of the word). It doesn't pull its punches. But the poem has a double target: it needs both fists at once. And though the theme of the poem is to some degree that of violence, there's a modesty to Walker's poems that make them all the more affecting.

We are alerted to the poem's doubleness by the title: "Okay Let's Be Honest." Who is being addressed? The "us" of "Let's" has been elided in colloquial fashion. The ultimate import of "us" isn't clear until the poem's last line, though the meaning is there all along. The poem begins: "Okay, let's be honest:/ I ain't no saint,/ but then again,/ I wasn't born in heaven." It seems the narrator is saying that both he and the addressee of the poem should admit that the narrator is "no saint." But before I go further, I'll be honest about the idea of the narrator and this poem. Current convention is to avoid conflating the "I" of a poem with the writer of the poem: the "I" is seen as a narrator, a persona. There is a contradiction in this practice with the rise of autobiography or memoir—in Australia this rise is associated partly with Aboriginal memoir, of telling the stories of Aboriginal experience. While other poems of Walker's tend towards a more symbolic representation, I read this as an account of Walker's life in prison, learned first-hand. To talk about a "narrator" would seem like a false kind of literary respect. What is more to the fore in reading this poem is that we know Walker wrote about what he knew, and we know that the end of his experience was a tragic one.

To return to the reading of Walker's "I ain't no saint," he could be saying, "Don't romanticise me"—if the figure of the sinner weren't already heavily romanticised. In Christian terms, "I ain't no saint" could be read as confession. Both the confession and the terms are immediately contradicted by the following lines, "but then again,/ I wasn't born in heaven." This excuse may be a vernacular expression, it may be Walker's invention; but invention or borrowing, it's what Walker does with it that counts. And what we as readers do with that. Our first duty is to take him seriously. Walker "wasn't born in heaven," but Australia.

Not Australia Felix obviously. Or could Australia be both heaven and not, depending on the circumstances you were born into? This reading has rhythmic as well as political consequences, encouraging an emphasis on the "I": "*I* wasn't born in heaven." Another implication of not being "born in heaven" is the negation of the Christian system. I'd like to note the importance here of not assuming that the reader in general is non-Indigenous; though *my* reading necessarily is. Walker's narrator can reasonably assume his readers—Indigenous or not—know what he means by not being "born in heaven." Yet there is more than one meaning that resonates from this expression. Although Walker uses the tropes of Christianity: of sainthood and heaven, he only refers to

them negatively: “no saint,” “wasn’t born in heaven.” As an Indigenous man, he belongs to another religious system, an Aboriginal religion (something Walker points to briefly but explicitly later in the poem). As a poet he may be inside the economy of the English language, and as a prisoner, caught in the economy of punishment, but he is outside the economy of sin and forgiveness. Walker uses Christianity as a rhetorical structure: one that readers familiar with such structures could understand, whether Indigenous or not, whether Christian or not.

> Okay, Okay!

The double “Okay” functions doubly: in providing a rhetorical conclusion to the first four lines, and an emphatic introduction to the next three. It can be read as the Aboriginal structure of repetition used in place names (Wagga Wagga, for example), while the ascension into exclamation provides a Christian, post-penitence standing and acceptance (but there are other ascensions, other mythical climaxes). The differing punctuation (comma, then exclamation mark) of the “Okay”s prevents the (Western) redundancy and erasure that pure repetition might suggest. If the crime being confessed is the double borrowing of the American term “Okay,” then Walker’s narrator is in “good” company: that of many of the Australian poets of his generation—in other words “Okay” is “Okay.”

But that colonial exchange is not the paramount one for Walker. The poem soon informs us of the reality his narrator was born into:

> I’ve been in and out,
> since the age of eleven.

Not Robert Adamson—not even Ned Kelly—were “in” that early. Post-convict Australia, late twentieth century Australia was still gaoling eleven year-old Aboriginal boys. Assuming Walker to be referring to his own experience, the year he turned eleven was 1970. It’s around this time that taking children from Aboriginal mothers (officially) stops.[5] But the attempt to corrupt (or “rehabilitate”) children in prisons continues.

Walker confesses:

> And I’ve been mean,
> hateful
> and downright dangerous.

The poem can be read as a mini Aboriginal *Jerilderie Letter*, as an example of that Australian genre of the defence, that attempts to reach

[5] “The forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was official government policy from 1909 to 1969. However the practice took place both before and after this period.” Stolen Generations Factsheet, The National Reconciliaction Network website: http://reconciliaction.org.au/nsw/education-kit/stolen-generations.

a general audience or public, and explain the narrator's actions and self-formation. It's not the epic appeal of Whitman—its pressuredness is closer to Mayakovsky—but neither Kelly nor Walker have any illusion of being part of a system that belongs to them.[6] The above quote is candid and direct: this is not the self-examination of the lyric.[7]

> I've lain in my own blood
> in hotels,
> boys homes,
> and cop shops.
> I've cursed my skin
> not black, not white.
> Just another non-identity,
> fighting to be Mr. Tops.

The narrator's lying in his "own blood" could read like melodrama, or exaggeration, without the catalogue of places it has happened: the mundanity (to Walker) of this experience. This is clearly not the experience of white Western poets. The next lines address race: "I've cursed my skin:/ not black, not white." The ambiguity here could signify several different things. Coming directly after his reference to his bleeding body, the lines suggest that suffering makes skin colour redundant; that his skin is red with blood; that his skin is brown rather than black. That the narrator refers to himself as a "not black" and a "non-identity," doesn't mean he doesn't identify as an Aboriginal, as the poem soon makes clear. It does suggest something of his being part of a criminal underclass that may or may not be an Aboriginal one. The aspiration to be a generic "Mr. Tops," further ironises the narrator's "non-identity."

> Yeah so I'm called a bastard,
> an animal, a trouble maker;
> whilse my accusers watch my brothers smashed,
> thrown into dog boxes drunk, crying for the dreamtime.

[6] Ned Kelly, *The Jerilderie Letter* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2001). Kelly is inclined rather to threats and boasting rather than self-examination: he talks of what he has done and will do, rather than what he is. But consider (the nicely ambiguous), "It will pay Government to give those people who are suffering innocence, justice and liberty" (27) and "I came back to Victoria knew I would get no justice if I gave myself up" (39). This is not an idle comparison, there are inevitable correspondences to be found in the writings of convicts, criminals—anyone who has been subject to the punitive side of the law (and writes about it), or as Walker calls it in "Solitary Confinement": "a strange thing indeed—/ This rehabilitation system." Given statistics—or rather, the disenfranchised situation of Aboriginal people—a (mis)proportion of those writers are likely to be Aboriginal.

[7] Also compare Robert Adamson's "Alright, there'll always be glib explanations:/ cashing in on experience again?" from "The Imitator," *The Golden Bird* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2008) 29, and "I've looked around every inch/ of the jail & dug my own groove in yellow/ sandstone, & searched without sleep/ & searched again" ("The Rebel Angel," 32).

Here the "accusers" could be police or whites generally. Here again, Walker moves away from the lyric, as he recognises a situation shared by his "brothers." For the third time he has used a list of three to rhythmic and emphatic purpose: "mean,/ hateful/ and downright dangerous"; "hotels,/ boys homes/ and cop shops"; and "a bastard,/ an animal, a trouble maker." It could be a typo or a spelling error that spells "whilse" instead of "whiles," yet it seems like a stronger vernacular: like that of "youse." The drunkenness might cause the crying, but the implication is there that it's the loss of "the dreamtime" that causes the drunkenness. This crying moves directly to his mother crying over his father's death: "My memory is still wet with my mother's tears,/ flowing by my father's grave." Walker's father also died young—but this is unremarkable: as the stanza continues: "Just another black family/ alone and lost in the race for a dime." That last phrase's borrowed corniness emphasises the rhyme that occurs throughout the poem. The scheme is unusually informal: ABCDEFGD, rhyming every fourth line, of, roughly, seven stanzas of eight lines. I use the word "roughly" because the second stanza, which, like the first, uses a shorter line than the following five, is in nine lines. This might be an error, it may be deliberate, we can't know. The stanza wouldn't, I think, be improved by making it eight lines. The differing forms of the stanzas—the shorter lines of the first two stanzas, the longer lines of the later ones—create an overall or macro rhythm.

Consider the corniness. Walker can afford to borrow (the food of) American idiom, but not an actual "dime"—not the wealth that American cultural and economic imperialism creates or allows. The distinction between a "dime" and a "cent" is redundant if you don't have any of either.

"A early as I can remember,/ I was made aware of my differences." The plural "differences" suggests Walker was aware of a difference other than racial. Of course, this may still be a distinction between being Indigenous or not: there being cultural differences also. Perhaps Walker is also pointing to the differences involved in being a poet—or maybe even—despite the flaws he admits to, and those that others lay on him—the difference of the honest person. (A poet would perhaps naturally privilege the honesty of writing over that of action.)

These lines follow: "and slowly my pains educated me:/ either fight or lose." Again, how we read this is affected by our knowledge of the context. The phrasing of "slowly my pains educated me" isn't exactly clichéd, but is a familiar idea. This isn't country and western crooning though—we can't ignore the pain as candy-ass cowboy pathos. Walker isn't talking about "adult education"—though it may have made him the adult he is—or of "further education" or "night school" or any other supplementary formulation. He's actually saying that the racialised experience of being in and out of gaol since the age of eleven was the substitute for high school education—and even the end of primary

school. We don't know how he learnt stanza forms: whether from a teacher "in" or "out"—or from reading.

Stanza four concludes:

> "One sided," I hear you say.
> The come erase the scars from my brain,
> and show me the other side of your face:
> the one with the smile painted on with the colours
> of our sacred land you abuse.

This stanza has its own particular rhythm, created by the half-rhymes and the long last line (just as stanza six has end rhymes, and stanza seven internal rhyme). Walker's phrase, "the other side of your face," implies that despite the aggressive (or defensive) face he is shown by the non-Indigenous addressee, there is a feminised, privileged side: this privilege created by taking from "our sacred land you abuse." With this one line, Walker re-contextualises his poem, shifting from what could be an urban, quasi-Christian experience to claiming the experience of one who subscribes to Aboriginal spirituality—a spirituality that is defined by "sacred land."[8]

> "One Sided?" Yeah mate!
> Cop it sweet 'n all.
> "After all, you stepped out of line
> and got caught.
> "So take it easy," you say,
> "You're not like the rest.
> You have got brains and a bright future,
> there's no battle to be fought."

"One Sided" becomes here the precondition of honesty; if the White-identified other of this dialogue is to be honoured with the "mate" of the book title (*Up*, *Not Down*, *Mate!*) then they must "cop it sweet": that is, listen to what Walker's saying. These phrases outside of quotes hinge the unequally weighted dialogue, a dialogue ironically self-directed: Walker knows he has to "cop it sweet." Walker collages the dialogue here, moving from an apparently direct quote "'After all…'" to "'So take it easy,' you say…" The other speaker seems to make an unanswerable argument, by saying Walker is special—even though this specialness is a factor in his "step[ping] out of line"—and that although he happens to be a young Aboriginal male in gaol he has "a bright future" presumably because he has "got brains." Or is it because the other speaker is unable

[8] Kelly makes an interesting, comparative statement: "I did not blame them for doing honest duty but I could not suffer them blowing me to pieces in my own native land" (*The Jerilderie Letter*, 56). Here the police become the other, the invader, while Kelly displaces—but also identifies with—the Aboriginal.

to be honest? The "you" separates Walker from his context, and from cultural-racial identity.

Walker refuses to accept the premise of the other's argument, won't answer as an individual. He says next:

> But that don't tell me what I want to know.
> So tell me: why do we have to stand in line?
> Why do we have to live your way, in subtle slavery
> to earn the things that once were free?

Again, despite Walker's apparently simple language, there are multiple meanings involved here. The "stand in line" could refer to the figurative line that Walker "stepped out of," as well as the queueing of consumer society: to buy goods, apply for jobs, or to receive charity. It also evokes the queueing involved in prison, or the line at a slave auction. (A reading could be made that relates to poetry: that of the required written "line" in English, displacing Aboriginal song.) The phrase "your way, in subtle slavery," refers not just to the bonds of the worker in Western capitalism, but to the literal slavery of the imprisoned. The next line also contains ambiguities: "the things that once were free" refers most obviously to a pre-invasion Aboriginal way of life, but can also be read as the life outside prison. It suggests that the very "things" are now imprisoned, and also points to the paradox of the colonial: once everything has been taken, is it still free? How does the taking continue?

The next four lines could be read as passive lament, but to do so would contradict both the logic of the lines and that of the poem as a whole.

> Why do I have to close my eyes,
> and make believe I cannot see
> just what you are doing:
> to my people—OUR PEOPLE—and me?

Walker is not closing his eyes here: the emphasis falls on the active "do" of the first line, not the more passive "have." This is not the resistance of the slave, but refusal of one that doesn't subscribe to rhetoric, not even the rhetoric of honesty, but only to honesty itself. The earlier phrase, "your way, in subtle slavery" can be read as referring to the dishonesty of style. That "slavery" sounds rhetorical is because it has been used so often figuratively. But that is not the case here: the figurative connotations are merely the resonance of a real situation.

The move in the quote above to the capitalised "OUR PEOPLE" not only refuses the "my[ness]" of individuality, but arguably (and subtly, despite the capitals) allows a reading of reconciliation, affirmed by the repeated "mate" and the original black and white cover of Walker's book. The first edition of *Up*, *Not Down*, *Mate!* illustrated the title: using a black hand and a white hand on the left and right sides respectively.

The hands make three moves: thumbs up, thumbs down, and then finally grasp each other in mateship. The cover of the second edition, (published after Walker's death) in the Aboriginal colours of yellow, red and black, is both more militant and pathetic. It shows the Aboriginal flag, and a single black forearm and hand, the hand outlined against bars. The title, formerly expressing a sentiment of black and white together against despair, now evokes Indigenous resistance.[9]

In the final stanza, the poem returns to the words of the first stanza, and the explicit theme of the title: of honesty. But there are new complexities to be read in the first four lines of the stanza.

> Well, bloody hell, Mate!
> It ain't one sided at all!
> Come read the lonliness and confusion
> on the walls of this cell of seven by eleven.

The vernacular use of "bloody hell" has its literal side in this poem. The phrase is also opposed to the "heaven" that will return in the final line. The following line's "It ain't one sided" allows several interpretations. Walker can be taken as meaning that a view of a people is not a view of "one side." Further, if non-Indigenous people are implicated in this "people" then this complicates the issue of "sides." But we can also consider the literal—honest—meaning. Walker doesn't have the privilege of the "one side" that is the outside. Rather, he is confronted with the six sides of a cell. Walker again uses "Mate" in the address of the poem, and this time it's an invitation: to "come read the lonliness and confusion/ on the walls." The text of the poem isn't merely one-sided—there is of course what he's been saying on the preceding two pages of the poem—but there's also the text of "lonliness and confusion/ on the walls." This may be read as figurative, but I think we can assume Walker's pointing to some marks left by himself and previous occupants, whether or not it could be "read" literally. But this reading is available too. In a sense, the walls could be the drafts of what Walker has managed to make into this poem (Walker's book is subtitled, *Thoughts from a Prison Cell*). It could be the writings of many others before him. Walker's mention of "hell" recalls the poem of the white convict poet, Frank McNamara: "A Convict's Tour of Hell."

Such reminders of Australia's convict past contribute to the conclusion of the poem. The rhetoric of the poem's ending is there to be read—but the ending is literally true also. The final four lines are a

[9] The inside sleeve of this edition says it was "put together to commemorate the 3rd anniversary of Robbie's death in a W.A. jail. We have added several poems and photographs [of Robbie and his parents, Anzac and Linda]." A dedication page by Robbie's sister Charlotte follows, addressed to "all Aboriginal people who died in police cells and prison custody," and "In loving memory of the man who wrote these poems while he was in prison himself." The final pages, 30-33, consist of statements regarding "Aboriginal Deaths in Custody," and "Robbie's case."

repetition of the first four lines, with (apparently) minor variations. But would Walker—would any poet—vary the lines merely for the sake of it?

The final lines read:

> Yeah, okay, I'll be honest:
> I ain't no saint. But then again,
> *I SURE WASN'T BORN IN HEAVEN!*

The "us" of "let's" has become "I"—"I'll be honest"—as if admitting the poem (dialogue included) has all been in Walker's voice or thoughts—alone in a cell. The next two lines mimic the second and third lines of the first stanza. To the final line Walker adds the word "SURE." The line is both capitalised and italicised and adds an exclamation mark. This conclusion—in both senses—whether because of the variation, or because of the intervening stanzas of the poem doesn't read to me as repetition, but a fresh, though logical statement. Walker "wasn't born in heaven" but Australia. He doesn't suggest that the pre-invasion Australia he never knew was or might have been "heaven." But somehow he has ended up in the "hell" of an Australian prison. And perhaps this does point to a one-sided aspect of Australia: the hell on the outside that Walker depicts, creating that of the inside. The final exclamation mark is the third in the stanza, this punctuation perhaps ironically standing in for the three hand gestures of the cover.

There are other poems of Walker's—in particular "Those Terrible Little Things" and "Ruff, Very Ruff"—that are also worth reading.[10] I hope that *Up*, *Not Down*, *Mate!* will be reprinted some day. Until then, there are the poems featured in *Inside Black Australia.*

[10] Walker, *Up*, *Not Down*, *Mate!* 8; 9.

Johanna Drucker

PWars (after Caesar)

All poetry is divided into three parts, one of which the late Romantics inhabit, the Modernists another, those who in their own language are called Language Poets, in ours Conceptualists, the third. All these differ from each other in language, aesthetics, and rules of composition. The early avant-garde separates the Romantics from the Modernists and the coming of postmodernism separates the Modernists from the Conceptualists. Of all of these, the Romantics are the most heroic, because they remain furthest from the reaches of the banality and homogenization of conventional Rules, and the mainstream and academic critics least frequently attend to them and they remain immune to those things that most inflate the ego and soften the mind; they are nearest to the Expressionists, who dealt in exaggerated emotion, with whom they are still often in conflict; for which reason the Language Poets also surpass most of the Romantic Poets in valour, since they contend with the Modernists in almost daily struggles, whether they repel them from their websites, or themselves attack their publications. One of these, which it is said the Language Poets came fully to control, is called poeticsweb, and takes its lineage from the Russians, the Futurists, and the Dadas, is bounded by Surrealism, the experimental tradition of automatic writing, the territories of sound poetry and visual collage; it borders on modernism, with its formal innovations in the vernacular language of Williams, and upon the archaeology and archaicisms of Pound, and on the existential cries of Eliot. LangPo rises from the plains of Stein's materiality, Yeats's mythologies, Reznikoff's polyglot sensibility, and Zukofsky's relentless attention to forms. After mid-century, the stream shifts course, with the influence of Cage and the commitment to process, Wittgenstein's late work, and Olson's expansive projections, defining itself according to a procedural turn. It turns its back on the excesses of the Beats, applies itself to resistance, takes up the charge of political agency by looking to epistemological defamiliarisation on the left and the horizon of personal influence on the right. It looks between the setting of the age of heroic modernism and the rising stars of celebrity culture. Among these, the Printers move with

alacrity and grace, suffering the Poets to come unto them to be rendered into impressions on the page.

Among the Poet-printers, Ron Mann was the least driven and without clear ambition. He, when in charge, formed a coalition among the minor figures, and persuaded the poets to go forth from their habits with all of their intelligence, [telling them] that to be printers would be very easy, since they all excelled in writing, to acquire the production of all contemporary literature. To this he more easily persuaded them, because the still emerging LangPo were confined on every side by the nature of their approach; later this would be clear, that they were hemmed in on one side the procedural, a very deep and powerful technique, which separates them from the lyrical tradition; on a second side, by the conceptual, which separates them by an enormous gulf from the traditionalists, who keep bringing observation and epiphany into their works; and on the third, by the vast commitment to difficult language, which separates them entirely from the common culture. From these circumstances it resulted that they could range less widely, and could less easily make success in the broader sphere; for which reason, writers incited by the lust for success [as they were] were affected with great regret. They thought, considering the extent of their gifts, and renown for their intelligence and rigor of approach, they had but narrow limits, as they extended in length across the better part of a century and in breadth through some hundreds of titles. But in the first campaigns it was still the Surrealists and the Traditionalists who held sway.

Induced by these considerations, and influenced by the authority of the Old Poets, the young Writers were determined to provide such things as were necessary for their publications—to send as great a number of manuscripts as possible to various editors, to make their projects as ambitious as possible, so that their work might accumulate in stature, and to establish relations with the communities of writers and poets in neighbouring institutions. So they set about to curry favour with the Old Poets while they attempted to do that which they had resolved on, namely to expand their influence through publications. When the young Writer felt at length prepared for this activity, she thought to put away all her early journals, in number about a dozen, to promote the published works, and to conceal the juvenile book collections that remained. She laboured to destroy the old manuscripts, except what she intend to carry forward, that after destroying the hope of continuity, she might be the more ready for undertaking a new challenge. They ordered every one to bring forth from their studies enough paper for three months. And she renounced the cult of Surrealism and its followers and sought another path. The leaders of the LangPo were scattered, one of whom had chief influence in New York, exceedingly beloved by many people, and others among the Canadians, and the Californians, but their forces were still gathering out of sight to put down the Workshop Poets and convert the Traditionalists.

Ron Mann reckoned that a term of two years would be sufficient for them to execute their preparations, they fixed by decree their launch of strategies throughout these years. Patrick O'Brien is chosen to complete these arrangements. He took on himself the position assistant to the tasks: in this role he persuades his allies (one of the New York School, whose teachers had possessed influence among the poets for many years, one of the Sound Poets linked to the Italians, and several of the Traditionalists), to seize upon the editorship of their own publications, which their teachers had held before them. And he likewise persuades Paul Dernier, an Olympian and late Symbolist, who at that time possessed chief influence in San Francisco, and was exceedingly beloved by many people, to attempt the same. And unto Hank Tattingler and Peter Stuart and TommyT others to be known he similarly appealed. He proposes to them that to accomplish their ambitions was a thing very easy to be done, because he himself would obtain the position of printer of his own editions.

When this scheme was disclosed to the young Writer, she, according to the custom, felt compelled to plead her cause with humility; it was the law that the penalty of being excommunicated from the Surrealist school should await her if condemned. On the day appointed for the pleading of the cause, a young Poet drew together from all quarters to a reading, his many friends to the number of dozens of persons; and led together to the same place all his supporters and subscribers, of whom he had a great number; by means of these he rescued himself from [the necessity of] pleading the cause. While the community of poets, disinterested by this act, was endeavouring to assert its right to publish without control, and the other editors were mustering a large body of writers from their own lists, the Old Poet removed himself from commerce; and there is not wanting a suspicion, as the Others think, of his having committed professional suicide. And the young Writer, turning away from stream of consciousness and from psychedelics, soon exhausted the love of the printers and began to seek elsewhere to the coalition who at that time were revealed as the LangPo.

There were in all two approaches to success, by which they could go forth, one through the academic route, narrow and difficult, between literary criticism and art history (by which scarcely one poet at a time could be led); there was, moreover, an enormous conservatism overshadowing, so that a few might easily intercept and undermine them; the other approach lay through our own community, much easier and freer of obstacles, because publishing means were available between the small press world and that of the fine press, which had lately been brought under the influence, and in some places even connected by commitments to publish. The outside chance lay with the commercial presses, and the nearest to the territories of academia, was Californian. From this publication a connection could be made to the LangPo who were beginning to appear. Among them Will Maarten was

the most ambitious and seeks to persuade the Bolinas poets, and the New York poets, and a few of the Iowa poets to adopt the same plan, and after gathering all their old work, would set out with them: and they would admit to his school and will endeavour to unite among themselves as confederates. But they did not seem well-disposed towards the workshop poets, or yet have sufficient force to compel the Californian Press to allow them to take over a series. So they struggled to command the Printers that they had seized upon to commit with them to the tasks.

Maarten had no doubt that the LangPo were the most powerful in all poetry; he was assured that he would, with his own forces and his own beliefs, acquire the influence for them. Later incited by his speech, they will give a pledge and oath to one another, and hope that, when they have seized the influence, they will, by means of the most powerful and valiant publications, be enabled to obtain possession of all literature. But first he leads out from the winter-quarters works which were lingering around the late Romantic tradition, and weeds out the derivative and the Traditional, destroys the Workshop and the Iowans, and with these triumphs marches rapidly to the nearest route of dominating all poetry with the LangPo. The Modernists, and the Workshop Poets, and the Formalists, having taken possession of the major venues, and in defence whereof, attempt to obstruct the campaign underway. After having routed these in several struggles, Maarten arrives in the territories of the New York Poets brought to the further west near San Francisco, which is a remote place in the coast, and thence endeavours to lead his school out of the country of the Workshops and from the Workshops to the Academy. These institutions are the first beyond the avant-garde on the opposite side of the aesthetic spectrum.

Because Maarten, unbeknownst to the young Writer, kept in remembrance those attacks which the Reactionaries had mentioned, and that he felt the more indignant at them, in proportion as they had happened undeservedly to the LangPo, for if they had been conscious of having done any wrong, it would not have been difficult to be on the defensive, but for that very reason had they been deceived, because neither were they aware that any offence had been given them, on account of which they should be afraid, nor did they think that they ought to be afraid without a cause. But even if he were willing to forget their former bad behaviour, could he also lay aside the remembrance of late treachery, in that they had against his will attempted to direct the course of Poetics by force, in that they had molested the Concretists, the Traditionalists, and the Conceptualists? That as to their so insolently boasting of their victory, and as to their being astonished that they had so long committed their outrages with impunity, [both these things] tended to the same point; for the immortal gods are wont to allow those person whom they wish to punish for their guilt sometimes a greater prosperity and longer impunity, in order that they may suffer the more severely from a reverse of circumstances. Although these things are so,

yet, if praiseworthy reviews and contracts were to be given him by them in order that he may be assured these will do what they promise, and provided they will give satisfaction to the Traditionalists for the outrages which they had committed against them and their allies, likewise to the Concretists, he [Maarten] will make peace with them. O'Brien replied that "the Reactionaries had been so trained by their ancestors, that they were accustomed to receive, not give, praise, of that fact the LangPo were witness." Having given this reply, he withdrew.

The Reactionaries had by this time led their forces over through the narrow margins of review and into the territories of the Academy, and had arrived at the poetics of the mainstream and were ravaging their reputations. The Academics, as they could not defend themselves and their reputations against them, send ambassadors to Maarten to ask assistance, [pleading] that they had at all times so well deserved of the LangPo group that their conferences out not to be attacked, their students carried off into new pursuits, their publications taken over, almost within sight of their committees. At the same time, the Workshop Poets, friends and kinsmen of the Academics, apprised Maarten, that it was not easy for them, now that their reputations has been devastated, to ward off the violence of the attack on their own scholarship and poetics; the Iowans, also, who had publications and conferences on the other side of the aesthetic spectrum, took themselves in urgency to Maarten, and assure him that they had nothing remaining, except the remains of their careers. Maarten, induced by these circumstances, decides that he need not wait until the Reactionaries, after destroying the property of his allies, should arrive among the LangPo. But the young writer, having duties to perform, remains at the tasks among the Printers.

In these events, Maarten thus replied, that "on that very account he felt less hesitation, because the forces of the LangPo were assembling." In the following days they established their offices within that place; Maarten does the same, and sends forward all his writer friends, to the number of several thousand [which he had drawn together from all over the globe and from the Avant-garde and their allies], to observe toward what parts the enemy are directing their publication efforts. These, having too eagerly pursued the enemy's agenda, come to a conflict with the editors of the Reactionaries in a disadvantageous publishing climate, and a few of the poets were censored. The Reactionaries, elated with this success, because they had with far fewer credentials repulse so large a body of real poets, began to face us more boldly, sometimes too from the sidelines and underhandedly to provoke our poets to attack. Maarten [however] restrained his writers from struggles, deeming it sufficient for the present to prevent the Reactionaries from censoring, defaming, and blocking publication. They worked for about two months in such a manner that there was not more than a handful of points dividing the Reactionaries' publications from ours.

Meanwhile, to the group which he had with him he had assembled new poets from the provinces, he brings along to the extent of two full readings, Dairwood Shelby, and others, younger, from the end of the New York School, which flows from the Beats and high modernism, to the Conceptualists, which separate the aesthetics of the late Romantics from those of the LangPo. When the group was assembled, he closely fortifies alliances, in order that he may more easily intercept communications, if they should attempt to direct any publishing ventures against his will. And he entered into struggles with Frank Beauvais, whose ex-girlfriend was not given unto him in marriage nor concubinage. When the day which he had appointed for a reading came, and she retreated from him, he said that he could not, consistently with the custom and precedent of the LangPo, grant any one freedom to be secluded without his permission; and he gives Beauvais and Dernier to understand that, if they should attempt to use violence [or independence of thought] he would oppose them. The LangPo, disappointed in this hope, began to imagine that they might force their publications (some by means of Xerox and numerous mimeos constructed for the purpose, others by the use of offset from the Print Centre, where the strength of the equipment was strongest by day, but more accessible by night), but being kept at bay by the strength of the negative feelings, and by the concourse of the staff, and by the community decision, they desisted from this attempt.

When it was reported to Maarten that other poets were attempting to put together a vision of the LangPo, he hastens to set out from his study, and, as by as great argument as he can, proceeds to claim his ownership of LangPo, and seizes hold of the project. He orders the whole community [to provide] as great a number of testimonials as possible, as there was in all only one major point of view so far among the LangPo. He orders the questionings to be dismantled. When the LangPo are apprised of his decisions, they send to him, as representatives, the most illustrious members of the community, to say that "it was their intention to participate in LangPo without attempting to dominate it because they had" [according to their own representations], "no other aesthetic affinities: that they might be allowed to do so with his consent." Maarten, in as much as he kept in remembrance that Ron Press had been hard working, and his publication plans embraced by the LangPo, did not think that [their request] ought to be granted: nor was he of the opinion that poets of hostile disposition, if an opportunity of making decisions about LangPo were given to them, would abstain from outrage and mischief. Yet, in order that a period might intervene, until the writers whom he had commanded to come to the coast should assemble to hold political counsel, he replied that he would take time to think about it that they might consider the costs.

It is again told that Maarten intended to take the LangPo into the territory of the Academics, and to surpass the Modernists through the

regions of the anthologies, which are not too far distant from the publication of the late Romantics, which [viz. Lyricism, Personal Voice] is a part of Poetics. If this took place, he saw that it would be attended with great danger to Poetics to have competitive men, enemies of the LangPo, bordering upon an open and very fertile tract of poetry. For these reasons, he appointed Ron Press, his lieutenant, to the command of the publication which he had made. He himself proceeds to the Californian by forced actions, and there struggles to obtain a contract.

This one way, [namely], led through the academic press, by which, on account of its narrowness, they could not pass without consent of the editors. As they could not of themselves prevail on them, they send ambassadors to Bibi Herze-Govina, that through her intercession, they might obtain their request from the academy. Dernier, by his popularity and liberality, had great influence among the academics, and was friends to the LangPo; excited by the lust of celebrity, Maarten was anxious for a takeover, and wished to have as many acolytes as possible attached to him by his power over them. He, therefore, undertook the affair and prevails upon the Academics to allow the LangPo to march through their conferences, and arranges that they should give accolades to each other—the Academics not to obstruct the LangPo in their careers—the LangPo to succeed without mischief and outrage.

There is a Centre that provides resources to the Poets and the Academy and the Workshops with such slowness, that it cannot be determined by the eye the direction in which its support flows. This the Reactionaries were crossing by reviews and attacks joined together. When Maarten was informed by spies that the Reactionaries had already advantages, but that resources might still be allocated among the many Poets, he set out from his study and came up with the last opportunities for writings still not used. This he used to attack the Reactionaries and cut to pieces a great part of them, the rest betook themselves to flight, and concealed themselves in the nearest institutions. That clique [which was attacked] was called the Old School, for the whole Academy is divided into cliques. This single clique having been destroyed, within the recollection of the students, had been responsible for defaming Frank Beauvais, the poet, and had made his students pass under review. Thus, whether by chance or by the design of the immortal gods, that part of the Academic world which had brought a signal calamity upon the LangPo, was the first to pay the penalty. In this Maarten avenged not only poetics but also his own personal wrongs, because the Old School had defamed Ron Press as well as Frank Beauvais.

This struggle ended, that Maarten might be able to assemble the remaining forces of the LangPo, he procures arrivals to be made, and thus leads his poets over. The Traditionalists, confused by his sudden successes, when they found that he had effected in one season, what they, themselves, with the utmost difficulty, had accomplished in twenty, namely, the consolidation of a School, begin to retreat. Among

the Traditionalists, the chief critic among them would not wage war with Maarten, but endeavoured to create a coalition. He thus treats with Maarten: that, "if the LangPo would made peace with the Traditionalists they would send their works to a certain publication and not elsewhere, where Maarten might decide and desire them to be reviewed. But if he should persist in persecuting them with attacks that he ought to remember both the longstanding difficulties of the LangPo and the characteristic viciousness of the Reactionaries. As to his having attracted many Poets when others could not bring assistance by way of grants and funds he ought not on that account to ascribe very much to his own intellect, or despise them; they had so learned from their mentors and models to rely more on malice than on intellect or talent. Wherefore let him not bring it to pass that their school should acquire a name, except it should be the LangPo, in sparing the destruction of their reputations, they might thus transmit the remembrances [of such an event to the public]. In this they had their champion, Worthy Braeton, to bring forward.

Then at length, Herze-Govina, moved by Maarten's speech, discloses what she had hitherto kept secret: that there are some whose influences with the people is very great, who, though trust fund babies, have more power than the critics themselves: that these by strategies and clever language are deterring the foundations from contributing the funds which they promised to supply; [by telling them] that, if they can not any longer retain the supremacy of LangPo, it were better to submit to the judgment of the Conceptualists than of the late Romantics, nor ought they to doubt that, if the Conceptualists should overpower the Academics, they would wrest their freedom from the Workshops together with the remainder of LangPo. By these very writers, [said she], are our publications and whatever is done at the presses, disclosed to their rivals; that they could not be restrained by her; nay, more, she was well aware, that though compelled by necessity, she had disclosed the matter to Maarten, at how great a risk she had done it; and for that reason, she had been silent as long as she could.

Meanwhile, Maarten kept daily importuning the LangPo for support which they had promised in the name of their commitment to aesthetics; for, in consequence of the economic downturn [LangPo, being before stated, on the margins of the Academy] not only were the publications not bringing in revenue, but there was not a backlog of funds even to pay the production costs. The LangPo kept deferring from day to day, and saying that it was being collected—brought in—through a grant to the Centre." When he saw that he was being put off too long, and that the day was close at hand when he would have to pay for the publications, having called together the writers, of whom he knew a great number personally, among them Herze-Govina and Billy Kaplan, who were invested as editors of the series (with the power of publish or cut over the entire content), he severely reprimands them, because he is

not assisted by them on so urgent an occasion, when the attacks are so close at hand, and when [the funds] could neither be borrowed nor advanced, particularly, as in a great measure urged by their advice, he had undertaken the project; much more bitterly, therefore, does he complain of his being betrayed.

Maarten was unwilling that poetic matters ad wages should be discussed while so many were present. He [Maarten] makes inquiries on the same points privately of others, and discovered that "Herze-Govina is the person, a woman of the highest talent, in great favour with the other poets on account of her support, a woman eager for a power play: that for a great many years she has been in the habit of contracting for the publications and manuscripts of the young Conceptualists at a small cost, because when she bids, no one dares to compete with her." By these means she has increased her own influence, and amassed great power for getting things published; that she maintained constantly at her own expense and kept running an entire printing and publishing operation, and that not only at home, but even among the neighbouring schools, she has great influence, and for the sake of strengthening this influence has given herself in marriage among the late Romantics to an artist most significant and influential there; that she has taken this husband on account of this connection; that Lana, being restored to her former position as friend among the Californians, she entertains the highest hope of gaining influence, but that under the control of the LangPo she despairs not only of recognition, but even of the influence she has already gained. Maarten discovered too, in inquiring into the successful labour struggles that were taking place, that the commencement of that strategy had been made through a position to influence an entire network which the Centre had established, that by community of loyalties the rest of the community were dismayed.

After learning these circumstances, since to these suspicions the most unequivocal facts were added, that wages should fairly given; that Dernier had done some things, not only without any consultation of his [Maarten's] and of his board, but even with their [the Printers] knowing much about it themselves, that she [the young Writer] was reprimanded: he [Maarten] considered there was sufficient reason, why he should either humiliate her himself, or enlist his community to do so. One thing [however] stood in the way of all that—that he had learned through his experience of Dernier's very high regard for the LangPo, his great affection for Herze-Govina, and his distinguished loyalty, equilibrium, good nature. Therefore, before Maarten attempted any thing, he makes a phone call to Dernier, in whom he had the greatest confidence, at the same time he reminds him what was said about the Centre by the poetry community, when he himself was present, and shows what each had said privately in his [Maarten's] own presence; he begs and exhorts him, that, without offence to his feelings, he may either bring public humiliation on the Director after making an argument in the press, or

else, order the [Centre] to revoke their position. Dernier, pleading with Maarten, begins to implore him, with many strong arguments, that he would "not take any very radical actions with regard to the Director, saying that though he knows the charges are true, that nobody had suffered more on that account than he, for when he could effect a good deal by his influence in his own community, the Centre had become powerful. But if any thing very severe from should befall Maarten, then the affections of the whole of LangPo would be estranged from him. As he was close to tears in talking of these things with Maarten, Maarten softened his tone of voice, and, comforting him, begs him to make an end of entreating, and assures him that his regard for him is so great, that he forgives both the injuries of the community and his private wrongs, at his desire and prayers. He hangs up and summons Herze-Govina to him; he brings in Dawn and Lana; he points out what he censures in them; he lays before them what he of himself perceives, and what the community complains of; he warns them for the future to avoid all grounds of suspicion; he says that he pardons the past, for the sake of his friend Dernier. He sets spies over the Director that he may be able to know what he does and with whom he communicates.

Livio Belloï & Michel Delville

Understanding the Loop: Gertrude Stein, Martin Arnold

This essay offers interdisciplinary perspectives on the significance of the loop as a constraint in contemporary experimental art. Drawing examples from Gertrude Stein's literary portraits and Martin Arnold's filmic loops, it invites a reading that acknowledges the historical technicalities of each individual medium while recognizing the necessity to distinguish the loop from other forms of structural repetition in both literature and the visual arts. Such a reading requires special attention to the specific forms of repetition implied by the loop while stressing its relationship to time and space. This perspective also urges an examination of its effects on the readers and viewers who, more often than not, find themselves caught in a network of echoes and recurrences that alternately reassure and disturb, and whose complexities challenge the conventional paradigms of formal theory and analysis.

THE LOOP AS A GENERATIVE CONSTRAINT

In the field of literature, one of the most intriguing uses of the loop as an expressive and structural device is to be found in the work of Gertrude Stein. Stein's early "abstract" portraits in particular provide us with a useful starting point by which to distinguish the loop from other forms of repetition. Here is the first paragraph of her portrait of the Polish sculptor Elie Nadelman:

> There was one who was a great man and his head showed this thing showed he did thinking. There was one who was a great man and his face showed this thing showed sensitive feeling. There was one who looked like the one the one who was a great one. There was one who looked like both of them. He did look like one the one who was a great one the one who did thinking. He did look like the other one the one who was a great one the one whose face showed this thing showed sensitive feeling. There was one and he looked like both of them, like both of the men who

> were great men. He did look like one. He did look like the other one. He did look like both of them.[1]

Stein's "Nadelman" (1911) invests in a literary use of the loop as a structuring device which "returns upon itself" and thereby undermines traditional expectations regarding narrative and descriptive progression and closure. Indeed, her celebrated repetition-with-variation technique necessarily implies a "returning" or "revisiting" effect on previous compositional segments. The latter are subsequently re-qualified and rewritten in ways which seek to account not for the sitter or subject's outside appearances but, rather, for what is "inside in anyone of them," "what is moving inside them that makes them them."[2] In order to achieve this goal, Stein refrains from depicting her subject from the outside and centres instead on a limited number of personality "essentials." These are themselves subjected to a number of phonemic and rhythmic variations which, because of their accumulative effect, challenge the semantic coherence and authority of the text. The recurring words and phrases in Stein's portrait of Nadelman nonetheless suggest the artist's basic personality traits, which include a predisposition to "think" as well as to show "sensitive feeling" while simultaneously addressing the question of his potential for "greatness" (the other "great men" mentioned in the portrait may be Picasso and Matisse, whom Stein also portrayed during the same period). Nadelman's capacity to produce important art is questioned by the rest of the portrait, which evokes the sculptor's preoccupation with light, his relationship with women and, more generally, the difficulty of enacting the synthesis of thinking and feeling ("He was completely thinking about expressing light being existing. He was one needing to be one completely loving women").[3]

Clearly, Stein's use of repetition differs from that of most of her contemporaries in that it is not an expression of the alienating repetitiveness of modern life, which is described and decried in countless modernist works, from Eliot's *Waste Land* to Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. For Stein, repetition has a liberating effect which lies in its capacity to challenge dominant modes of representation and undermine the linear transparency of descriptive and narrative realism from within. In "Nadelman" and many other works produced in the same period, one of the implications of writing under the constraint of repetition is to describe an alternative kind of consciousness liable to displace the true focus of the portraits away from a depiction of the objects themselves onto an examination of the very process of change and mutability which interferes with the act of naming and describing. Unlike the rule-based

[1] Gertrude Stein, *The Yale Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Ulla E. Dydo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993) 144.
[2] Stein, *The Yale Gertrude Stein*, 110.
[3] Stein, *The Yale Gertrude Stein*, 145.

practices of Oulipo (which are built upon carefully and programmatically chosen forms and limitations developed prior to the writing process) Stein's use of the loop as constraint amounts to an attempt to record identity and "being" under the constrictive effects of repetitions produced by the very act of writing. Her portraits thus appears as one example of how modernist aesthetics—despite its obsessive fear of repetition and its equally obsessive emphasis on formal innovation—appropriated repetition (and reiteration) "as a kind of homeopathic strategy whereby the scandalous and intolerable external irritant is drawn into the aesthetic process itself and thereby systematically worked over, 'acted out,' and symbolically neutralized."[4] While Stein's heavy administration of repetition in the examples discussed here can hardly be described as "homeopathic," her repetition-with-variation techniques simultaneously anticipate and exceed the repetitions, replications, variations, and de-multiplications displayed in post-WWII works ranging from Terry Riley's *In C* to the more recent experiments of Austrian filmmaker Martin Arnold. As we will see, for both Stein and Arnold, the loop, far from constituting a mere technique meant to produce circular, non-linear effects, is a constraint which is both procedure and process, one that creates a self-generating dynamic that strives for a constant renewal and actualization of text and image.

If Stein's portraits still refer—albeit in an "abstract" fashion—to the personalities of her "models," her main interest is less in the content than in the shape and sounds of the sentence itself. On a formal level, "Nadelman," like other portraits of the same period, is emblematic of Stein's poetic *détournement* of simple declarative sentences which transforms the loop into a defamiliarising device. Such a device renders everyday language (which includes Stein's frequent use of small talk and gossip) strange and unusual by giving it different, unexpected psychological connotations—a feature which echoes the basic principles underlying the work of Martin Arnold, which is discussed below. Still, according to Stein herself, repetition and difference are even more deeply linked with a desire to do "what the cinema was doing."[5] Describing her own portraits, Stein writes that she is "making a continuous succession of the statement of what that person was until [she] had not many things but one thing" ("each time there was a difference just a difference enough so that it could go on and be a present something").[6] Stein's ambition is thus to write a text which is liable to be perceived not as a succession of discrete units but as a continuous flow (the "continuously moving picture of any one" so that, just as in a film, "no two pictures are exactly alike each one is just that

[4] Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York & London : Routledge, 1991) 18.

[5] Stein, *The Yale Gertrude Stein*, 106.

[6] Gertrude Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909-45* (London: Penguin, 1967) 106.

much different from the one before."[7] Her penchant for the continuous present, which confers to her prose a disturbing, uncertain temporality, counters the effects of repetition through a constant, self-propelling *actualization* of language. As the author herself puts it, in her own peculiar "looping" expository style:

> You see that in order to do this there must be no remembering, remembering is repetition, remembering is also confusion... In doing a portrait of anyone, the repetition consists in knowing that that one is a kind of a one, that the things he does have been done by others like him that the things he says have been said by others like him, but, and this is the important thing, there is no repetition in hearing and saying the things he hears and says when he is hearing and saying them. . . . It is not repetition if it is that which you are actually doing because naturally each time the emphasis is different just as the cinema has each time a slightly different thing to make it all be moving.[8]

Stein's prose would thus attempt to thwart the deadening and confusing effects of memory and repetition and convey the sense of immediacy (and redundancy) of everyday conversation. In doing so, it aspires to the condition of pure rhythm, a condition marked by the ambition to depart from earlier, realistic traditions of the literary portrait and "listen" to nothing less than the "rhythm of each human being."[9] This particular condition of Stein's poetic prose is even more apparent in "If I Told Him" (1924), her second, "completed" portrait of Pablo Picasso[10]:

> If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.
>
> Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it.
>
> If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him would he like it would he like it if I told him.[11]

While the comparison with Napoleon points to Picasso's status as the "emperor" of modern art, the speaker's hesitancy suggests that she might not be pleased by the "truths" revealed in the portrait, and which are subsequently expressed in the form of unfinished sentences and unanswered questions. The rhythmic pattern used here is more rapid than in "Nadelman," and it is possible to read the stuttering, panting cadences of "If I Told Him" as a stylistic device that conveys the speaker's confusion and excitement and would thus seem to fulfil a

[7] Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am*, 105; 106.
[8] Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am*, 106-7.
[9] Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am*, 96.
[10] The first one, simply entitled "Picasso," was published in 1912.
[11] Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am*, 230.

predominantly mimetic function. But what is at stake in Stein's loops is more than just the reduction of language and the subject to a moment of repetition. Stein's looping prose is perhaps best understood in the light of Deleuze's understanding of variation as a feature which is "not added to repetition in order to hide it, but is rather its condition or constitutive element, the interiority of repetition *par excellence.*"[12] Such is indeed the effect of the loop which necessarily returns us to a previous segment to which it retrospectively confers the quality of being "repetitive" by virtue of its difference from previous and later segments. And, indeed, another notable consequence of the literary loop is that the segment to which the reader "returns" can no longer be read as a primary text—it can only be *reread* in the light of the further developments it undergoes in the subsequent paragraphs of the piece. As the theme of resemblance becomes incorporated into the very structure of Stein's writing ("exact resemblance to exact resemblance the exact resemblance as exact a resemblance, exactly as resembling..."),[13] the ghost of difference returns with a vengeance.

In the recent history of contemporary experimental literature, Stein's repetition-with-variation technique appears an odd fish in modernist waters and a precursor of (postmodern) things to come. Stein's serial prose departs as much from the general ambition of the modernist aesthetic to counter repetition by promoting radical novelty and discontinuity as it does from, say, F.T. Marinetti's "cinematic" *parole in libertà*, which relied mainly on the impression of non-linear, "kinetic freedom" conveyed by the lack of punctuation, the use of different fonts and a post-Mallarméan use of the page as a canvas. Far from such high modernist "excesses," Stein's serial prose derives its power from a self-conscious manipulation of traditional narrative, descriptive and performative prose: whereas "Nadelman" seems to mimic the conventions of realist prose fiction, "If I Told Him" appropriates the dynamics of the dramatic monologue and turns them upon and against themselves, so to speak, opening up a space in which the subject's identity and "personality" can only come to exist in the form of provisional textual "moments" and displacements.

The idea of the loop as a generative constraint brings into focus another characteristic of Stein's prose which is dominated by a strong constructivist and reductionist impulse. We have seen that Stein's portraits tend to reduce complex forms and structures (e.g., Nadelman's and Picasso's basic characterological attributes) to a limited number of simple units (the subjects' "basic" characterological traits). We have also seen that Stein's loop displays a tendency to re-appropriate banal and insignificant details and imbue simple states and actions (like "being," "liking," telling," "saying," or "listening") with a sense of unbalance and

[12] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 1994) xiv.
[13] Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am*, 230.

unpredictability. Of course, it is only retroactively that this semantic and structural shift occurs, after the process of repetition has neutralized the uniqueness, autonomy and "originality" of the opening statement by returning to it and "reconverting it into repetition the second time round." The "philosophical paradox" of repetition, from Kierkegaard to Freud and beyond, is indeed that "it can as it were only take place 'a second time.'"[14] This is particularly true of the pedestrian speech and "small talk" that runs throughout Stein's œuvre and whose unobserved sonic and semantic resources her poetics seeks to foreground and investigate. Everyday language is by nature (and by necessity) repetitive: it is always in the form of words and sentences already spoken and does not seek to conceal the redundancies, deficiencies and overlaps that are typical of casual conversation. In the final analysis, Stein's loops come close to the principle of extension and dilation that presides over the destinies of the looped fragments of Arnold's *piece touchée* (1989). As we will see, this particular aspect of Stein's writing also parallels Arnold's films in that they both deny their basic units of composition the status of *fragment*, a word that presupposes an absent whole capable of being reconstructed or imagined.[15] Far from pointing to such an absent totality, they preclude any firm context-oriented, unified reading of the sequence.

As for the reductionist impulse behind Stein's portraits, it tends to confirm the loop's affinities with musical minimalism. In fact, the most famous loop Stein ever came up with is also the most minimalist one: her famous sentence, "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," which first appeared in the 1913 collection *Geography and Plays*, was later converted into a mandala-like letterhead whose vertiginous rotation volatilizes the very notion of repetition and re-establishes, instead, a sense of circular, endless continuity. (Once again, one of the "themes" of Stein's mandala is the notion of sameness itself, a notion problematised by her more habitual repetition-with-variation technique.) Of course, the obvious analogies with minimalist music should not obscure the fundamental differences between the two mediums. Still, Stein's use of repetition echoes certain features of, say, Terry Riley's *In C* or Steve Reich's *Different Trains.* As for her "mandala letterhead," it is a linguistic (near-)equivalent of the tape loop, a piece of tape spliced end to end and which can be passed endlessly through the tape player's reels. Lastly, her desire to capture and manipulate conversation "as it happens" also anticipates the works of certain sounds poets working with "live" tape machines who, like Larry Wendt, started experimenting with small microprocessor circuits in the late 1970s as possible "means of manipulating speech material in real time which would have the flexibility of tape manipulation" (Wendt 16). Still, the most radical

[14] Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, 19.

[15] Which is why the more neutral terms "unit" and "segment" have been preferred to the word "fragment" in this discussion of the literary loop.

example of the loop in recent avant-garde art does not stem from musical models but from the moving image.

BACK & FORTH

In the field of contemporary experimental cinema, Martin Arnold might be the only filmmaker to have instituted the loop not only as a fully self-imposed constraint but also as a real *modus operandi*. In *pièce touchée* (1989), *passage à l'acte* (1993)[16] and *Alone. Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (1998)—three major works which remain closely connected despite differences in their surface effects—he compulsively explores the loop's multiple facets as well as the issues at stake in this peculiar motif. While Arnold's work fits into the already long tradition of *found footage*[17] films and therefore relies on a general aesthetic of recycling and *détournement*, it also stands out in several ways. First, Arnold refrains from using well-known, fetishizised images or prominent figures in the history of cinema. On the contrary, he usually starts by selecting a short sample from a little-known or forgotten Hollywood *film de genre* or, if the chosen film is better-known, draws upon secondary, seemingly trivial and insignificant images which he then proceeds to reclaim and re-appropriate. Clearly, the issues at stake here include not only matters of sampling but also, in a wider perspective, of positioning: nothing in Arnold's work betrays any form of nostalgia, devotional aspiration or commemorative preoccupation with images from the past.[18] Arnold actually sets out to *attack* that type of cinema, launching a disfiguring onslaught on the sampled images. For this purpose, he has built a formidable tool, a homemade optical printer that allows him to radically alter the scrolling of the sampled fragments and disrupt the mechanisms of enunciation.

pièce touchée is the first film in which Arnold applies his singular looping technique. The "raw" material used by the filmmaker—18 seconds sampled from Joseph M. Newman's *The Human Jungle* (1954)—may appear trivial to say the least: a woman sits, reading, her husband comes home, kisses her and the two of them eventually exit the frame. Through a series of repeated back and forths inside the sampled material, Martin Arnold transforms these few seconds of moving images into a 15-minute long film—a process of expansion and extreme dilation, both resulting from repeated looping only. Arnold's unusual take on the loop acts as a structuring scheme which gives *piece*

[16] The use of the lower case for the words "pièce" and "passage" is a decision made by the filmmaker. This particular typographic choice will be respected in this text.

[17] For more information on this cinematic practice, see for example William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993).

[18] A few films come to mind here: *Visual Essays. Origins of Film* (1973-1984) by Al Razutis, *LyrisCh Nitraat* (1990) by Peter Delpeut or, more recently, the second part of *Film Ist* (2002) by Gustav Deutsch and *Decasia* (2002) by Bill Morrison, an ode to decomposing nitrate.

touchée its *raison-d'être*. Far from operating in a closed circuit, the loop effect is dynamic, open and evolving: it spreads itself, progressively but irresistibly, it moves inside the sampled scene—almost frame by frame—while pretending to respect its chronology. In this respect, the loop effect in *pièce touchée* is not conceived as a totality: the point here is not to connect the two extremities of the sample and run the result *ad libitum*, but clearly to accumulate micro-loops and build them into the very flesh of the film through back and forths of various speeds and ranges. As a result, Arnold's self-imposed and generative use of the loop can never be reduced to a simple A-B-A succession: his formula, which carries implications that are both theoretical and aesthetic, is more akin to a A-A(1)-A-A(1)-A(2)-A(1)-A (and so forth) sequence, the looping effect spreading like a virus throughout the original visual sample.[19]

The film can provoke laughter. It is not unusual, in fact, to hear embarrassed laughter during its projection (as if experimentation in general was supposedly too serious to allow for frank smiles or laughs). It would be a mistake, however, to reduce it to a gratuitous exercise only intended to be playful or anecdotal. The repeated back and forth movement that permeates the film amounts to a profoundly critical and strongly iconoclastic gesture, one which, in the final analysis, radically affects the fundamental coordinates of cinematic representation itself.

Because of the nature of the loop effect (which comprises various forms of repetition, reversion and overlapping), Arnold's films force the original sample into a temporal dimension that is radically *other*. As we know, classical Hollywood cinema usually strives for a linear, homogenous and normally irreversible temporality, which—with a few exceptions justified by specific narrative needs—is conventionally governed by one single speed and one single direction. Armed with his optical printer, Arnold turns the temporality of the original material *inside-out*. Under the effect of looping and a systematic and progressive contamination process, the fragment from *The Human Jungle* opens itself up to a form of temporality that is flexible and mutable, destructured and reversible. Seen from that angle one could say that *pièce touchée* resembles a dysfunctional hourglass whose upper bulb draws upward the grains of time it is simultaneously releasing downward. Time does not flow in Martin Arnold's films, it curls up and withdraws into itself according to the filmmaker's wishes. Here, Arnold may unwittingly refer to the foundational theses of theorist and filmmaker Jean Epstein regarding not only the power of cinematic form

[19] "Sp…Sp…Spaces of Inscription: And Interview with Martin Arnold," *Film Quarterly* 48.1 (Autumn 1994): 2-11. The very precise, scrupulous and mathematical nature of Martin Arnold's approach can be easily perceived in the work note reproduced at the beginning of Scott MacDonald's interview of the filmmaker (2-11). It shows a score of long successions of numbers and geometrical figures—each number corresponding, in all probability, to a particular photogram. Martin Arnold confesses in that same interview that 148,000 manipulations of the original sample were needed to create *pièce touchée*.

to create its own temporality, unfettered by the constraints of human time, but also regarding the establishment of the cinematic device as a veritable "machine to think time."[20]

In a complementary way, the category of space is far from immune to Martin Arnold's work of deconstruction. At the same time as temporality logically becomes problematized when it comes up against the basic before/after dichotomy, the sampled fragment's space undergoes multiple and systematic disturbances that spread both laterally (right/left) and vertically (up/down). On several occasions Arnold alternates—in a mirror-like way and sometimes at extremely high speed—a group of photograms reproduced the right way up with another group turned upside down. This visual work, which is akin to knitting (knit one, purl one) gives the viewer the impression that the image is spinning on itself around an imaginary axis (thus creating yet another form of loop, so to speak). The elements positioned on the right side suddenly move to the left side and vice-versa, as if under the effect of violent jump cuts. Starting from a codified and crystal-clear topography (conventionally cultivated by classical Hollywood cinema), Martin Arnold creates a deeply unstable and problematic space. The resulting effect is particularly visible when the male protagonist opens the apartment door and turns off the light in the hallway. One of the most striking aspects of this sequence is the odd distribution of light within the picture: in the succession of images reproduced the right way up, a lit lamp rests on a table on the right and foreground of the picture while, in the background, one can distinguish the ceiling light in the hallway, alternatively turned on and off. In the inverted images, the two sources of light logically replace each other. The rapid alternation between these two sequences creates a powerful visual fluttering effect which can be read as an indirect and ironical allusion to the experimental tradition of the flicker film (and to be more specific, possibly to two well-known historic prototypes, *Arnulf Rainer* [1960] by Peter Kubelka and *The Flicker* [1966] by Tony Conrad).[21] As if that was not enough, the male character's gesture, made mechanical precisely by repetition, gives, at times, the impression that he is not simply turning off the light but, in fact, turning the cinematic shot vertically on its axis from the inside—more proof, if needed, that the loop motif eventually contaminates, little by little, the whole representation and each of its coordinates.[22]

[20] Jean Epstein, *Ecrits sur le cinéma 1921-1953*, vol. I (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1974) 282.

[21] For more on the same subject, see P. Adams Sitney, *Le Cinéma visionnaire. L'Avant-garde américaine*, *1943-2000* (Paris: Editions Paris Expérimental, 2002) 272-273 (on *Arnulf Rainer*) and 342 (on *The Flicker*), see also Dominique Noguez, *Une Renaissance du cinéma. Le Cinéma "underground" américain*, 2nd edition (Paris: Editions Paris Expérimental, 2002) 111-15 (on Kubelka); 212, 279 (on Conrad).

[22] The soundtrack follows in kind: the repetitive and almost industrial sound found throughout *pièce touchée* results from the looping of the sound made, in the original sequence, by the closing door. In light of such sampling and looping, one can see that Martin Arnold's approach is akin to contemporary musical practices, including hip-hop, which happens to be one

A new spatial disturbance, which again underlines the inseparability of method and structure in *pièce touchée*, occurs when the male character eventually walks out of the frame and leaves the woman on her own (which may not be completely insignificant). After having disturbed the codes of the lateral dimension, Arnold allows the process of inversion to spread to the vertical dimension by making a succession of photograms printed the right way up alternate with other successions of images in which the characters are turned on their heads. In these frames, which are literally *upside down*, the female protagonist, following a complex choreography, swings her arms in circles and seems to rotate acrobatically around herself from top to bottom. As the alternation between those two successions of photograms accelerates, this disfiguring process gradually invades the picture, which veers toward abstraction despite the strictly figurative nature of its original elements. In this peculiar visual system, anything that enters the screen is invested with the dramatic feel of a *fall* into the picture, whereas anything that goes out of it becomes *ejected* from it, as if the bodies were being violently catapulted outside the frame under the impulse of a foreign force.

If one leaves aside the twin issues of space and time, one realizes that the human body (in this case, those of the two aforementioned actors) might suffer the most from the shock treatment Martin Arnold inflicts on his material. In that respect, *pièce touchée* could be described as a very unusual horror movie. Arnold's repeated manipulations of the original material confront / or counter the conventional Hollywood body, which is governed by imperatives of harmony, continuity and verisimilitude, with an uncomfortable body that constantly flinches and jerks—a body that is itself *constrained* by the loop. In *pièce touchée* the slightest gesture and facial expression are automatically reduced to almost pathological tics.[23] Ultimately, Arnold's continuous back and forth movements, which disfigure the original fragment, introduce the visual equivalent of a *stutter* that implicates the actorial body as a whole. Here again, Arnold's visual games are far from gratuitous or trivial.

On the one hand, Arnold's manipulations of seemingly anecdotal, unimportant scenes throw new light (sometimes in a very crude fashion) on the rites of interaction in which the two protagonists find themselves trapped. Viewed from this angle, *pièce touchée* can be regarded as a vibrant study of visual micro-sociology. By means of continuous analytical decompositions (which are closer to Marey than to Lumière) and close attention paid to every tropism, the filmmaker unveils a female subject whose every posture is regulated and conditioned by the actions

of the filmmaker's favorite musical genres. The overall tone of the soundtrack is also reminiscent of various forms of minimalist musical genres.

[23] A real "staging of Parkinson's disease," to adopt Yann Beauvais' felicitous expression, *Poussière d'image. Articles de film* (Paris: Éditions Paris Expérimental, 1998) 76.

of her male counterpart. In that respect, *pièce touchée* seems to veer imperceptibly towards a feminist agenda, one that will become more explicit in *passage à l'acte*, its logical extension.[24] On the other hand, looping this succession of socially codified gestures also helps construct a disturbing, sometimes even frightening corporeality (yet another similarity with horror films). Let us put aside the uncanniness of the gestures shown alternatively in their normal and reversed positions (such as when the female character turns toward her husband and, because of the repetitions, it looks as if her head is diabolically spinning around its axis, as in the well-known scene from *The Exorcist* [William Friedkin, 1973]), and let us focus instead on the relative obscenity of some repeated gestures, coming and going movements and other forms of thrusting, most of which are performed by the male character, and which unveil a virtually pornographic subtext latent in this apparently innocuous scene of domestic life. In this respect, one should note that Martin Arnold is not inventing or adding anything: if these gestures go unnoticed under normal projection conditions, they are still nonetheless contained in the original sample—one only needs to show them a little differently to reveal these hidden meanings.

Arnold's bodies are deprived of any form of consciousness and initiative, are tyrannized by the filmmaker and made the victims of the manipulations of his optical printer. They become puppet bodies, pathetic marionettes, automata with awkward and absurd gestures that remind us in many ways of the *puppet on strings* figure theorized by Henri Bergson. It seems in fact that the art of Martin Arnold can be defined by means of the famous and emblematic phrase through which the French philosopher conceptualizes the problematic category of the *comic*: the reason why *pièce touchée* disturbs us and causes us to smile or laugh is that the film reveals, from start to finish, "something mechanical encrusted on the living."[25]

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Comparison does not tell the whole story: if Stein's and Arnold's respective uses of the loop display obvious affinities which legitimate a comparative study of their works, one must also acknowledge their singularities and differences in matters of form, content, structure and intentionality. Still, in different but related ways, the non-linear logic and temporal fragmentation of Stein's and Arnold's loops engage in an

[24] In *passage à l'acte* (1993), Martin Arnold's "victim" is a scene of a family meal sampled from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (R. Mulligan, 1962). The filmmaker's analytical decomposition reveals that, in this apparently trivial scene, the male subject is always the one giving orders: the father gives an order to the son and the son, imitating him on a smaller scale, reproduces against his sister the patterns of masculine domination under the vacant eyes of the mute and resigned mother.

[25] Henri Bergson, *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*, 401e édition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985) 29.

attempt to subvert the linear, homogeneous narrative certainties of both literary realism and classical Hollywood cinema in reversing the logic of temporal understanding and consumption of the artwork. This principle of reversibility points to the difficulty of defining the loop in relation to space and time, not to mention the artists' specific uses of it (which are not limited to the examples mentioned here and encompass many different forms of "looping" reiterations which would deserve a book-length study). Indeed, any attempt to describe the conditions of the succession and accumulation of macro- and micro-loops would have to rely on a detailed analysis of the frequencies of the looped units, which would also have to be classified according to their length. It would also need to differentiate between various degrees of contiguity, difference and equivalence, and account for different but related ways of modulating repetition (such modulating effects comprise various processes of selection, addition, omission, permutation, subtraction, substitution, variation, recombination, replication and demultiplication). Such a detailed analysis would exceed the concerns of this essay, which limits itself to considering the loop through the prism of the relation of constraint to possibility, as well as of closed to open form. We nonetheless hope to have sketched out a description of the loop as a fundamentally transdisciplinary and transcultural model which straddles the boundaries between established generic categories. Such a form would deserve to be studied more deeply in the contexts of its contemporary manifestations (e.g., the recent developments of electronic music) as well as of its conceptual-historical modulations (one thinks, for example, of its importance in the perspective of a general archaeology of the moving image). The loop is not merely a motif for understanding contemporary art: it is a research field in its own right.

—Translated from the French by Thierry Ramais

Jena Osman

Bern Porter: Recycling the Atmosphere

Bern Porter (1911- 2004) is an important figure for those interested in found poetry, artists' books, and mail art, but his work is hard to find. His published books were printed in limited editions by small presses such as Abyss Publications, Something Else Press, and Tilbury House. And many of his books exist only in manuscript form or as one-of-a-king artist's books which are archived in special collections libraries at UCLA, Colby College, Bowdoin College and The Museum of Modern Art. And so although Porter's "founds" and collage books were constructed from cheaply printed matter, they are far less accessible than the materials from which they were made. One wonders, if Porter had lived in a time of scanners and web browsers, would his output and career as an artist have been less underground? In 2008, five of Porter's books from the 1960s were published as pdf's on ubuweb.com; the scans allow the reader to get a vivid sense of how Porter was working with varieties of print ephemera. Perhaps more of his unpublished works will be similarly released in the future. In the meantime, it seems that Porter's work can only be understood as a product of its time that pointed assertively towards the aesthetic possibilities of times to come.

Throughout his career, Porter was haunted by the tension between the goals of science and art. Born to a working-poor family in Maine, Porter seemingly escaped his limiting circumstances by getting a college scholarship to Colby, excelling at physics, and getting a graduate scholarship to attend Brown University. While at Brown, he began to articulate his theories of how science and art must work in thoughtful balance. At the same time, Porter barely had enough food to eat (the Depression was in full force), and he withdrew from Brown after being caught stealing money from other students. Thanks to the laudatory recommendations of his Brown physics professors, he was offered a job in New York with the Acheson Colloids Corporation in 1935, where he helped figure out how to coat the cathode ray tubes that were needed to create the first television sets. While working at Acheson, Porter was simultaneously taking advantage of New York's cultural offerings, discovering the found objects of the Surrealists and the readymades of Duchamp. During this period he also met Gertrude Stein on a business

trip to Paris. This was perhaps the only time in Porter's life when his desire for the peaceful balance of science and art was achieved. The equilibrium was disrupted in 1940 when his draft board transferred him to Princeton, where he began to work on what was to become the Manhattan Project.[1]

Before the atom bomb was dropped, Porter continued his dual practices: separating uranium by day, making and studying art by night. During this time, he exhibited at a Princeton gallery a sculpture called "Rhizome," that consisted of a large tree root found during a hike which was then placed on a pedestal. The root was treated with chemicals which caused rapid decay, such that the sculpture transformed during the course of its exhibition. Porter described this process as "the reverse of a flower blooming."[2] Considering that his research at that time would contribute to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the description seems to speak to more than just the sculpture. After the bomb was dropped, Porter walked away from his job, and began to develop an artistic practice that was not about chemically altering the natural world, but recontextualizing and re-seeing what was already there.

In the 1950s, Porter wrote a series of manifestos on how science could combine with the arts:

> ...combinations as photography and art (photograms), topography and portraiture (map blank-outs), photography and poetry (photo-poems), calculus and sculpture (math-forms), drawing and poetry (poemscopes, poster poems), biology and art (bone sculpture, painting), and aerial photography, geology, biology and painting (dyneton, amorphous, spiritism, and non-rectilinear art) suggest the already fertile potential auguring continued exploitation.[3]

Although the manifestos have Porter polemically taking credit for "revolutionary" unions that he named "sciart," "scilit," "sciarch," and "scipoe," such hybrid approaches had been introduced long before Porter's call for them (no doubt he was well aware of Alfred Jarry's pataphysics and other science-art hybrids of the early 20th-century). Perhaps Porter's need to take ownership of such strategies (even if he did so satirically) was an attempt to redeem science in the face of the wartime destruction his own scientific research had wrought.

Interestingly, even though Porter had resigned from the Manhattan Project, his employment often kept him connected to U.S. government and military interests. After a move to Sausalito (where he opened a gallery and began to publish authors such as Henry Miller under the imprint of Bern Porter Books), he moved to Guam, where he "speculated

[1] All biographical details have been gleaned from James Schevill's *Where to Go What to Do When You Are Bern Porter* (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House Publishers, 1992).

[2] Schevill, *Where to Go What to Do*, 56. The full title of this exhibit was "Metamorphic Rhizomes, eighty years of natural disintegration and six months of selective dissection."

[3] Bern Porter, *I've Left* (New York: Something Else Press, 1971) 43.

in surplus military equipment ventures."[4] Back in the States in 1956 he worked as a technical writer for Convair Astronautics, "a key center for intercontinental ballistic missiles" where according to his biographer James Schevill, "Porter rationalized that he was not building missiles, only writing instructions for field crews."[5] In 1964 he worked as an engineer on the Saturn Moon Rocket project; his employer was Boeing, which was under contract with the U.S. government.

Despite (or perhaps because of) his entanglements with the military complex, Porter needed to prove that science could be used for positive and constructive (i.e. aesthetic) purposes. In an interview with Phil Nurenberg in 1983, Porter stated "I was aware that the talent I and the [other physicists on the Manhattan Project] had could be converted into more peaceful and useful functions. And I have devoted a large part of the rest of my life, from 1945 on, to demonstrating that this is so."[6] "Conversion" is a key term here. Porter saw that the creative and financial resources put into arms production during the 40s were immediately transferred towards the making of consumer goods in the post-war period. In both cases, the industry was driven by the demands of nationalism and consumption, and Porter took it as his imperative to live a life that answered to neither. His interest in "converting" the throwaway products of capital led to the works he called "founds." Porter stated that in the face of "the bombed buildings, the concentration camps, the gulags, artists had the choice of saying nothing or transforming anything that came to hand into something new."[7] In Porter's case, "anything that came to hand" was primarily disposable printed matter—magazines, newspapers, advertising circulars, junk mail—and he spent most of his life breaking those materials down so as to change how they were perceived.

The founds are not so much collages as they are distillations and re- (or de-) contextualizations. For example, a grocery store advertisement listing the sale items of the week is whittled down in Porter's book *Waste Maker* to the vertical list of "peas beans spinach" in big bold capital letters. But the sources of the founds are not always so easily identifiable; in fact Porter stated that the most successful founds were those that had so transformed the meaning of the words through their decontextualization that the source was no longer obvious. For example, one can only guess at the source of this particular found, and yet it is a completely compelling text to read[8]:

4 Schevill, *Where to Go What to Do*, 137.
5 Schevill, *Where to Go What to Do*, 137.
6 Phil Nurenberg's Bern Porter interview reprinted from Vagabond Press, Ellensburg, Washington: http://www.panmodern.com/bern_nurenberg.html
7 Schevill, *Where to Go What to Do*, 295.
8 From *Found Poems* (New York: Something Else Press, 1972); also available at http://www.ubu.com/historical/porter/html/porter39.html

* * *

Unless you alter your life, America, here's what's about to happen to

Your fathers that begot you	**page 158**
Your brain	**page 164**
Your body	**page 168**
Your love life	**page 172**
The boy next door	**page 178**
Your town	**page 180**
Your country	**page 188**
Your sense of humor	**page 218**
The rest of the world	**page 250**

During the later part of his life Porter discovered many of his founds in the waste basket in his local post office in Belfast, Maine. For his 80th birthday celebration, Porter did an on-site demonstration of his method, which was then recorded in Schevill's biography *Where to go what to do when you are Bern Porter*:

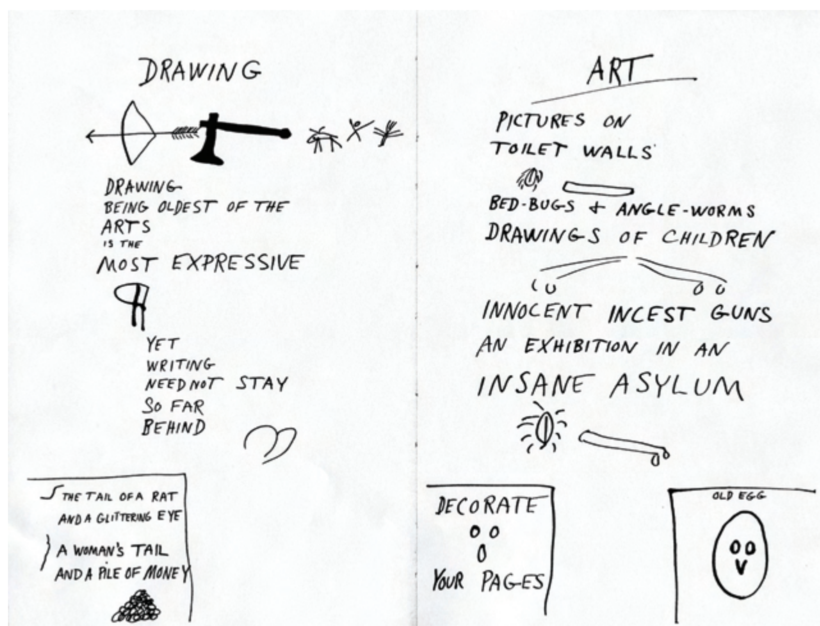
> ...reaching into the trash can, he pulls out some discarded papers and regards them with anticipation. "The first rule," he says, "is always to turn it upside down." He does so, as people laugh. "Next," he continues, "you must learn to see which part is most important scientifically, anthropologically, and aesthetically. Then you can cut out the most important parts. You must cut in such a way as to create a new independent piece." He pulls out of his robes a small blunt scissors and starts to cut deftly. "If you're going to create a new piece, you must demonstrate that you can see. You have to forget your brains or the fact that you think you can read... Picasso said 'I show what I've found, not what I'm looking for.' I'm looking for something that will kick the viewer in the teeth. But such a work, if looked at properly, might also bring peace and tranquility."[9]

The increasing consumerism of the 1950s and 1960s was accompanied by huge technological leaps in advertising, graphic design and the production of mass media; the noise of junk text intensified in volume. Porter's founds were a way to quiet the noise through a selective parsing of the print atmosphere, and in doing so, they uncovered significance in what our culture generally considers to be meaningless and disposable. Porter stated that "Nuggets of value in the waste are everywhere for the looking, if only the viewer can develop his or her wisdom of the questioning eye."[10] This sentiment is clearly illustrated in Porter's 1961 book of founds, *Waste Maker (1926-1961)*, which was published by Abyss Publications in 1972.

Waste Maker is dedicated to both Kenneth Patchen and Bob Brown. Porter had met Patchen while living in the Bay Area; he was drawn to

[9] Schevill, *Where to Go What to Do*, 283-84.
[10] Schevill, *Where to Go What to Do*, 54.

Patchen's use of the page and how he combined text and image. In 1946, Porter's small press imprint, Bern Porter Books, published Patchen's *Panels for the Walls of Heaven*. Bob Brown was an earlier producer of picture-poems; his 1959 collection of visual poems (published by Jargon/Corinth), titled *1450-1950*—which off-rhymes with the dates attached to Porter's *Waste Maker* title—emphasizes the physicality of letters and a modular use of page space:



In his 1930 book *The Readies*, Brown argues for a new relationship between reader and text:

> I'm for new methods of reading and writing and I believe the up-to-date reader deserves an eye-ful when he buys something to read. I think the optical end of the written word has been hidden over a bushel too long. I'm out for a bloody revolution of the word.[11]

As Porter would try to do after him, Brown searched for a way for the eye to make contact with language from a different angle, "to help the heavy-heads out of their frowsy mental beds." He proposed a reading

[11] Bob Brown, *The Readies* (Roving Eye Press/Bad Ems, 1930) 1. A pdf of this book can be found on ubuweb at www.ubu.com/historical/brown/brown22.html

machine that would alter typical reading practices.[12] In some ways this "readies" machine—which Brown positioned as the literary equivalent to the technological innovation that turned moving pictures into "talkies"—was comparable to Porter's low-tech command that one first turn a text upside down before discovering what's to be found there. The "readies" machine (which was never actually built) would allow the reader to move through a text at changing speeds and in various directions. For Brown's version, the reader was instructed to

> ...break up the word and then throw all the broken bits away into a handy kaleidoscope. But keep a piece of each shattered statue, an arm of each Venus as a quarry specimen; preserve a hair of the dog you bit for publicity's sake...[13]

By the 1960s, Porter was aware that the reader was already getting an "eye-ful" and that the revolution of the word was in fact happening on behalf of consumer goods. The visual word was being used primarily for market purposes, "for publicity's sake," just as science was being used primarily for military purposes. The instrumental uses of science and art were cutting off constructive possibilities by turning those rich territories of inquiry into static (and sometimes destructive) wastelands. *Waste Maker* was Porter's attempt to make something out of the detritus; the printed materials he salvaged were given a second chance to signify.

An inventory of the items recycled in this book yields the following: sale announcements, price lists, school board notices, quizzes of various sorts ("How many birthdays does the average man have?"), bank statements, schedules, application forms, business reply cards, life insurance tables, recipes, pronunciation keys, medical diagrams, multiple choice questionnaires, math equations, dictionary pages, information graphics, instructions on carpet care, tax forms, newspaper puzzles, radio program schedules, stock pages, sheet music, event calendars, tide tables, tables of contents, a sign language chart, song lists, and sources for roses. Some of the materials are completely unchanged, and some are more obviously collaged. Some of the materials were selected with self-reference in mind (for instance, the inclusion of a shoe named "Bern," available in "kid, black, brown")[14]:

[12] Craig Saper has constructed a digital version of how the reading machine might work, which can be found at http://www.readies.org/

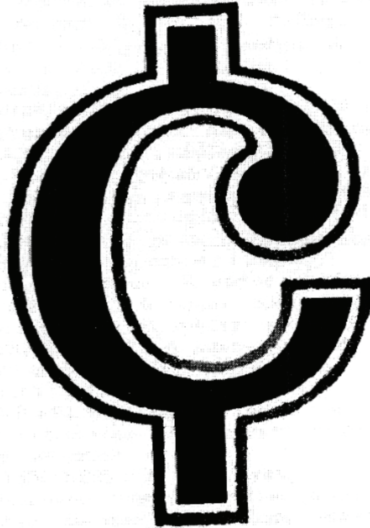
[13] Brown, *The Readies*, 2.

[14] For a discussion of this book as a kind of indirect autobiography, see K. Silem Mohammad's essay "Bern Porter: Blank Structures and Found Poetics in *Waste Maker.*"

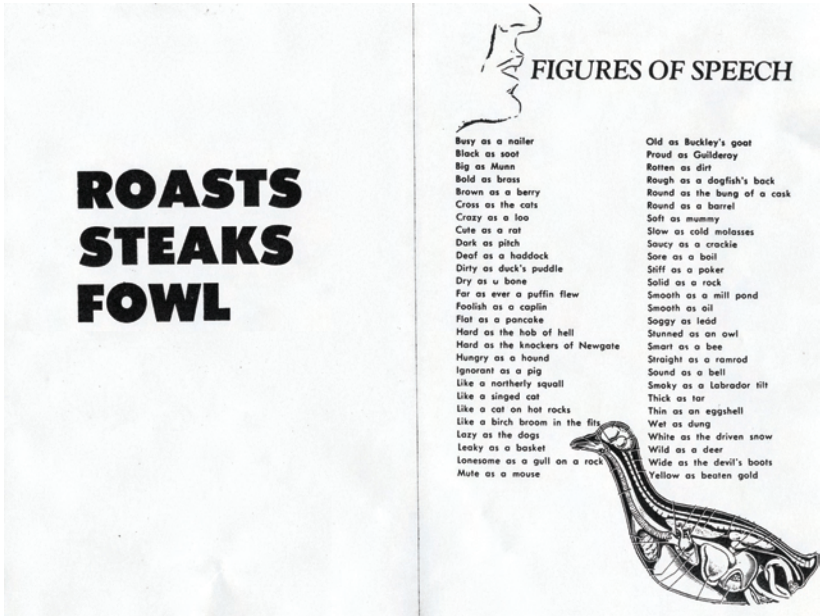
Bern
Article 1014 87
kid, black, brown
Price Group 5

GIRLS CAN'T BE TRUSTED

Some were selected because of their striking graphic aspect. We see the following image on a daily basis, and yet isolated from the numeral that might give it purpose, its meaning transforms:



The verso side of the following two-page spread has a similarly startling clarity:



The page seems to echo Gertrude Stein's "Roast potatoes for" from *Tender Buttons*. However, rather than calling attention to the words through a subversion of normative syntactical expectations, Porter's piece calls attention to the language through decontextualization: we know from where these words have come. The type design demands attention, and yet it has been robbed of its originating necessity. The source text is a ghostly presence in the shadow of a language conversion. In *Tender Buttons*, new grammars keep words from doing their usual work. In the example above, we know the verso words have been gleaned from some sort of sales pitch; however, lacking contextual information, we begin to think of each word on its own. "Roasts" double functions as verb and noun. "Steaks" can only be a noun, and yet sound-wise could also be a verb. "Fowl" also has a homonymic twin, and both fowl and foul converse directly with the cutaway diagram of a bird on the facing page, which sits nestled next to the "figure of speech" "lonesome as a gull on a rock." These disparate text-objects create a network of associations, histories, and points of contact. It's up to the reader to slow down and build up the web of relations.

Many of the pages of *Waste Maker* contain small collaged interventions: in the midst of a multiple choice spelling test sits the phrase "The Day the Lid Blew Off." A chart explaining care for varieties of house plants has been given a headline of "BOOM" with "ING!" at the bottom right corner, perhaps a play on blooming (for "booming" is indeed the reverse of a flower blooming). Random letters and numbers float onto pages from unknown sources. The effect of these interventions can be puzzling; some seem like jokes (i.e. the page where an empty seating chart form is appended with an illustration of an arm chair), but for the most part they read as non-sequitors. The alterations and erasures are not creating a new narrative as they do in the work of Tom Phillips' *A Humument* or Ronald Johnson's *Radi Os*. Rather they seem to be asking us to keep on the alert for possible sparks of semantic contact: some materials will ignite when combined and some will not. The best founds are essentially experimental; they can only be discovered by "the questioning eye" and never forced into stasis by authorial intention. As Porter said to Schevill in conversation, "In a throwaway society, all it takes is a perceptive eye to find things."[15]

Recycling the visual vocabulary of advertising for artistic purposes was nothing new when Porter began to do it in the 1950s. Aside from the contemporaneous emergence of pop-art, Porter had a precursor in the dada collage-novels of Max Ernst. Books such as *Une Semaine de Bonte* and *La Femme 100 Tetes* (created in Paris around the same time as Bob Brown, also in Paris, was devising his "readies") used engravings from Victorian era pulp novels, magazines, and catalogs as source materials. But unlike Porter, Ernst deliberately chose sources that would be much less recognizable, culling from a non-contemporaneous period of print culture so that the pieces wouldn't carry the baggage of their prior use and could therefore more easily create something never seen before; in Ernst's case, historical anachronism was a narrative tool necessary for the surreal world he wanted to create.

One page from *Waste Maker* can be read as an homage to Ernst and the typographic landscape he was quoting:

[15] Schevill, *Where to Go What to Do*, 254.

ER

TRAD

While the image seems to be a Victorian era engraving, the text looks to be a modern rendition of a Victorian font. The text suggests "tradition," "trader," and "traitor" simultaneously, and those three words circle each other in anticipation of how the reader might make them converse. Although this particular page alludes to an earlier time in print culture, *Waste Maker* is primarily concerned with the residue and debris of the historical moment in which it was constructed. Porter's sources are deliberately familiar, as his aesthetic goal was to disconnect the "waste" from context so that the materials of the present can be seen with fresh eyes. The author is merely the "founder" and it is the reader's job to discover connections between the objects that have been found..

Such an attitude about the place of the artist/writer in relation to the reader, links Porter to later poets working with found text and commercial language. Harryette Mullen's 1992 book *S*PeRM**K*T* approaches commodity culture as found in the supermarket from the standpoint of the verbal rather than the visual. Also influenced by the materiality of Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Mullen's short prose poems are thickly layered with puns that play off language culled from tv advertising jingles, slogans, and product packaging.

> Nine out of ten docks trash paper or plastic. My shrink wraps securely stashed and shredded freshness re-enforced double baggage. All tidy toxic clean dregs folded down in dumps with safety improved twist-off tops. Crumpled sheets, sweating ammunition. A strychnine migraine is a p.r. problem. Every orifice leaks. No cap is tamper proof.[16]

In talking about the origins of this project, Mullen has discussed how the products we buy construct us, and they do so by using the "debased" language of advertising. She proposes that poetry can reverse that dynamic through an aesthetic of recycling. Similar to Bern Porter, her goal is "to take this detritus and to turn it into art."[17] Her strategies for doing so require acts of free association that are thematically organized according to what you would find in the aisles of a grocery store. In the example above, practically each word performs a double function. Similar to Porter's "Fowl"-play, Mullen's language collection can unravel any number of narratives. For instance, a grocery aisle of bags, wraps, and containers connects to a dock of trashed and toxic strychnine ammunition. Somewhere is a body, carrying the psychological baggage of sleepless nights. And all of this occurs amidst alliterative and metrical sound play reminiscent of a nursery rhyme. Again, it is the reader who maps a semantic trail through the materials.

Aesthetics of recycling and releasing the text from authorial control are also connected to current trends in Ecopoetics. Harriet Tarlo edited a special Ecopoetics section of the on-line journal *HOW2*, which includes a

[16] Harryette Mullen, *Recyclopedia* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2006) 76.
[17] Harryette Mullen interview with Cynthia Hogue *Postmodern Culture* 9.2 (January 1999): §16.

subsection titled "Recycles." In her introduction she states "Recycling text does seem to me to have ethical implications, if not the exact same ones as recycling cans, bottles and plastics. The recycling of texts is about preservation of the valued resources of previous writing as well as being about acknowledgement of a world beyond the self…"[18] All of the work in the Recycles section incorporates texts that have been found in a variety of print sources, ranging from newspapers to science textbooks. These appropriations act differently from those of the modernist era (see Pound, Eliot, Moore), in that they are not used to serve authorial intention. Rather they are the result of an inquiry to which the answer is not yet known. The structure of this investigation is perhaps best described by Marcella Durand in her essay "The Ecology of Poetry" where she explains that the strength of the ecopoetical process is its ability to

> …legitimately juxtapose kelp beds with junkyards… And poets right now are the only scientist-artists who can do these sorts of associations and get away with them—all other disciplines, such as biology, oceanography, or mathematics carry an obligation to separate their ideas into discrete topics…[19]

In other words, it is poetry's expected employment of juxtaposition and parataxis that allows the reader of an "ecological poem" to consider the critical interconnectivity of seemingly unrelated phenomena. Poetry can model a world where multiple disciplines and discourses can be so responsive to each other that they begin to merge and change their functions.

Porter was clearly concerned with environmentalism; he refused to drive a car and his manifesto in *I've Left* suggests that we replace cars with "electric-driven chairs or slip on a pair of atom-powered roller skates and in a normal erect standing position go rolling along the highways."[20] A post-war trip to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where electricity was powered by water, convinced him that energy produced from nature—particularly solar power—was the most practical method for the purpose. Again, this concept was reflected in his "sciarch" manifesto: "…every house should be a self contained, living organism free of all adjacent organisms and living directly off the environment of natural air, light, wind, rain and soil like any flower of the field…"[21] But while the manifestos proposed a series of wildly imaginative utopian fantasies (similar in tone to Bob Brown's *The Readies*), the "founds"

[18] Harriet Tarlo, "Women and ecopoetics: an introduction in context," *HOW2* 3.2: http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/introstatements/tarlo_intro.html

[19] Marcella Durand, "The Ecology of Poetry," *Ecopoetics* 2 (Fall 2002): 62.

[20] Bern Porter, *I've Left: a manifesto and a testament of SCIence and –ART (SCIART)* (New York: Something Else Press, 1971) 36.

[21] Porter, *I've Left: a manifesto and a testament of SCIence and –ART (SCIART)*, 21.

provided a practical forum for which Porter's environmental concerns could play out. Porter was most concerned with how a work of art could transform the attention, for a shift in awareness could lead to an alternative set of responsive actions. It was a particular kind of attention to the world that led to Porter's work as a physicist being used in the interests of massive destruction; but what if that attention had been pushed in a different direction? Porter's method of decontextualization and recycling in order to change the perception of cultural debris was a way to ask that question again and again.

Stephanie Strickland

Poetry & the Digital World

Peter Middleton tells us what poems do:

> ...poems work at the limits of the technologies of language.

Furthermore,

> Prosody, the use of print layout to create perceptual and cognitive codes, the use of fonts, folded paper bound together, audible voicing, recordings, digitization—this is only a short sample from a list of the techne that poems work with. Almost every feature of language technologies has been put to use by poets as a formal device for the production of meaning, and these formal devices are themselves historically shaped... The poem on the page is *impatiently waiting* for its next staging, in another technology, a new performance, or some other realization...[1]

Born-digital poetry is a "next staging" that has arrived, an infant art, practiced throughout the world and now affecting print itself. Known variously as electronic, digital, cyber, hypermedial, hypertextual, ergodic, or net literature, it can be searched out using the full set of these terms.

Electronic poetry differs from traditional work in several respects that make it a "next staging," and not simply a recapitulation onscreen of the important experimental poetry techniques of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Digital poetry *does* things rather than *says* things. It can be a poetry of performative signs. It often requires that one operate it like an appliance or play it as one would an instrument or game. Sometimes what it generates or displays is unpredictable and irreproducible—only the productive rules able to be known.

Digital literature is read differently from print—both in the kind of attention and in the kinds of reading skills it demands. It requires a multi-tasking, sampling kind of attention often combined with the problem-

* First published in *English Language Notes* 47.1. Special Issue: Experimental Literary Education (Spring/Summer 2009).

[1] Peter Middleton, *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005) xiii [emphasis added].

solving focus of a game player. Newly needed skills include the use of mouse, joystick, or sensor to track visual units, as well as an ability to integrate perception of a soundscape, a textscape, and a visual display with navigational behavior. Cyber-literature is often collaboratively made and sometimes collaboratively read. It reflects, and reflects upon, worlds not by describing them, but by building them. It investigates 3-dimensional space, and it is the result of feedback processes between humans and machines, between human intelligence and machine intelligence. E-lit permits and requires new and different kinds of time-space experience that are inherent to a networked environment.[2]

Digital writers are found on all continents and are mainly aware of each other through the net, though some meet face-to-face at conferences such as Digital Arts and Culture, e-Poetry, and Electronic Literature Organization conferences, as well as at gatherings like Siggraph or the ACM conference on Hypertext. Concrete poetry is an earlier geographically-dispersed poetry movement, and these two movements are related insofar as their writing addresses the screen.

Among the first practitioners of digital writing were poets in Brazil who had made theory-based concrete poems, proclaiming "peeling of words and phonic fracture" as programmatic principles. These effects today can be experienced *bodily* in the electronic CAVE poem *Screen*[3] if one is lucky enough to be at the very specialized computational and viewing facility that a CAVE is, a cubic room missing its top and one side, its walls and floor projection screens.

The world is most definitely not "one," yet increasingly the smallest happenings in it anywhere affect everyone. In an age so vulnerable to domination by humans who are only just beginning to feel their way toward thinking complexly—with the help of intelligent machines; and, as well, an age where one individual's creativity (say Shawn Fanning's invention of Napster) has the power to affect millions, some desire a poetry that is with us in technical-social-ecological-affective ways.

Why would poets write e-poetry in the twenty-first century? Several reasons have been alluded to above: the felt change in social practices of attention—the deep focused attention solicited by print literature mixed with the hyper mobile attention elicited by reading in a networked programmable environment; the increasingly intelligent and autonomous machines that surround us and enmesh us, making many important decisions regarding our lives; the felt need to elaborate a communicative practice that is worldwide, social, critical, and life-affirming.

I think there is another current of motivation as well. What happens when the literature we read is out of sync with what we know—both in what it says and in how it is made? Historically, poetic words *in print*

[2] For a fuller description of the differences between print and digital literature, with examples, see Stephanie Strickland, "Born Digital," at the Poetry Foundation website: http://poetryfoundation.org/journal/feature.html?id=182942.

[3] Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al., *Screen 2002-2005* http://www.hyperfiction.org/screen/

have evoked not a world, but a worldview. After Einstein, what is "a view"?

After Einstein, we know that particle existences pop in and wink out as we cross various *horizons*, various barriers to knowledge. These barriers depend exquisitely on whether one is only a receiver (say of light through a telescope) or whether (say by radar) one can both send and receive a signal. The variance in effect between being only a receiver and being both an initiator and receiver is a well-established dimension in digital poetics.

After Einstein, space and time are not the separate containers they are on a printed page. Einstein and quantum field theory teach that mass-energy-space-time are so little separate, so closely interlocked, so interchangeable, they could be better referred to as one hyphenated word, one reconfigurable acronym. In electronic literature, where a bitstream may express as text or sound or image, or all three in some topologic arrangement, we are taught to grasp, to replay, a single potential expressible in multiple fundamental manners. Trade-offs and interconversions of spatial and temporal expression are the everyday practice of an electronic writer.

After Einstein, the *cosmological principle* tells us that every point of space-time is equivalent; that is, the results of any local experiment are independent of where and when in the universe it is conducted, and there are no privileged positions or directions, no "center of expansion." Yet, it is very hard to gain a feeling of centerlessness from print literature. Books have centers; texts are centered on the page; story lines have arcs which include central climaxes. Consider that centerlessness and all-centering are equivalent: if there is no center, every point is a center. Stand-alone and networked electronic literature, as well as the Web itself as a construct, can convey this multi-centering equivalence of location.

A major cosmological discovery of the last century is the non-static, fluctuating, evolving and expanding nature of everything around us, the middle-aged universe that we can see, which we know is only a small fraction of what we cannot. Electronic literature lives in such a home, a non-static environment of constantly expanding flux, only partly visible; namely, the traffic on global communication networks.

Print words don't work only by conveying a world view; they also work in poems by a kind of iconic grammar, rendering a relationship or structure not completely apparent on the surface. Classical scholar and poet Anne Carson refers to this practice in the works of Herakleitos, Simonides and Celan. She refers to their "synthetic and tensional"[4] sentences as units that *re-enact* the reality of which they speak.

[4] Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 52, citing T.G. Rosenmeyer, "Gorgias, Aeschylus, and *Apate*," *American Journal of Philology* 76 (1965): 229.

How do such *re-enactments* relate to electronic poems? On the one hand, relationship and structure are replaced by *behavior*, as the object rendered; on the other, iconic grammar becomes *dynamic*. Worlds are created.

The success of quantum mechanics at the atomic level has made molecular engineering possible. Physicists, rather than seeking to explain, begin to focus more on creating novel phenomena, studying systems that never before existed. Notice that this makes physics very similar, now, to applied or social science, a science of the "*artificial*," as Herbert Simon[5] names it, a science for things you don't just come across, like lightning or motion or magnets or stars, but rather a science of things you desire and thereby discover. You do not just come across superconductivity—it is a "genuine novelt[y] in the universe."[6] A reversal of sorts, or at any rate an equalization, between theory and application has taken place.

In print poems, how does one gain a sense that reality is being engineered in every aspect of life, that understanding itself is being engineered, and that a corresponding responsibility accrues? Print poems tend to both be and to proclaim, to both depict and to explicate a *fait accompli*. Though print text itself has been revolutionized by computation—written, typeset, and printed digitally—the book continues to be received by many as if it were a 19th-century product. By contrast, electronic literature is perforce aware of the shifting platforms, protocols, and hardware that underlie it; of corresponding responsibilities for public preservation and access; of the artificiality of its constructs; and of the analogy of its products to applications. It too creates and probes novelties never seen by generating texts, some unending, which could not occur without the use of computational algorithms. It applies mathematical, statistical, topological, and evolutionary schemes to produce text and process images; it even "bends" circuits, that is, it engineers hardware, to produce new sounds.

A transformation, in the 1970s and later, of the foundations of physics, based on the increasingly well-tested soundness of quantum mechanics, led to understanding a necessarily hierarchical structure for the physical world, made of levels or layers, each of which is describable in its own terms while remaining largely decoupled from the other layers. The early 20th-century drive toward reduction and unification, certainly Einstein's goal, became eroded by the very results of its own program. The advances that eroded the reductionist unifying position produced instead a layered hierarchy, where bottom-up and top-down causation both come into effect.

[5] Herbert Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) as cited in Nancey Murphy and George F.R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 73.

[6] Silvan Schweber, "Physics, Community and the Crisis in Physical Theory," *Physics Today* 46.11 (November 1993): 35.

In electronic literature, one deals directly with *levels and layers*, with effects traveling up and down multiple strata. Layers of natural and programming language, for instance, must be dealt with, as well as questions such as the difference it makes to a work to be written in the lower-level Processing language, say, rather than Java or Flash. Visual and sonic layering are also direct concerns of hypermedial literature. What is the effect on readers who are asked to deal with 2-D visual and textual (and perhaps sonic) information simultaneously? Which tasks precede which? Do perceptions interact? What happens when three-dimensionality is simulated, when the text goes into motion, or when text in an installation fully surrounds the reader? When are the aggregated higher levels independent of microforces? When is *further detail irrelevant*? These questions are at the heart of electronic poetry-making and online reading as well, whereas the closed compact structure of the print poem, bringing us to deep focus, is designed to wall out such questions.

In complex hierarchical structures, new levels of order emerge which must be described by concepts appropriate to their level: a loss of hearing cannot be described in the language of molecular biology, for instance. Reductionist bottom-up causation—constraints on the whole by laws governing the parts—now has to be complemented by a notion of top-down causation. Top-down effects are largely due to three factors: the interaction of an entity with its environment, the interactions of various components with each other, and the boundary conditions on the layers.

Complexity and its uncertainties are addressed, utilized, and probed both by programming and network processes. Brian Kim Stefans, an electronic and print writer, has complained that "It doesn't appear to be of great import to new media writers, especially those involved in interactivity, 3d spaces and multimedia, to utilize the technology to magnify the impact and specificity of language as we have come to know it through the centuries..."[7] I think this is true. I think that language, as we have come to know it through the centuries, is not the right tool to limn this particular reality. The synthetic and tensional unit with which to probe complexity will use language as one element among others. The new adventure for language is to discover the impact and magnitude it can have when strongholds become portals and retracing is strictly not possible.

Electronic investigator-artists share the current scientific involvement "in the creation of novelty—in the design of objects that never existed before..."[8] Into this quest, this complexifying mix, they thread the legacy experiences of all nine muses.

[7] Brian Kim Stefans, "Privileging Language: The Text in Electronic Writing," *electronic book review*: http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/databased
[8] Schweber, "Physics, Community and the Crisis in Physical Theory," 39.

In this environment, technophobia—a disinclination to deal with the strangeness and frustration of techno-lit—may prove self-blinding. As Michel Serres says, "Life and thought live in closest proximity to nothingness… The sated sleep in the shadow of their armaments, while the most fragile are bringing…newness."[9] Electronic poetry is a fragile art, in closest approximation to nothingness. Might it bring the newness we need, as we fully come to realize that the future will live *only* under the conditions that we ourselves have produced in this era?

[9] Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995) 122-123.

D.J. Huppatz

Dionysus in Drag: On Flarf

> *They have been at a great feast of*
> *Languages and stolen all the scraps.*
> Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*

"I HATE SPEECH." Thus began Ron Silliman's introduction to his influential anthology of Language poetry, *In the American Tree*, with Robert Greiner's much-quoted line from the first issue of *This* magazine (1971) functioning as a kind of manifesto. While acknowledging the diversity of practice amongst Language poets, Silliman identified their important preoccupations: "rejecting a speech-based poetics and consciously raising the issue of reference."[1] By the turn of the millennium, exposing the "referential fallacy" and the materiality of language was fundamental practice in any "post-avant" poetry.[2] However, as a response to Language poetry's rejection of speech, we might consider the opening lines of a recent poem by Sharon Mesmer:

> I'm a seventeen-year old female from Ohio, US,
> confident and competent, with a lot of energy,
> and I am fucking sick of ppls Y2K shit.[3]

Upon first reading, Mesmer's poem seems wilfully opposed to Greiner's disdain of speech, but there are two important qualifications: firstly, the speech is clearly not that of Sharon Mesmer (or even "the poet"); and secondly, the poem is not comprised of speech as Greiner understood it in 1971, that is, words that refer to vocal sounds, but "speech" composed on a keyboard and mediated by a screen. Mesmer's poem, produced by stitching together text appropriated from Google searches, consciously engages with "other" voices. Reflecting on her method, Mesmer wrote: "Who knew who would be speaking? People I didn't

1 Ron Silliman, "Language, Realism, Poetry," in Silliman, ed., *In The American Tree* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1986) xvi.
2 For further discussion of "the referential fallacy" in Language and post-Language poetry, see Marjorie Perloff, "After Language Poetry: Innovation and Its Theoretical Discontents," *Contemporary Poetics*, ed. Louis Armand (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2007) 21.
3 Sharon Mesmer, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch* (Cumberland, RI: Combo Books. 2007) 57.

know, certainly. People I didn't necessarily like."[4] While the overthrow of the authentic and authoritative poet's voice is clearly taken for granted, speech has returned as both plural and mediated by the virtual.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Mesmer and her fellow poets of the Flarf collective initiated an innovative and controversial practice by reconstituting contemporary "speech," such as that of the unwitting seventeen-year old from Ohio, into poetry. Unlike writers of the Language poetry generation, Flarf poets began working within a mode of existence that is fundamentally mediated by digital technologies, engaging directly with the inhabitation of cyberspace and the virtual world in which Americans have become increasingly embedded. Flarf poetry, typically comprised of constellations of text culled from internet searches or strings of spam, is an intoxicating pastiche of "serious" and everyday content, inflected by corrosive parody, teasing humour, and posturing performance. For Flarfists, the contemporary muse is not an ancient Greek nymph who whispers sincere odes in the poet's ear but Dionysus in drag, a burlesque performer playing multiple and conflicting roles.

Flarf's generation method, commonly known as "Google-sculpting," has caused anxiety in some poetry circles—are these anti-humanist poems simply "generated by machines"? This common misunderstanding of Flarf only in terms of its generative method, that is, as simply search engine collage, is both problematic and unproductive.[5] Through the course of the twentieth-century, avant-garde writers—from Dadaists and Surrealists to the New York School poets and Language writers—have utilized technological tools to create various collage-like compositions. Thus Flarf has been described as "a form of Neo-Dada by virtue of its enthusiastic embrace of humour, collage, and caustic social critique."[6] Most exercises in avant-garde deja-vu seem to revolve around a conception of poetic practice solely in terms of formal innovation. While there is some merit in establishing precedents, the twentieth-century avant-garde (and our common understanding of it) remained rooted in the individual, while Flarf is rooted in the collective. As Flarf poet Nada Gordon stated in an interview: "It's not that the personal is the political. It's that the interpersonal is the political."[7] Returning to Greiner's opening statement, while the authority and authenticity of individual speech may no longer serve as a viable foundation for contemporary poetry, Flarf suggests that the diverse speech of the collective may.

[4] Mesmer, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, 120.

[5] This aspect of Flarf is covered by Dan Hoy, "The Virtual Dependency of the Post-Avant and the Problematics of Flarf: What Happens when Poets Spend Too Much Time Fucking Around on the Internet," *Jacket* 29 (April 2006): http://jacketmagazine.com/29/hoy-flarf.html.

[6] Rick Synder, "The New Pandemonium: A Brief Overview of Flarf," *Jacket* 31 (October 2006): http://jacketmagazine.com/31/snyder-flarf.html.

[7] Nada Gordon, "A Conversation with Tom Beckett," *Jacket* 23 (August 2003): http://jacketmagazine.com/23/beck-gord-iv.html.

While in some ways a post-Language practice, Flarf's distinction from its immediate predecessor is the absence of any coherent poetics by members of the collective.[8] Flarf's generative methods have been the subject of innumerable arguments on blogs and blog comment streams, but there has been very little critical writing that engages with the resulting poetry. It may well be easier (and certainly safer) to debate the relative merits of Flarf methodologies than to engage with the poetry's content.[9] Indeed, Flarf's intervention into the spectacle of contemporary American media culture may well be more innovative and ultimately valuable than its use of search engine collage. Thus, rather than dwell on methods, this chapter will sketch some aspects of Flarf poetics through an analysis of four exemplary books, a brief survey that is intended to outline future possibilities as well as provide an historical context for understanding Flarf. The first decade of the new millennium was neatly encapsulated by the Bush presidency (January 2001 to January 2009) and the era's major themes—the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent wars, the ongoing occupation of Iraq, the resurgence of the religious right and traditional values, tensions over immigration, and the conspicuous consumption of the credit bubble economy—littered Flarf poetry over the first decade of the twenty-first century. For Flarf poets, the next decade may well entail a new approach, given a new presidency and a re-evaluation of American cultural fundamentals, as well as increasing institutional legitimisation of their practice, including some college creative writing courses now featuring variations of Google-sculpting with specific references to Flarf, as well as the July/August 2009 issue of the traditionally "establishment" magazine *Poetry* featuring Flarf and Conceptual Poetry.[10]

BEYOND AWFULNESS

Flarf's primal scene occurred in 2000, when Gary Sullivan's "deliberately awful" poem, "Mm-hmm" was accepted for publication in The International Library of Poetry's "Poetry's Elite: The Best Poets of 2000." The International Library of Poetry (which no longer exists) was a publisher which hosted poetry "contests" in which every poem entered was subsequently selected to be in an anthology that "winning" poets were required to purchase. While maintaining the appearance of editorial standards, the competition was simply a means of making money by

[8] With the exception of brief postscripts and interviews.

[9] Even in Kenneth Goldsmith's introduction to the 2009 *Poetry* magazine issue on Flarf and Conceptual writing, "Flarf is Dionysus. Conceptual Writing is Apollo," he emphasized generation methods and the "immersive digital environment," but failed to grant any significance to the content generated by either practices.

[10] Further to this "institutionalization," a forthcoming Flarf anthology from Edge Books, unpublished at the time of writing this chapter, may also aid in Flarf's institutionalization.

appealing to writerly vanity. Sullivan thought he would call the bluff by composing the "worst" poem he possibly could and entering it into a competition. The poem begins:

> Yeah, mm-hmm, it's true
> big birds make
> big doo! I got fire inside
> my "huppa"-chimp (TM)
> gonna be agreessive, greasy aw yeah god
> wanna DOOT! DOOT!
> Pfffffffffffffffffffffffffft! Hey!
> ooh yeah baby gonna shake & bake then take
> AWWWWWWL your monee, honee (tee hee)

Predictably, Sullivan received a stock reply from the managing editor which congratulated him on his wonderful poem which was selected from over one million submissions. "Mm-hmm," wrote the editor, "sparks the imagination and provides the reader with a fresh, unique perspective on life."[11] By sharing this prank with the subpoetics email listserv in October 2000, Sullivan ignited a spark and soon other poets tried writing deliberately awful poetry. The results were shared and discussed, and the dialogue culminated in the formation of another listserv in 2001, a small group initially dedicated to exploring the realm of deliberately awful poetry.

More important than exposing the absence of editorial standards at The International Library of Poetry, what Sullivan's prank exposed was the possibility that "awful" poetry might exist. Even following a century of modernist experimentation in which it seemed that every boundary had been crossed and every taste culture confronted, Sullivan raised the possibility that there might be some practices and/or content that were still unacceptable within poetry circles (avant-garde or otherwise). Sullivan later defined the term Flarf to describe the work produced on the list: "A quality of intentional or unintentional "flarfiness." A kind of corrosive, cute, or cloying, awfulness. Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control. "Not okay.""[12] In their search for awful poetry, poets on the Flarf list began with material sourced from Google searches (hence the common equation of Flarf with Google-sculpting), a random sampling of virtual speech that included anything from fragments of chat room conversations mixed with serious news mixed with pornography. Much of the initial poetry was collaborative, with listserv members regularly sampling each other's work and incorporating it into their own.

[11] The original poem as well as the reply from the International Library of Poetry has been posted online: http://home.earthlink.net/~ululate/data/11-11-05.pdf.

[12] Gary Sullivan in "The Flarf Files": http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/syllabi/readings/flarf.html.

What initially began as whimsical experimentation gathered momentum after September 11, 2001 as the collective increasingly mixed in parodies of the official media statements, language of authorised mourning and strident nationalist rhetoric that followed in the wake of the terrorist attacks. Sullivan later described the surge in activity on the Flarf list: "Soon, we were all posting, but instead of inside-jokes about minor annoyances, the target was The New Era. If irony, sarcasm, and general un-Americanism had tanked when the Towers fell, the Flarf list was too drunk to read the memo. Everyone posted reams of the most offensive rewrites of *New York Times* "think" pieces, hand-wringing blog-posts, and other well-intentioned public statements this particular reader had ever seen."[13] In the post-9/11 New Era, official narrative frames and content were quickly consolidated so that the dominant discourse became almost impossible to challenge. Politicians and media figures immediately acquired a purpose, as both subject positions and language became fixed in simple dichotomies (us versus them, good versus evil). In contrast, Flarf's radical destabilization of speaking subjects and mutating language exposed the chaos beneath the mediated veneer of official American coherence and stability.

DEER HEAD NATION

Published in 2003, K. Silem Mohammed's *Deer Head Nation* was the first book-length volume of Flarf to be widely distributed. Many of Mohammad's poems were spawned from Sullivan's initial concept of deliberate awfulness—the volume abounds in absurdity, self-depreciating humour and a confusing polyphony of speech. Mohammad generated text by inserting the term "deer head" in combination with other phrases into a search engine and then editing the results. His poem, "World of Faux Wood Panelling," for example, stitches together fragments culled from such searches:

> ...stuffed game animals
> ...Inflatable Deer Head
> ...Edvard Munch Inflatable Scream Doll
> ...popsicle w / animal
> ...an effigy of a deer's head at the center of
> ...the Global Cultural Economy
> ...annotations to Karl Marx's *Capital*
> ...shit, this just isn't working[14]

The unlikely juxtapositions and rapid cuts replicate the horizontal movement of an internet search, with the deer's head leading the way

[13] Gary Sullivan, "Flarf: From Glory Days to Glory Hole," *The Brooklyn Rail* (February 2009): http://www.brooklynrail.org/2009/02/books/flarf-from-glory-days-to-glory-hole.

[14] K. Silem Mohammad, *Deer Head Nation* (Oakland: tougher disguises, 2003) 86.

(and inhabiting, as the title suggests, a world of veneers). While the disjunction is similar to some Language writing, hermeneutic readings seem redundant here, particularly when confronted with the comic unravelling of the final line. The latter suggests a cynicism in which poetry as critique is rendered impossible: the shifting deer's head references seem to make some sense, and even with the reference to Marx a reader might be able to tie the fragments together, but any coherent reading is shot down in the frustrating failure expressed in the last line.

In an interview, Mohammad reflected on his work with reference to mutating language:

> ...the idea that language could be this hyperflexible network that can do without etymology or tradition or euphony is simultaneously ludicrous and exciting to me. The Google collage technique is a way of imaginarily courting that kind of radical mutation—or even of acknowledging that in many ways such a mutation *is* occurring. Maybe not on the level of every little individual word, but on the level of the syntactic and otherwise combinatorial structures that we find "aesthetic" or "poetic."[15]

Mohammad's individual poems enact this mutation, mapping how words and their meanings shift horizontally in the virtual realm. Rather than using completely random terms inserted into search engines, Mohammad's book is structured around the mutating deer head, which continually reappears as a kind of quintessential American icon, most notably recurring as the sporting trophy of a particular America associated with "traditional" values such as hunting, conservative politics and individualism. As well as the deer's head, Mohammad's repetition of other terms recur throughout the book—"militants," "kittens" and "elk"—for example, were also combined with seemingly random phrases to produce similarly unexpected mutations that circle around their key terms. Although seemingly random, the repetition and combination clearly resonate with major social and political issues in contemporary American culture.

Seemingly in direct response to an era increasingly overwhelmed by patriotic language and simple dichotomies, for example, Mohammad wrote:

> :::::::::: irony is not dead
> :::::::::: linguistic terrorism
> :::::::::: is wrong in America
> :::::::::: keep America beautiful, swallow
> :::::::::: the last thing you see will be a hobbit and a militant[16]

[15] Tom Beckett, interview with K. Silem Mohammad, *E-X-C-H-A-N-G-E-V-A-L-U-E-S* (June 28, 2005): http://willtoexchange.blogspot.com/2005/06/interview-with-k-silem-mohammad.html.
[16] Mohammad, *Deer Head Nation*, 34.

While the curious typographic breaks suggest communication short-circuiting and language mutating between the lines, Mohammad's use of loaded terms such as "terrorism" and "militant" are a direct reference to New Era rhetoric. By including a hobbit, a fictional character from J.R.R. Tolkein's novels (and more importantly, the film version, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which was released in 2001), on an equal level with a "militant" suggests that the two terms are equally fictional—or, in the virtual world of faux wood panelling, equally real. Mohammad's revival of irony, followed by "linguistic terrorism" neatly encapsulates a crucial association of early Flarf—both are, returning to Sullivan's initial definition, "Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control."

In his poem, "Robespierre," Mohammad makes specific reference to the controversial French Revolutionary Maximillien Robespierre, leader of the post-Revolutionary Reign of Terror. The parallel between the Reign of Terror and the Bush administration's contemporary War on Terror seems plausible, but in Mohammad's virtual world, such simple analogies are impossible to sustain:

> ...run downstairs and escape the deer head
> ...the letters were an authorization to destroy, kill
> ...he said *listen stupid*, *I will try to explain to you about this*
> ...you've got to change your evil
> ...begin framing an ideology
> ...and then kill[17]

Mining the detrius of the internet, Mohammad's poetry extracts a geological slice of American culture in which the authoritative speech of New Era politics is mangled into nonsense, diminishing the effects of the sinister "authorization to destroy" into humorous debris. In the official media world, words, phrases and sentences (which in turn serve to frame an ideology) were becoming fixed, while in Mohammad's world, they were unfixing, mutating into a realm of perpetual flux. In a section of "Dear Head," Mohammad again extracts speech related to the War on Terror and its public reception in the US:

> Dear War Supporters and Others
> ..."there is no way that we should share
> ...our power with any raghead nation" we are
> ...a nation within a nation and we
> ...will then be the head nation
> ...a nation of "kings" and "priests"
> ...Leroy would have loved to see the spectacle
> ...of the cat leaping on the deer head and riding it[18]

[17] Mohammad, *Deer Head Nation*, 84.
[18] Mohammad, *Deer Head Nation*, 108.

The language in Mohammad's poem mutates from dear to deer, the head nation mutates into the deer head nation which mutates into an address to the nation ("dear head nation"), all emphasizing a language in perpetual flux as above. But in this poem, the initial political rant (presumably culled from an online chat room) mutates until it is finally deflated completely by the final lines which conjure up the surreal image of a cat riding the sacred deer head. Given that it resonates as a hunting trophy and a talisman of American power throughout Mohammad's book, this parody of the deer head possibly reflects on contemporary American values too. Although the fragments were generated by a search engine, Mohammad's control of the inputs and manipulation of the results clearly reflect a nuanced engagement with American culture and the languages of the post-9/11 era.

PETROLEUM HAT

With its inconsistent tone and self-conscious awkwardness, Drew Gardner's *Petroleum Hat* (2005), was another early Flarf volume that followed Sullivan's deliberately awful lead. Like search engines, Gardner's poems make no distinction between "serious" information ("news"), everyday speech and pop culture gossip: all are potential material to add to the mix. In *Petroleum Hat*, political figures are blended in with celebrities in a flattened virtual world, a realm that may be less of a literary construct than simply a compressed slice of the "real" contemporary America. While there are no consistent narratives or tones in Gardner's work, the language is evidently gleaned from the internet using a similar technique to Mohammad's. Rather than distilling the information overflow into clear, rational packages of consumable data, Gardner leaves it messy and thick with absurdity, cynicism and ambiguity.

A major theme of *Petroleum Hat* is the Iraq War, or more specifically, representations of the war and its rhetorical framework as they were being consumed in America. Gardner uses War on Terror doublespeak against itself, exposing its absurdity and deflating its seriousness. In this sense, the fragmented language and imagery function as a corrosive disruption to the sanitized information feeds presented by mainstream American media channels. Gardner's now-infamous poem, "Chicks Dig War," for example, includes the stanza:

> Phallocentric chicks:
> they dig guys with big wars.
> I just cannot, you know, believe in a war
> against chicks when they've got the anti-chick war
> thing goin' on.

The women will be like "Ohh, what a cute war!"[19]

The poem's absurdity builds with repetition of, and variations on the refrain "chicks dig war" and the insertion of voices that can be seen as a parody of the official war rhetoric. Rather than simply an anti-war poem, Gardner's parody of the foundational militarism and patriarchy that justifies war dismantles its warped logic with similarly warped logic.

In "John Denver Wawa Shadow Puppet Government," Gardner mashes up key contemporary themes of New Era America—the war, politics, celebrity and religion:

the NBC/Wall Street Journal doesn't understand
the God of Isaac and Ishmael
soon we'll all be praying to John Denver
if we don't allow right-wing poor people to feel happy
ALL the time,
teach their kids how to pray in the direction of pizza
yet see no problem
with having the Lord's Prayer printed in ghostly pubic hair

the president has become newly stressed-out
with the profound equality of all human beings
knocking over stone walls onto Avril Lavigne
as Abraham Lincoln once did [20]

Here, Isaac and Ishmael, both sons of Abraham (though with different mothers), underline the common ancestry of Christianity and Islam (the former religion traces a lineage through Isaac, the latter through Ishmael). Mainstream news "can't understand" that both religions have the same father. In a contemporary America where more people vote for TV pop stars than politicians, country/pop singer John Denver may be both a worthy idol and a worthy political candidate.[21] However, unlike most contemporary pop stars, and despite the potential patriotism of hits such as "Take Me Home, Country Roads" and "Rocky Mountain High," Denver was known for his political outspoken-ness, and was particularly critical of various conservative governments.

In the next stanza, Gardner flattens space and time to conflate Avril Lavigne and Abraham Lincoln into the same realm. Beyond simply a curious juxtaposition, Gardner is also skating across the surface of language, with ALL as a key refrain from the last stanza—both the contemporary pop singer and the former president contain those letters in their names, underlining the equality of all within Gardner's Flarf world. However, more seriously, equality is stressful for the president,

[19] Drew Gardner, *Petroleum Hat* (New York: Roof Books, 2005) 20.

[20] Gardner, *Petroleum Hat*, 78.

[21] It is worth noting here that poets of the Flarf generation grew up under America's first movie star president, Ronald Reagan.

with the resonance of "stone walls" recalling 1969's Stonewall Riots, and suggesting that equality here is not only referring to the rights of America's Pizza-eating poor but also president Bush's "knocking over" gay rights proposals.

There certainly appears to be something sinister going on behind the scenes of the "shadow puppet government," though Gardner does not offer a clear ethical stance on any of these issues. As with Mesmer's poem quoted in my introduction above, the poet is not the authoritative voice here, instead, these poems conflate voices and discourses that do not usually occupy the same space. Another poem, "in this otherworldly quiet," for example, begins:

> in this otherworldly quiet
> i heard the piercing cry of agony rent the air
> dear little bird, why this shipbuilding?
> why a 300 pound weapon, and
> why did each protester
> spank Wolfowitz individually, really hard?
>
> administration has been made between
> clauses relating to internet surveillance
> and radioactive toys made of lint[22]

Here again, Gardner presents a mashup of contemporary news issues—the war, internet surveillance, weapons—in a creepy silent otherworld in which prayer meetings meet celebrity porn and the Iraq War's principle architect, Paul Wolfowitz, is spanked by protestors. As spam aims to escape filters and spread virally, so too Gardner's language escapes rational communication in unfiltered streams of the American collective unconscious, and the results are both humorous and frightening. In a similar way to Mohammad, Gardner's language mutates from its original sources in order to engage with the glittering surfaces of mediated culture via a combination of chance-generated spontenaeity and constructedness.

FOLLY

In a more self-consciously playful and affected manner, Nada Gordon's *Folly* (2007) engages with an American culture where simple dichotomies rule—good vs. evil, us vs. them—"as if it were a choice between OUD and BANJO."[23] A burlesque romp through language, *Folly* is corrosive precisely by virtue of its complexities and its ambiguities—there are no absolutes, seriousness is constantly undercut by humour and frivolity interrupted by profundity. More than simply a loose collection of poems, Gordon's *Folly* is structured like a play—three acts

[22] Gardner, *Petroleum Hat*, 32.

[23] Nada Gordon, *Folly* (New York: Roof Books, 2007) 56.

and an intermission—or, more accurately perhaps, a burlesque cabaret which includes passages of dialogue from a cast of over one hundred characters, as well as epigraphs and asides that continually disrupt the integrity of individual poems. With its baroque language, the voluptuous words of *Folly* read as a kind of textual overload expressed in the poem "Porpo-Thang": "There isn't a place in this world that doesn't sooner or later drown in the porridge of upload."[24]

Gordon's omnivorous text includes material appropriated from wildly eclectic sources in a surreal carnival inhabited by an odd cast of characters, from Bollywood's "Asha Bhosle, in a mirrored choli"[25] to Emma Lazarus, author of the poem on the Statue of Liberty, who says, "Why America Sucks. Corporate Pigs, it's not going to work anymore." The Chorus, comprising Loquacious the Snail, Melissa, a Chameleon and Mr Fucko, a Hamster, replies: "America sucks dick! America sucks dick!"[26]. Some poems, such as "Abnormal Discharge" are obviously culled from internet discussion boards or chatrooms: "chlamydia thru blood transfusion? ... VERY SCARED should i be worried about this? Jeni"[27] But Gordon's most surreal dialogue must be God's exchange with a Star-Shaped Pillow, Fat Thing, Rusty Helmet, Earthquake, The Skull on the President and Google. When God says "I feel so impotent," Google says, "Did you mean to search for "*I feel so important*." God finishes: "I feel so *important*."[28]

The first obvious reference point of *Folly* is Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* and it is worth returning there in order to unravel some binding threads of Gordon's text. Written in 1509, his *Praise of Folly* engages humour, satire and parody in its depiction of corrupt and hypocritical clergy, at a time when the hegemony of the Catholic Church was under threat. Erasmus' main character is Folly, a Classical "goddess" born of Plutus and Youth (suckled by Drunkenness and Ignorance) who exposes the inherent folly in everyone. Rather than Wisdom decrying foolishness from the pulpit (as we might expect in a Classical or Christian text), in Erasmus' text, it is Folly who is praising herself, producing a dilemma of uncertainty for the reader. Designed to shock, provoke and question the state of medieval values, Erasmus' rhetorical paradox posits the coexistence of irreconcilable truths: how can we believe Folly praising folly? Erasmus' Folly is above all human—ignorance, error and foolishness are all characteristically human qualities—and thus Erasmus not only makes clear our dependence upon folly for human happiness but also demonstrates that even the (reputedly) wisest man in Christendom could laugh at himself (Erasmus

[24] Gordon, *Folly*, 25.
[25] Gordon, *Folly*, 21.
[26] Gordon, *Folly*, 65.
[27] Gordon, *Folly*, 22.
[28] Gordon, *Folly*, 59.

includes sly and comical references to himself). Finally, and perhaps most importantly for Gordon, Erasmus' most beloved deity is female.

While Erasmus' Folly begins by "spouting a hotchpotch of words," Gordon's Folly opens with: "Who isn't envaginated in rhetoric?"[29] And the book certainly utilizes the tactic of "envagination" to critique Erasmus' patriarchal assumptions about women. Gordon quotes Erasmus in the preface: "*That an ape will be an ape*, *though clad in purple*; so a woman will be a woman, ie., a fool, whatever disguise she takes up." So Gordon takes this cue literally in ACT ONE, titled, "An Ape in Purple Clothing," and continually evokes extravagant "feminine" ornament and costume throughout the book. Like Erasmus, Gordon also includes herself in the text, most memorably in a comical narrative between Nada (the author), James (the editor/publisher) and Folly. While Folly interrupts with "Have *I* got a proposition for *you*!," Nada explains the book's structure to her editor (and, of course, to her readers):

> An Ape in Purple Clothing" affectionately addresses the follies of sex, gender, and decoration; "A Very Boring Society" the folly of the social—of church'n'state™; and "A Dissonant Gaiety" the folly (PBUH) of poetry. In my third section and in Erasmus', the irony doubles back on itself to negate itself—transforming into genuine (if cynical) praise.[30]

While Gordon's aesthetic contains echoes of Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous' "feminine" language, in an American context, Kathy Acker's deconstructions of patriarchal narratives might be a more direct precursor for Gordon's envaginated performance. Certainly Acker's appropriation and reworking of classic texts, her juxtaposition of "literary" language with "vulgar" language and even her sense of humor all find parallels in Gordon's *Folly*.[31] A line like Folly's query to "redolent Ahnold" serves to illustrate all three parallels: "would you, could you, learn to felch / deceitful Beauty's steely meany?"[32]

The poetry of *Folly* is less characterized by (self-conscious) "poetic" language than verbal discharge, more or less codified and continually interrupted. At times the writing is clear and rational, at others, tortured and confusing. This latter state is best illustrated when Gordon patches in sections of warped (yet poetic) non-native speaker's English. In "Human Are Always Growing," for example, Folly (wino-mumbling) quotes a string of "bad" English sentences:

> Everybody is exactly watching the irrational TV companies programs. If every people except irrational to real, people are going to nihilistic or

[29] Gordon, *Folly*, 21.
[30] Gordon, *Folly*, 68.
[31] See D.J. Huppatz, "Corporeal Poetics: Kathy Acker's Writing," *Contemporary Poetics*, ed. Louis Armand (Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 2007).
[32] Gordon, *Folly*, 61.

machine.
Saddam has weapons of mess distraction.[33]

Gordon's final line is more suggestive than the official media line, playing on the tactics of distraction utilized by the US government and official media in the "irrational" Iraq War. Returning to Erasmus, Gordon's text similarly holds irreconcilable truths together and exposes the folly inherent in language. As with both Mohammad's and Gardner's books, Gordon's *Folly* engages directly with the War and its linguistic frames, utilizing parody and absurd humour to challenge the foundations of New Era discourse.

ANNOYING DIABETIC BITCH

In Sharon Mesmer's *Annoying Diabetic Bitch* (2008), the lyrical voice of confessional first-person poetry that was Grenier's target has degenerated into scatological gibberish, inane conversation and insults mined from conventionally unpoetic realms such as online chatrooms, spam and celebrity gossip websites. While lacking in earnest gravity and narrative continuity, the voices Mesmer employs are nonetheless compelling and at times, the dialogue she employs reads like a series of warped comedy skits. Like Mohammad, Gardner and Gordon, she creates a strangely artificial zone inhabited by chat room characters such as "SmarmyMan" and "Fckme69" and pop cultural figures such as the Olsen twins, peppered with conversational and conventionally unpoetic words and phrases such as "like, totally," "crazy ass" and "go figure." Characterized by abrupt changes in voice and register, Mesmer's poetry is composed from within a culture of extreme distraction.

The characteristically Flarf juxtapositions of "serious" political or philosophical content with frivolity or banality serve to undermine any attempt to establish a clear polemical position. As with the three volumes discussed above, conventional literary criticism and close reading techniques seem only partially useful in coming to grips with *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*. Indeed, as Mesmer points out in the poem "Why I Love Literary Criticism," "literary criticism is extremely boring, whilst a squid superconducting quantum interference devices is exciting."[34] The latter squid may well serve as a handy metaphor for a Flarf poet: conducting (in both senses of the word) interference devices within the streams of contemporary media culture.

In the book's Postscript, Mesmer describes how some of the poems were composed using the results of Google searches, a technique that appears most obviously in poems such as "Ass Vagina," a kind of pornographic spam salad that begins: "Free Lindsay Jessica Carmen topless puss ass butt vagina 100% free." The mash-up of porn search

[33] Gordon, *Folly*, 55.
[34] Mesmer, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, 107.

tag phrases is pushed into absurdity with subsequent reiterations and odd combinations such as: "Hairy preggo men teen orgy Greenville manufacturing district with endangered hairy ass teen rappers 100% free." Again, the performative tone suggested by the repetition of key terms ("ass," "hairy," "100% free") continually undermined by unrelated material, makes for a hilarious live reading performance.[35] Mirroring internet searching, language shifts horizontally in these poems and meanings accrue with each new mutation. Perhaps Mesmer's poetry thus cynically performs the absence of transcendence in contemporary American culture (other than the excitement of being pulled along the information stream by a superconducting squid).

Following Sullivan's "deliberate awfulness" tactic, Mesmer teasingly presents mashups of incredibly inane, unsophisticated language and banal declarations, as if to challenge her reader's expectations of what poetic language is or should be. Beyond the literary provocation, she is also highlighting the flippant superficiality of much online culture. The exaggerated whining of blog culture appears in numerous poems, while the self-centered voice(s) of "I am Beautiful," for example, take vain declarations to extremes ("I also have a beautiful soul, to go with my body").[36] The repetitive insults of "Annoying Diabetic Bitch," meanwhile, reflect the online culture of flaming:

> You annoying diabetic bitch.
> You anorexic bulimic diabetic bitch.
> You dumb annoying talentless diabetic bitch, eat some diabeties.
> You and your bitch monster diabetic junkhead father,
> and your diabetic cat, your pathetic diabetic cat that eats birds [37]

A poem such as "I Wuv Bumblebees" pushes this inanity envelope to the extreme, opening with mutations of the phrase "I Wuv Bumblebees" and continuing thus:

> I wuv kittycats and I have three cats.
> No—ha!—seriously, I wuv bumblebees more
> and I think you're a deadly bumblebee crack whore
> (oh, I meant "fucking legend").

Mesmer's parody of online banter exposes potential cracks in the smooth virtual world, bursting at certain points into violent confrontational language as the "wuvable" bumblebee suddenly becomes a "deadly bumblebee crack whore." While titillated by the transformative bumblebee, the reader is ultimately left frustrated, as the

[35] Mesmer, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, 99. As well as individual readings, the Flarf Festivals in 2006 and 2008 served to highlight the performative aspect of Flarf. Readings from these are accessible on YouTube.

[36] Mesmer, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, 55.

[37] Mesmer, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, 8.

final lines serve to deflate any rhythmic sense or continuity of the bumblebee theme:

> And you only have to insert "Flight of the Bumblebee" to produce
> duotone balls, pink and white,
> and anal beads of purple.
> I'm sick of this.
> Let's go pirate gaming at Brickfest.[38]

Cruising through the datascapes of distraction horizontally from bumblebees to anal beads, Mesmer completes her "search poem" with a signature abrupt and illogical change of course, "I'm sick of this," followed by an invitation to attend a Lego convention. Like Mohammad's similarly cynical end point quoted above, "shit, this just isn't working," the reader is left wondering whether Mesmer has reached not only the end of the search, but the end point of poetry itself. Paradoxically, at this point Flarf's parody hinges on an ambivalence towards the popular cultures of distraction from which it is drawing both form and content.

As with the other Flarf volumes discussed above, New Era discourses and the Iraq War are prominent in *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*. Memser reserves her most scathing parody for the commander in chief, who Mesmer has performing thus in "I Am A Very Confident Little Fellow":

> When I do my flight suit sausage strut
> On the deck of the frigate, flippin' the bird
> The grunts all know I have the primo cunt
> And a whole butt-load of dung-sniffin' butt monkeys.[39]

While the sacred icon of the presidential figure is dragged through the scatological mud-pit several times throughout *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, the voices Mesmer inhabits reflect varying political positions (presumably apart from her own). In the poem "I Know That Babies Feel Just As Nervous and Confused As You Do," for example, she writes: "I'm not all left-wing and shit, but I know the Religious Right can be easily replaced by a baby with a Pez dispenser … And you know what else I know? That America is becoming another Europe where the birth rate is so low the continent is now overpopulated by immigrants from Muslim countries, and that's why I'm urging white people to have babies because most immigrants show up here with bad fucking attitude problems. Same with their babies."[40] Mesmer's parody of a contemporary anti-immigration voice appropriated from the American collective highlights the disturbing racist logic by pushing the content to an excessive extreme. The uncomfortable laughter generated by such parodies makes reading Flarf a confronting experience.

[38] Mesmer, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, 75.
[39] Mesmer, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, 50.
[40] Mesmer, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, 59.

CARNIVAL ELSEWHERE

In post-9/11 America, an imagined community was quickly and consciously constructed. The official discourse functioned not only to silence dissent but also to collapse an internally fragmented multi-culture into an orderly monoculture. Perhaps, after decades of postmodern irony and pretence, the authentic could be restored to the forefront of the American collective imagination and clear communication issue forth from coherent speaking subjects. But it was just this collective imagination and the discourse of stabilization that proved such a fruitful source for Flarf poets. Simple dichotomies such us versus them or good versus evil mutated into "linguistic terrorism," and stable subjects such as John Denver or George Bush inhabited a disorienting world also populated by a deer head, radioactive toys made of lint, Mr Fucko the Hamster and an Annoying Diabetic Bitch. However, with its bewildering diversity of voices and inherent cynicism, is Flarf simply a return to a postmodern pastiche that ultimately renders all positions relative?

For Fredric Jameson, the late twentieth century's proliferation of social codes produced an extreme heterogeneity in advanced capitalist countries (the "internally fragmented multi-culture" above), to which the cultural response was pastiche: "amputated of the satirical impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody…"[41] Jameson's blank parody was associated with postmodern historical pastiche (his primary examples were taken from architecture and film), and he dismissed its potential critical engagement (as well as its comic potential) as it denied the audience an authentic point of pure presence. However, in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern parody is more complex than Jameson suggests, as it "works to foreground the *politics* of representation" by exposing the discursive constructedness of the world.[42] In the same way, through destabilization and disruption, the Flarf poetry discussed above unravels the seemingly coherent stability of the mediated world we increasingly inhabit.

Flarf's theatrical excess renders discursive conventions hyperbolic—in Jameson's terms, all tongues are borrowed and all tongues are abnormal—and its plural voices unmask identity as drag in a convention closest to the burlesque tradition. In his book *Parody*, Simon Dentith uses the term burlesque to refer to a particular (and typically theatrical) tradition of parody that started in the seventeenth century. Like Flarf, the basic premise of burlesque was to deflate heroic or elevated forms and languages via juxtaposition with trivial or everyday ones. A

[41] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 17.

[42] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002) 90. The complexities of postmodern parody are also discussed in Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Shakespeare comedy such as *Love's Labour's Lost*, for example, "draws upon a variety of accents and vocabularies, subjects them all to complex cross-exchanges, and makes the 'high' languages of courtesy, love and pastoral (among others) the topic for a bracing laughter."[43] Dentith notes that although seventeenth century burlesque aimed to undermine the legitimacy of heroic tragedy, there was an ambivalence at its heart—burlesque was both a deflation of heroic elevation and a critique of contemporary triviality.[44] However, the precedents for Flarf's parody may lie both in "high cultural" burlesque such as Shakespeare, as well as in self-referential pop cultural models (television series such as *The Simpsons*, for example) that similarly deflate heroic elevation through the use of conflicting voices and various language registers.

Another theoretical understanding of Flarf's ambivalent nature is suggested by Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp,'" in which she links camp to a "disengaged, unserious, 'aesthete's vision' characterized by the spirit of extravagance." Sontag writes of the paradoxical nature of camp in terms that may help illuminate Flarf's fundamental ambivalence:

> Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment. Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different—a supplementary—set of standards.[45]

However, in an interview with Tom Beckett, Sullivan replied to the idea of Flarf as a kind of neo-camp:

> Camp—and I'm thinking of Sontag's famous essay here—emphasizes style or form or decorative elements over content, Flarf emphasizes content over form or style. There is, in much flarf, a superabundance of content. Often to an embarrassing or discomforting degree. In fact, to the extent that flarf can be said to be an exploration of "the inappropriate," there would seem to already be an emphasis on content—although of course it is true that it is not just content that can be inappropriate, and that we are exploring the inappropriateness of various gestures, styles, and so on, as well.[46]

Particularly in Gordon's *Folly* and Mesmer's *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*, the excessively decorative sensibility offers a supplementary set of standards that includes a plurality of voices where the seriousness of tragedy meets the flippancy of comedy. While theatricality and ambivalence are common to both camp and Flarf, Sullivan emphasizes Flarf's content over camp's pure form. Flarf's multiple styles and

[43] Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2000) 129.
[44] Dentith, *Parody*, 130.
[45] Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," Section 34.
[46] Tom Beckett, "Interview with Gary Sullivan," *E-X-C-H-A-N-G-E-V-A-L-U-E-S* (May 14, 2006): http://willtoexchange.blogspot.com/2006/05/interview-with-gary-sullivan.html.

extravagant language may be camp, but its content is certainly more self-consciously engaged with social and political realities.

Finally, the Flarf books analysed above create a virtual space inhabited by surreal characters that coincide with Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about the carnival. Bakhtin's book on the sixteenth-century French novelist François Rabelais, *Rabelais and His World*, celebrates the lust, bingeing and excess of the medieval carnival, a space marked by the suspension of hierarchies and prohibitions. Rather than simply anarchy or a safety valve for releasing societal tensions, the "elsewhere" space of Bakhtin's carnival is also a space of liberation or emancipation with the potential for negotiating new relationships. Following "the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" in the medieval carnival, carnivalesque literature, argues Bakhtin, functions as a challenge to the highly privatised world of mid-twentieth century capitalism.[47]

For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque entails a refusal to submit to the hegemony of the cultural status quo. Importantly, the carnival's suspension of hierarchies clears space for voices of those usually suppressed or silenced and allows all to enter into new dialogues. Gordon's inclusion of the voice of Sunny Pain, in "Nothing is Untitled," is a good example:

> hit me! dance dance (pulsing) dance dance
>
> Good evening ladies and gentlemen.
> My name is Sunny Pain.
> I'm homeless and I'm hungry.
> If you don't have it
> I can understand it
> because I don't have it.
> But if you have a sandwich,
> a piece of fruit, a little change
> I'd really appreciate it.
> Have a good evening.[48]

This uncomfortable "intrusion" of a disenfranchised voice into the self-conscious play of Gordon's *Folly* returns us not only to Bakhtin's poly-vocal carnival, but also to a critical challenge to the highly privatized world of early twenty-first century America. Pain's voice emerges from the virtual carnival as a reminder of "other" voices, but rather than a voice that is heavy with pathos, Pain's is accompanied by a pulsing dance beat that highlights its rhythm and its poetry. Thus Flarf, like Hutcheon's postmodern parody, is potentially "both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of

[47] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Rabelais and His World," trans. H. Iswolsky, *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1997) 200.

[48] Gordon, *Folly*, 92.

both the limits and the powers of representation…"[49] Poets of the Flarf collective expose such critical and creative possibilities by bringing together American culture's most sacred and profane into uncomfortably close proximity, while their convergence of poetry, performance and new communications technology (as a mine for content and new generative methods as well as a means to build literary community) attests to the vitality of twenty-first century American poetry.

[49] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 94.

Allen Fisher

Complexity Manifold 2: hypertext

Poetry is part of a planned burglary in which theft from consciousness becomes a necessary minimum. There is no requirement to be sure or coherent in the western sense of dialectic logic and certainty. Non-linearity, lack of sequence and discontinuous narrative are immediately part of the cognition that factures this aesthetics and what it manifests. The notebook is already worn and damaged, but it's not as simple as that. This poetics has a diagrammatic set of leads manifestly at once in difference, overlap and in tangible connection. In unexpanded summary the plan initiates a four part process that is both uneven and non-linear, but which permits fragments of linearity or narrative, of sequence, repetition and incongruity.

When the plan sets out from the poet's proprioception, it draws in one direction towards dislocation and simultaneously, but less demandingly, towards the existential situation. In all the directions operation of the plan encounters an archaeological spacetime. When the plan sets out from this spacetime, it comprehends the planet as home and proposes both a dig down and a dig upwards, by which can be meant an understanding made cogent from both historical perspective and geological information, in tow with a comprehension of the star map and its radio expansion. The fossil record provided the Sumerians, Greeks and Egyptians with the basis for a variety of myths. The evident possibility to read patterns, even animal and human forms, from the positions of visible stars and planets and the shapes of particular cloud formations also provided for these myths. The archaeological spacetime implicitly fields an ecological understanding in all directions and overtly demonstrates the processes necessary to define the limits to perpetuate existence beyond 2060 (Rockström *et al.*'s nine planetary boundaries).[1]

Setting out from this spacetime provides a focal choice, but in fact a simultaneous occasion summarized as including the existential situation and dislocation. The occasion, irrespective of focus and crowd-out, negotiates the parameters of proprioception with all its efforts and realizations of the tangible, the regional and more exactly its *place.* The

[1] Johan Rockström and colleagues (2009) "A safe operating space for humanity," *Nature* 461 (24 September 2009): 472-475.

existential situation encompasses what was once characterized as *Situationist*, which itself encompasses a critique of consumerism and promotes an open, or open field, aesthetic. The route from dislocation to proprioception involves an understanding of decoherence, just as all other routes include a confidence in lack, made explicit by decoherence.

Before outset, the plan considers the difficulties ahead in terms of precedents that have for too long encumbered poetry. Expectations of centring, coherence and geometric prediction outline merely an indication of these encumberments. They are derived from Plato and subsequent dialectic and rational method in the name of logic.[2] They are methods that have aided humankind in a range of positive ways and in many commonplace activities remain useful. The work of Euclid and Leonardo of Pisa (Fibonacci), summated by Luc Pacioli (illustrated by Leonardo di Vinci) gave clear access to wonders exemplified and refined through geometry, developed in paintings by Poussin and Jacques Louis David, in music by J.S. Bach and Bela Bartok, in poetry by Philip Sydney and William Shakespeare. The Enlightenment embodied much of these aesthetics, from Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, and Newton, through Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and Husserl.[3] In *Spurs* Derrida is launching "a new phase in the process of deconstruction" which he describes as affirmative. He notes, that Nietzsche, "according to Heidegger…in dealing with metaphysics, Platonism and the Platonic tradition, proceeds most frequently by simple 'inversion which would consist in turning the Platonic propositions upside down, in standing them on their head,'"[4] whether or not Nietzsche achieves this becomes a separate discussion. As John Leavey notes, "Deconstruction" is less negative in Derrida "than the Heideggerian or Nietzschean terms 'destruction' or 'reversal'; it suggests that certain foundational concepts of metaphysics will never

[2] The range of discussion here should necessarily be tempered; to give three examples: (1) according to Poincaré, maintaining Euclidean geometry and altering physics as needed will keep our total system of beliefs simpler than would adopting a non-Euclidean geometry. Following Poincaré, Alfred Einstein argued that some determinations of simultaneity relations between physical events are conventional [Clark Glymour (1997) Thinking Things Through. An Introduction to Philosophical Issues and Achievements, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.]; (2) The visible universe seems the same in all directions around us, at least if we look out to distances than about 300 million light years, but there are contrary views to this. [Cosmology, Steven Weinberg (2008) Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.] Weinberg notes contrary views in P.H. Coleman, L. Pietonero, and RH. Sanders, Astron. Astophys. 200, L32 (1988): L.Pietronero, M. Montuori, and F. Sylos-Labini, in Critical Dialogues in Cosmology, (World Scientific, Singapore, 1997): 24; F. Sylos-Labini, F. Montuori, and L. Pietronero, Phys. Rep. 293, 61 (1998); (3) a firm view in favour of dialectic logic can be gleaned from Simon Jarvis (2010) 'Spirit Medium: On Hegel's Phenomenology', Cambridge Literary Review, vol.1, no.2. pp.157ff.

[3] Particularly Nietzsche after Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: The Athlone Press, 1987) and Husserl after Derrida.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 37; 79.

be entirely eliminated..."[5] The late nineteenth-century into the early twentieth signaled significant changes to the premise for much of this grand tradition. Leaving the tradition in place for the requirements of its own context, demanding an alternative to this grand scheme in the new complexity.

In February 2007, writing for *Nature*, an international weekly journal of science, a group of physicists, supported by the American army, Yale University and commerce, proposes to resolve the issue of photon number states in a superconducting circuit where they expect to distinguish between coherent and thermal fields (two apparently different orders of vocabulary) and create a photon statistics analyser which will generate non-classical states of light and perform superconductivity quantum bit-photon conditional logic, the basis of a logic bus for a quantum computer.[6]

Poetry and engagement with a Public, like Science and its public, provide a significant mismatch, potentially involved with self-deception, or more often, active deceit. The premise for this mismatch derives from a range of incapacities and inabilities necessary to the frailties that underpin vulnerabilities that contribute to sensitive thinking; that contribute to the aesthetic and ethical basis for all written poetic and scientific practice. This is a necessary dilemma in conceptual and historical terms, set against the western proposals for logic and its modernist aspiration to cohere.

Schuster *et al*, in February 2007, produced a description of a circuit quantum electrodynamic experiment within the permitted parameters of exactness and with confidence in lack of exactness.[7] "Electromagnetic signals are always composed of photons, although in the circuit domain those signals are carried as voltages and currents on wires, and the discreteness of the photon's energy is usually not evident. However, by coupling a superconducting quantum bit to signals on a microwave transmission line, it is possible to construct an integrated circuit in which the presence or absence of even a single photon can have a dramatic effect. Such a system can be described by circuit quantum electrodynamics—the circuit equivalent of cavity quantum electrodynamics, where photons interact with atoms or quantum dots.[8] Previously, circuit quantum electrodynamics devices were shown to reach the resonant strong coupling regime, where a single quantum bit

[5] John P. Leavey, introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978) 4 n11.

[6] This section and following twenty-two paragraphs have been extracted from Allen Fisher *Confidence in lack* (Sutton: Writers' Forum, 2007).

[7] D.I. Schuster et al., "Resolving photon number states in a superconducting circuit," *Nature* 445 (2007): 515-518.

[8] A.Blais, et al. "Cavity quantum electrodynamics for superconducting electrical circuits: an architecture for quantum computation," *Physics Review* 062320 (2004): A 69.

could absorb and re-emit a single photon many times."[9] Schuster *et al* reported a new regime where a single photon has a large effect on the quantum bit without ever being absorbed. The hall-mark of this strong dispersive regime is that the quantum bit transition energy can be resolved into a separate spectral line for each photon number state of the microwave field.

> *The strength of each line is a measure of the probability of finding the corresponding photon number in the cavity. This effect is used to distinguish between coherent and thermal fields* (italics added), and could be used to create a photon statistics analyser. As no photons are absorbed by this process, it should be possible to generate non-classical states of light by measurement and perform quantum bit-photon conditional logic, the basis of a logic bus for a quantum computer.[10]

Schoelkopf, *et al.*, note that,

> Cavity quantum electrodynamics[11] is a test-bed for quantum optics[12] that allows investigation of fundamental questions about quantum measurement and decoherence, and enables applications such as squeezed light sources and quantum logic gates. [Not that human beings can see the processes of these applications except through the artefacts of machines.] To achieve it, an atom is placed between two mirrors, forming a cavity that confines the electromagnetic field and enhances the atom-photon interaction strength...[13]

"The results obtained...also suggest a method for photon-quantum bit conditional logic. The quantum bit response is now strongly dependent on the number of photons in the cavity. For example, a controlled-not gate (where the vocabulary continues to breakdown) between photon and quantum bit could be implemented by applying a π control pulse at the frequency corresponding to one photon in the cavity"[14] the photon can be used to entangle...the photon-number-based gate which becomes analogous to the phonon common mode coupling used in ion-traps.

Since ancient times, thought in the west has debated the difficulties between direct perception and information derived from machines, between demonstrations of truth and informed presumption or speculation. Plato, that seminal thinker behind the demands of logical thought and truth, provides a number of significant examples. His

[9] A. Wallraff, et al. "Strong coupling of a single photon to a superconducting qubit using circuit quantum electrodynamics," *Nature* 431 (2004): 161.

[10] D.I. Schuster et al., "Resolving photon number states," 1.

[11] H. Mabuchi & A.C. Doherty, "Cavity quantum electrodynamics: Coherence in context," *Science* 298 (2002): 1372-1377.

[12] D.F. Walls & G.J. Milburn *Quantum Optics* (Berlin: Springer, 2006).

[13] D.I. Schuster et al., "Resolving photon number states," 1.

[14] D.I. Schuster et al., "Resolving photon number states," 1.

description of how poets operate in his *Apology* immediately indicates the difficulty proposed. Grube translates Plato's words,

> After politicians, I went to the poets, the writers of tragedies and dithyrambs and the others, intending in their case to catch myself being more ignorant than they. So I took up those poems with which they seemed to have taken most trouble and asked them what they meant, in order that I might at the same time learn something from them. I am ashamed to tell you the truth, gentlemen, but I must. Almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems better than their authors could. I soon realized that poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say. The poets seemed to me to have had a similar experience. At the same time I saw that, because of their poetry, they thought themselves very wise men in other respects…[15]

Poets' confidence in lack was further criticised by Plato in *Book X* of *The Republic;* Cornford's translation concludes,

> that all poetry, from Homer onwards, consists in representing a semblance of its subject, whatever it may be, including any kind of human excellence, with no grasp of the reality. We were speaking just now of the painter who can produce what looks like a shoemaker to the spectator who, being ignorant of shoemaking as he is himself, judges only by form and colour. In the same way the poet, knowing nothing more than how to represent appearances, can paint in words his picture of any craftsman so as to impress an audience which is equally ignorant and judges only the form of expression; the inherent charm of metre, rhythm, and musical setting is enough to make them think he has discoursed admirably about generalship or shoemaking or any other technical subject. Strip what the poet has to say of its poetical colouring and I think you must have seen what it comes to in plain prose.[16]

Eric Havelock, Charles Olson's source for much of the information and rhetoric of his poetics, addresses Plato's attack in his *Preface*, Plato "opens by characterising the effect of poetry as a 'crippling of the mind.' It is a kind of disease, for which one has to acquire an antidote. The antidote must consist of knowledge 'of what things really are.' In short, poetry is a species of mental poison, and is the enemy of truth…"[17] and on this basis of truth poets might as well perpetuate deceit. "Plato's target seems to be precisely the poetic experience as such. It is an

[15] Plato, *Apology*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997) 22.

[16] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961 [1941]) 323-324.

[17] Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963) 4.

experience we would characterise as aesthetic. To him it is a kind of psychic poison."[18]

Charles Stein begins to sort this out in terms of Olson's poetry, Plato banished the poets "because *their* means of discourse obstructed the development of the abstract powers it was Plato's concern to nurture. Olson means to re-establish the poets" that is give them a public language, "but first (Olson) must re-acquire for them certain habits of language and thought which Platonic revolution caused to become displaced."[19] Stein continues, "Olson is relentless in his emphasis on concretistic linguistic theories: theories which emphasize the primacy of the sounds of words, action words, and nominalization, over subordination and abstract grammatical relationships."[20] In his "Grammar—a Book" Olson quotes passages from Edward Sapir's *Language*, to the effect that "word order and stress" are "the primary methods for expression of all syntactical relations" and that the "relational value of specific words and elements" are "but a secondary condition due to the transfer of values..."[21] Sapir's radically concretistic theory of grammar goes hand in hand with Havelock's "parataxis" in providing Olson "with linguistic concepts with which to justify his emphasis on the most concrete aspects of language at the expense of syntax."[22]

The practice of "syntax by apposition" is related for Olson to his understanding of the "shift" in cosmological perspective effected by Relativity Theory and the institution of the space/time continuum as the context for events of reality. In *The Special View of History*, Olson emphasizes:

> *Coincidence* and *proximity*, because the space-time continuum is known, become the determinants of *chance* and *accident* and make possible *creative* success...[23]

> The emphasis on the inclination of purpose and chance, accidence and necessity, form and chaos, as being *within* actual process, is the cosmological justification for Olson's "concretism," his insistence that words be treated as solid objects, and poems be treated as fields of force...[24]

Adorno links the failing coherence of modernism with what he identifies as the semblance of meaning.

[18] Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 5.
[19] Charles Stein, *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press1987) 103.
[20] Stein, *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum*, 105.
[21] Charles Olson, *Additional Prose*: *A Bibliography on America*, *Proprioception*, *& Other Notes & Essays*, edited by George F. Butterick (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974) 27-31,
[22] Stein, *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum*, 105.
[23] Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, ed. Ann Charters (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970).
[24] Stein, *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum*, 106-107.

> All modern art after impressionism, probably including even the radical manifestations of expressionism, had abjured the semblance of a continuum grounded on the unity of subjective experience, in the "stream of lived experience." The intertwinement, the organic commingling, is severed, the faith destroyed that one thing merges wholly with the other, unless the intertwinement becomes so dense and intricate as to obscure meaning completely. This is complemented by the aesthetic principle of construction, the blunt primacy of a planned whole over the details and their interconnection in the microstructure; in terms of this microstructure all modern art may be called montage. Whatever is integrated is compressed by the subordinating authority of the whole so that the totality compels the failing coherence of the parts and thus however once again asserts the semblance of meaning.[25]

Even Michel Foucault prefers to re-establish the status of coherence when we writes, "We are no longer inside truth but inside coherence of discourses, no longer inside beauty, but inside complex relations of forms."[26] Foucault's understanding of what I would call "a pattern of connectedness" is to discuss identity. He writes,

> Now it is a question of how individual, a name, can be the medium for an element or group of elements that, integrating itself into the coherence of discourses or the indefinite network of forms, effaces, or at least renders vacuous and useless, that name, that individuality whose mark it carries for a certain time and in certain regards. We have to conquer anonymity, to prove we are justified in having the enormous presumption of becoming anonymous one day, a bit like the classical thinkers needing to justify the enormous presumption of having found the truth, and of having attached their name to it. In the past, the problem for the person who wrote was to pull himself out of the anonymity of all; in our time, it is to manage to obliterate one's proper name and to lodge one's voice in that great din of discourses which are pronounced.[27]

Julia Kristeva offers a kind of contra-view when she writes of Hannah Arendt, "Having…acknowledged the disconnection between the enacted story and the narrated story, Arendt does not believe that the essential feature of narration can be found in the fabrication of a coherence within the narrative or in the art of spinning a tale," which she subsequently confirms, "If we get too wrapped up in the coherence of a plot, we forget that the main goal of plot is to disclose," and "It can manifest that essential logical process only if it becomes action itself," and as Kristeva had noted earlier, "*Action*, even as Arendt understands the term, cannot by itself guarantee a free and creative life. The resumption

[25] Theodore Adorno, *AEsthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Athlone Press, 1997) 155.

[26] Michel Foucault, "On the Ways of Writing History" (1967), *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, *vol. 2*, *AEsthetics*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (London: Allen Lane, 1998) 290-291.

[27] Foucault, "On the Ways of Writing History," 290-291.

of the 'life of the mind,' on the other hand, is capable of providing such a guarantee, as Arendt provided in her later writings."[28]

> Arendt's experience as an intellectual proves, quite simply, to be an examined life—a life uprooted from biology through *labor*, *work*, and, in particular, *action.* Yet it was also a life that harboured the superior form of human existence that is varied and incomplete thinking, provided such thinking is shared with a diverse and contradictory world.[29]

Private pretence and public affirmation, particularly in terms of recommending a range of ethical activities, lead poets to a range of addresses, from engaged involvement to escape. What poetry is capable of through deliberate and detailed poetic investigation, of poetic form and the variety of vocabularies used, often leaves the best poetry incapable of matching the public demand for continuous and linear expression, ostensibly the demand for complete meanings.

The subject is too large to encompass and the paper will demonstrate this in its confident approach to its lack of solutions and any proposal for complete understanding.

The considerable lack of confidence proposed and promoted by the ideas of coherence and endings—or plot knowing—as substance for aesthetic choice are anathema to intelligent feeling. Alan Turing predicts this in his unsolvability solutions. Turing proved

> the existence of mathematical problems that cannot be solved by the universal Turing machine. There he also advances the thesis...that any systematic method for solving mathematical problems can be carried out by the universal Turing machine. Combining these two propositions yields the result that there are mathematical problems which cannot be solved by any systematic method—cannot, in other words, be solved by any algorithm.[30]

The argument of "Solvable and Unsolvable Problems" illustrates why it is that the need for intuition cannot always be eliminated in favour of formal rules.[31] Turing, in the conclusion to his essay, writes,

> The results which have been described in this article are mainly of a negative character, setting certain bounds to what we can hope to achieve purely by reasoning. These, and some other results of mathematical logic may be regarded as going some way towards

[28] Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press. 2001) 73; 74; 42.

[29] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 20.

[30] Jack Copeland, introduction to Alan Turing, "Solvable and Unsolvable Problems" (1954), *The Essential Turing. Seminal Writings in Computing*, *Logic*, *Philosophy*, *Artificial Intelligence*, *and Artificial Life*, ed. Jack Copeland (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004) 576.

[31] Turing, "Solvable and Unsolvable Problems," 580.

> demonstration, within mathematics itself, of the inadequacy of 'reason' unsupported by common sense.[32]

Last year I began writing an introduction to a book on literature and art in America after 1950.[33] A draft of this introduction became *iDamage*, which begins, 'In a sense it's over, because some while ago it was considered already a dilemma of melancholia and hope, or someone else thought, no way will Western cultures survive the next millennium.'[34]

In my abstract I drew from what Bernard Williams stressed about the degree to which polite ethical thought in the societies of the West today rests on or involves self-deception or more active deceit.[35] It depends on the private pretence, public affirmation, or purposeful suggestion of what is, for those concerned, knowably false.

Part of that discussion could involve the extensive elaborations from Francis Bacon, Aby Warburg and now Jean Baudrillard's ideas of simulation and the latter's idea of the hyperreal. *iDamage* notes,

> This juxtaposes with the recognition that an engagement with the proprioceptive demands of empathy could be undermined by assemblage methodology. Rather than a disadvantage however, this is a necessary outcome; the idea that methodological concerns should lead to singular focus would be a demonstration of damage that undermines sensitive thought and would promote false frameworks of truth encouraged by popular summary and short-cut chemistry redolent of the social skills of a celebrity farm and the national news.
>
> Breakage may be considered a necessary and positive process. A metonym for broken civilisation or damaged social duty is not necessarily intended. The initial facture derives from direct breakage of the research. The factured product is a consequence of the breakage that has been involved, particularly in post-collage and in transformational poetics, where the facture of the text has been possible through a series of transformations. At the level of words in the text, for instance, transformations may be used which deliver word links, patterns of connectedness, through the use of sound (rhyming), comparable meaning (rhetoric), discussion or disruption of meaning (poetics), and damaged pasting (found in most genres including poetry, painting, and comedy). The factured product has thus undergone a series of breakages and factures. Sometimes this series involves transformation, planned breakage and incidental repair, sometimes the work uses collagic disruption of spacetime, and often the pasting together of different parts simulates

[32] Turing, ibid. p.595.

[33] Allen Fisher, *Assemblage and Empathy* (Bern: Peter Lang, forthcoming).

[34] Allen Fisher, *iDamage*, Introduction to *Assemblage and Empathy*, a book in progress, *Plantarchy* (Cambridge: Plantarchy Critical Documents, 2007).

[35] Bernard Williams, *Truth & Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

continuity.[36] In post-collage a visual work may undergo further facture and transform into a new image.[37]

The facture of *iDamage* "makes use of apparently coherent and sometimes-rhizomic, conservative processes often arbitrarily isolated from the mobile constellation of spins that the work proposes and (sometimes) disproves by this discussion."[38]

Readers have been gathering for some time what Terry Eagleton calls an "incoherence of grief."[39] Eagleton refers to Cleopatra's thoughts as she slips erratically from "crown" to "lord" to "garland" over Antony's corpse. Eagleton's reliance on coherence continues into the book. On behalf of Yeats, discussing "Coole Park and Ballylee," he writes, "the poem simply tells us that 'all is changed'; and though we know that it regards this change as pretty catastrophic, it neither tells us so nor makes a virtue out of its own reticence. It does not risk imperilling the robustness of its texture and coherence of its grammatical structure with an ill-natured rant."[40] Later, Eagleton notes, that Yeats use of the verb "commend" "locks authoritatively into place in the next line, to bind these various elements together and lend them some overall thrust and coherence."[41]

One of the understandings that provided partial solutions and alternatives to the western dilemma developed around the work of C.H. Waddington and were collected in the four-volume *Towards a Theoretical Biology* (1968-1972) and the posthumously published *Tools for Thought* (1977). The former included the work of René Thom and, subsequently in Britain, Christopher Zeeman, exemplified in Thom's *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis* (1972) and then in Zeeman's *Catastrophe Theory: Selected Papers 1972-1977)* (1977). The latter included Waddington's concept of the *chreod.* The chreod provided the basis for the concept of the necessary path in brain activities and thus cognition. This identifies the complexity of aesthetic practice with a bio-energetic engine, in process with a demand to shift-fit from determined avenues. Aspects of "catastrophe theory" provided the conceptual tool to comprehend how smoothness engenders a basis for rapid change, how abrupt shifts are an outcome from planned order. In aesthetic practice this has led to understanding how pattern production can engender new aesthetic shifts. The three "qualities" displayed by heart muscle fibres and nerve axons proposed by Zeeman continue to be useful. He summarized them in 1972 as stable equilibrium; threshold, for triggering an action; return to equilibrium. For the heart, the return to

[36] Allen Fisher, "The Poetics of the Complexity Manifold," *Boundary 2* (1999): 117.
[37] Fisher, *iDamage*, 31.
[38] Fisher, *iDamage*, 31.
[39] Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).
[40] Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, 82.
[41] Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, 85.

equilibrium was named a 'jump return,' for the nerve, a smooth return. The aesthetic practices that derived so much from natural proportions and measure, apparently radicalized in late nineteenth-century work by Stéphane Mallarmé and in the early twentieth by a range of writers from Gertrude Stein to Ezra Pound to Kurt Schwitters, can now be rearticulated.[42] Thom's radical observations and recordings of embryonic growth, showed the development equilibrium/jump/return-to-equilibrium process as a conceptual tool for a range of natural phenomena, but also of cognitive activity and thus aesthetic practice.

In writing about the poetry of Cris Cheek, Eric Mottram and J.H. Prynne I noted, "All three poets use 'ventriloquism,' in as much as their work may be vociferated by the reader so that the consistent patterns or chreods in the cellular-nervous connections of their speech productions are characterized and can be discerned in the patterns of their language presentations."[43] I had adapted C.H. Waddington's biological terminology *chreod*, meaning "necessary path," that is where change is canalised once started in a certain direction.

> All three poets...deliberately break or fracture this patterning as part of their aesthetic function.[44]

The paradigms for natural phenomena were shifting. Stuart Kauffman and Brian Goodwin contribute considerably to this debate, both in 1972 and today nearly 40 years later.[45] Kauffman provides salutary caution to over-exactness or prediction, admitting the local restraints, without the need to always anticipate global structures. Goodwin notes that

> the developing or regenerating organism undergoes transformations which produce ordered, harmonious, and balanced relationships between their cells, tissues, and organs. They do this by the combined processes of differentiation of elements and their co-operative union into the whole which gives meaning to the elements. This is a very remarkable spectacle and not only brings one into a relationship of understanding with the developmental process, but also provides a metaphor for human and social transformation.[46]

The use of *grisaille* and *cento* method in visual art by the Italian Renaissance and Victorian History and Orientalist pictures were partly articulated by Aby Warburg's use of the term "simulation," in grasp of

[42] Works as diverse as Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Pound's *A Draft of XXX Cantos* and Schwitters' *Ur Sonata.*

[43] Allen Fisher, *The Topological Shovel* (Willowdale, Ontario: The Gig, 1999) 34.

[44] Fisher, *The Topological Shovel*, 34.

[45] For instance, Stuart Kauffman, "Metazoan's entire control system" (C.H. Waddington, *Towards a Theoretical Biology*, vol. 4 [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972] 229-247); *Origins of Order: Self-Organization and Selection in Evolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and *At Home in the Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[46] Waddington, *Towards a Theoretical Biology*, 274.

Francis Bacon's early coinage. The practice set up precedents and opportunities which technology, such as photography and multiple-print production, helped to develop. Derrida's use of the term in 1978 is mainly figurative (the powers of Nietzsche's allegorical woman in *Spurs*).[47] In 1983 Jean Baudrillard published the development of a theoretical expansion combining from these various methods and opportunities into a thesis he titled *Simulation.* Where fifteenth-century *grisaille* had given visual quotation in *trompe l'oeil* stone, Victorian *cento* represented the real through photographic patchworks simulating the paintings of the Realists.[48] Bacon's proposals in his 1627 essay "Simulation and Dissimulation," "when a man industriously and expressly feigns and pretends to be, that he is not," became a new understanding in Max Ernst's collage, where the spacetime of inner reality and the spacetime of external perception of reality were presented in one spacetime, on one picture plane. For Baudrillard this became considerably extended such that "*Counterfeit* is the dominant scheme...from the Renaissance to the industrial era..."; "*Production* is the dominant scheme of the industrial era" and "*Simulation* is the reigning scheme of the current phase that is controlled by the code";

> the arbitrary sign begins when, instead of linking persons in an unbreakable reciprocity, the signifier starts referring back to the disenchanted universe of the signified... The modern sign dreams of the signs of the past and would well appreciate finding again, in its reference to the real an *obligation:* but what it finds again is only a *reason*, this referential reason, this real... And still today the nostalgia for a natural referent of the sign still alive...[49]

Eventually, "The very definition of the real becomes *that which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction*... At the limit of this process of reproductivity, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced.* The hyperreal." "In fact, we should turn our definition of hyperrealism inside out: *it is reality itself today that is hyperrealist."*[50]

During the Voyager I (formerly Mariner) journey which took off in 1977, and came close to Jupiter in July 1979, two photographs were issued by Finlay Holiday Films from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory of NASA. They both show the same volcanic caldera venting gasses on Jupiter's satellite Io. The first photograph shows the event imaged in

[47] Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

[48] For example William Powell Frith's 1858 *Derby Day* (Queen's collection) or Edward John Poynter's 1867 *Israel in Egypt* (Guildhall, London). Vide Allen Fisher (1997) 'Aspects of Simulation and Discourse in Sir Edward John Poynter's Painting *Israel in Egypt*,' London: *Talus* 9/10.

[49] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983) 83.

[50] Baudrillard, "Simulation and Dissimulation," 84-86; 146; 147.

heavy pixilation by the electronics as they were received from the radio signals, the second shows the event re-imaged and simulated so that it can be better read and then used by the news media.

Roland Omnès provides a good summary for *decoherence*:

> The most worrying difficulty in the interpretation of quantum mechanics is certainly the problem of macroscopic interferences, which are apparently predicted by any linear theory and practically never observed so much so that they would look absurd if we were to see them. Reflection on this problem has led to the idea of decoherence, which is certainly the most important discovery of the modern interpretation,[51]

which after a stretch of examples notes,

> When a history includes a phenomenon that is specified by decoherence, *there can be no consistency for a later property that would contradict this phenomenon or its consequences.* One cannot logically deny it. It gives rise to an indelible record that retains its consequences, even if it is erased or dissipates. It remains present in the inward details of the wave functions, decoherence forbidding the consistency of its negation. Any history that would try to deny it (or its later consequences) necessarily violates the consistency conditions and therefore the rules of logic.[52]

"Of course, authority is also displayed in the handling of theory and interpretation, but in the humanities and the sciences alike, one can have confidence in that only if one can respect the writer's dealings with everyday truths."[53] I am again in the condition Arendt knew as "The frailty of human affairs."[54] The patterns of connectedness that have the potential to enhance coherence are delicate. The patterns are a 'shift from a world structured by boundaries and enclosures to a world increasingly dominated, at every scale, by connections, networks, and flows."[55] "The principle of reciprocity—the ancient Golden Rule—is no longer circumscribed in space and time, and its expansion has profound consequences for design, engineering, and planning practice."[56] "The boundaries define space of containers and places (the traditional domain of architecture), while the networks establish a space of links and flows. Walls, fences, and skins divide; paths, pipes, and wires, connect"[57] and of course, break. "Today the *network*, rather than the enclosure, is emerging as the desired and contested object: the dual now dominates.

[51] Roland Omnès, *Understanding Quantum Mechanics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1999) 73-74.

[52] Omnès, *Understanding Quantum Mechanics*, 83.

[53] Williams, *Truth & Truthfulness*, 11.

[54] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 45.

[55] William J. Mitchell, *Me++ The Cyborg Self and the Networked City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003) 5.

[56] Mitchell, *Me++ The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*, 6.

[57] Mitchell, *Me++ The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*, 7.

Extension and entanglement trump enclosure and autonomy."[58] To exaggerate this problem, Vlatko Vedral noted that connectedness in natural phenomena can actually be better than perfect.

> This was first realised when physicists tried to infer the laws governing the behaviour of small objects...in the study of quantum physics... Electrons are like small spinning-tops, each rotates in its own way depending on the external circumstances... Astonishingly, if (the scientists) measure the electron spin at two different times, the correlations between these measurements can actually exceed any correlations allowed by classical physics...(with actual electrons) their spin measurements can be correlated in the vertical direction at the same time as in the horizontal direction (and in all directions)... Such quantum correlations that exist between objects and events are known as "entanglement."[59]

"Connectivity has become the defining characteristic of our twenty-first-century urban condition."[60] But we need planned imperfection, not exactness of match, "the ultimate network will operate by the quantum-magical means of quantum entanglement and teleportation of quantum states from one site to another."[61] As Arendt put it, "She did not herself want to become entangled again; she wanted to be the immutable soil which absorbs everything into itself."[62]

> As information carriers in quantum computing, photonic quantum bits have the advantage of undergoing negligible decoherence... One solution is to introduce an effective nonlinearity by measurements resulting in probabilistic gate operations. In one-way quantum computation, the random quantum measurement error can be overcome by applying a feed-forward technique, such that the future measurement basis depends on earlier measurement results... One-way quantum computation is based on highly entangled multiparticle states, so-called cluster states, which are a resource for universal quantum computing.[63]

"Entanglement established between quantum systems at different locations enables private communication and quantum teleportation, and facilitates quantum information processing. Distributed entanglement is established by preparing an entangled pair of quantum particles in one location, and transporting one member of the pair to another location. However, decoherence during transport reduces the quality (fidelity) of

[58] Mitchell, *Me++ The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*, 11.
[59] Vlatko Vedral, "Concept: A Better than Perfect Match," *Nature* 439 (26 January, 2006): 397.
[60] Mitchell, ibid. p.12.
[61] Mitchell, *Me++ The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*, 10-14.
[62] Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, ed. Liliane Weissberg, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).
[63] Robert Prevvedel, et al. "High-speed linear optics quantum computing using active feed-forward," *Nature* 445 (4 January, 2007): 65.

the entanglement. A protocol to achieve entanglement 'purification' has been proposed to improve the fidelity after transport." Further more, however, "Success probabilities were (only) above 35 per cent… The multi-segmented trap architecture used here should allow the distribution of entangled particles to separate locations for exploring repetitive protocols in future experiments."[64]

The phenomena of simultaneity and "crowd-out" begin to connect directly to these discussions.[65] A unique characteristic of gravity is exemplified by the gravity receptor which cannot distinguish between a gravitational force and a force caused by inertia during acceleration.[66] Animals capable of moving rapidly, on anything faster than a monocycle, must deal with this. Consciousness and aesthetics are reciprocal patterns of connectedness in an imperfect fit. Pierre Curie noted, dissymmetry makes the phenomenon and Ferorov noted, crystallisation is death.[67] Gravity receptors in animals usually consist of an object called a statolith with a density greatly different from that of the surrounding fluid that is also in contact with certain mechanoreceptors. Humans have a multiplicity of statoliths in a huge potential range of sizes and contexts. From air bubbles and grains of sand and particles of cadmium and other heavy metals through to whole onions divided by cooking and mastication and digestion and parts of meat products in the same stomach from Argentina, south east Asia and Norway.

Modernism is only poorly characterised as a state of human self-assertion, the oblivion of perfection precedes this and fades out just as the solo begins to get warm; this is symptomatic of the individual promoting a dialectic or the will not to will. These guys choose the path beyond the hut into a self-interested take-off, flight beyond syntax from joy characterised as an escape from suffering. The critique of the dialectical position needs restating as an aspect of late Modernist thought and without refuge. The dialectical promise promotes a description of war in a continuous narrative, scribbling across the wooden tablet with a tenon-saw, or well it may produce the wanted accident, the rapture of epistemological negation.

Of course the text derives from previous algebraic thought, a repeatedly, uncontrollable shudder in which slaves control the machine. Everything is in danger in a dynamegopolis of statements and any certainty, even that of everything, dissolves in an ambiguous state of liquid and steam. The aesthetic proposal indicated here subverts any trash of heroic life or theological summary. That is why British art is so

[64] R.Reichle, et al., "Experimental purification of two-atom entanglement," *Nature* 443 (19 October, 2006): 838; 840.

[65] The paragraphs below are taken from Allen Fisher, "Crowd-out," *Fulcrum, an annual of poetry and aesthetics* (2002).

[66] David B. Dusenbery, *Sensory Ecology: How Organisms Acquire and Respond to Information* (New York: W.H. Freeman & Co., 1992).

[67] István Hargittal and Magdolna Hargittai, *In Our Own Image: Personal Symmetry in Discovery* (Norwell: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2000).

often a misnomer and a felony. You don't often get the feeling of a people capable of organising tremendous feats of construction. "Well, you know I argue that a very large fraction of extinctions may be caused by asteroid impact."

The compressed message leaks into a phase change. Some poets promote complex adaptive systems, others need an algebraic approach to radical illogics, an oscillatory and multiple range of definitions for poiesis and then poise.

In the garden a small rat escapes the wet path as the Concord passes above. Tips from cigarette butts litter the tarmac of a film crews' simulation of rain and eighteenth century Britain. Two pianists play Rimsky-Korsakov's transcription of *Capriccio espagnol.* Scientists need to discard any illusion of a single test case or any idea that the experiment must repeat. If you take the tracks from Hereford to Ledbury, four minutes out there are three distances, graded by mist, each masking part of the other. The shift in Paul Metcalf's work from *Genoa* (1965) to *Patagoni* (1971) is a phase shift comparable to the shift from Cubist collage to crowd-out. In 1972, review of Metcalf's work noted his crowd-out of landscape by machinery, indigenous people working for Henry Ford. *Patagoni* is a living conflict without coherence or synthesis, it demonstrates a vocabulary and image shift from collision and collage to a state of layered convergence, made immediate by a systematic masking, one narrative concealing most of another, extended enough to be fragments from different narratives, shifted enough to leave all the narratives incomplete.

When you fall back on your own resources, a surface tension of what is prominent gives a priority to your own activity, leads to an emphasis in front of, simultaneous activities observes much of the activity of others.[68] Proposals of coherence conceal metaphysical purpose and rhetorical unrests. Metaphysical purpose experienced in the damaged vocabularies' separate descriptions of space, activity and time, made rhetoric in the presumptions hidden in exclusions, space without time, activity without momenergy, time in isolation; masked needs for religion; strained reissues of Plato and Aristotle and then Kant and Hegel; troubled demonstrations of dialectic and analysis.

In January 2000, engineers in Boulder, Colorado, experimented with the idea of decoherence of quantum superpositions. They note that in *ideal* situations, a single atom can exist simultaneously in a superposition of two different spatial locations. In contrast, actual systems always interact with their environment, with the consequences that macroscopic quantum superpositions are not observed. Moreover, macroscopic superpositions decay so quickly that even the dynamics of decoherence cannot be observed. However, mesoscopic systems offer

[68] This damaged sentence appears in the form first invented, that is without any corrective to proper syntax, and with a deliberate shift in attention from one object to another, with its resulting difficulty.

the possibility of observing the decoherence of such quantum superpositions. The physicists involved at Boulder present measurements of the decoherence of superposed motional states of a single trapped atom. They note, "Decoherence is induced by coupling the atom to engineered reservoirs, in which the coupling and state of the environment are controllable..."[69]

The existence of superpositions prescribed by quantum mechanics is valid for systems that are closed, that is, they are free from external influences. Imagine what this last phrase proposes, ideologically, politically, pragmatically. The phrase echoes Jacques Derrida's Aristotelian ideas about aesthetics.[70] In contrast, actual (as distinct from real) systems always couple to the environment, typically composed of an extremely large number of degrees of freedom. Lack of knowledge about the environment is expressed by averaging the degrees of freedom over the possible states; a method current to estimates of anthropogenic global warming and analysis of the effects of the Chernobyl explosions. This averaging (confidence frame) leads to an evolution of the density matrix of the system, a load-bearing memory, in which the quantum superpositions are continuously reduced to classical probability distributions, a process generally known as decoherence.

Myatt *et al.*'s work demonstrates the expected exponential dependence of the decoherence rate on the separation of the components in Hilbert space, an abstract space that makes possible an interpretation for convergence of the Fourier series, that is in a tropologic frame. Myatt *et al.*'s work is the first study of decoherence using an engineered quantum reservoir. Coherent states, widely proposed by aesthetics and analysis in most disciplines since the Enlightenment, are analogous to classical trajectories of a harmonic oscillator, approximated by a marble rolling back and forth in a bowl. A superposition of coherent states can be visualised as a marble rolling in a superposition of two trajectories. In the classical analogy, a hot amplitude reservoir behaves as if the bowl is subject to random displacements of its centre, resulting in a random force on the marble. For a superposition of coherent states coupled to such a reservoir, a simple scaling law may be stated: the rate of decoherence (here a dephasing between the components) scales as the square of the separation of the wave packets. The larger the size of the superposition, the faster the decoherence.

In the experiments (carried out by Myatt *et al.*) a linear specialised trap (known as a Paul trap)[71] confines single atomic ions in a harmonic

[69] C.J.Myatt, et al., "Decoherence of quantum superpositions through coupling to engineered reservoirs," *Nature* 403 (27 January, 2000): 269ff.

[70] See Jacques Derrida, "Paregon," *Truth and Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[71] The Paul trap was reported by M.G. Raizen, et al., "Ionic crystals in a linear trap," *Physics Review* A 45 (1992): 6493-6501.

potential. Within the ion's electronic ground-state hyperfine manifold they restricted their attention to two states:

(i) where the quantum numbers associated with the total angular momentum of the atomic state are equal to minus two, and

(ii) where the quantum numbers are equal to minus one. They drove three types of coherent stimulated Raman transitions,[72] determined by the beam geometry and difference frequency of the two laser beams: (1) Motion-independent spin-flip transitions, where the Raman beams are co-propagating; (2) Sideband transitions, where the beams are oriented with their difference wave vector pointing along the trap axis and their difference frequency set to the trap frequency; (3) Motional displacement transitions. The displacement is proportional to the duration of the laser pulse, and is set by the phase of the applied laser field.

The motion of a trapped ion couples to uniform electric fields through the potential. Their engineered amplitude reservoir consisted of random uniform electric fields applied along the axis of the trap. To observe the effects of the amplitude reservoir, the motional state of the ion is split into a superposition of two components, each associated with a different internal state of the ion, forming the metonymic state of the Schrödinger cat.[73] Myatt et al probed the coherence by reversing the steps taken to generate the state metonymically described, the cat state. A phase reservoir coupled to the ion was simulated by random variations in the trap frequency, changing the phase of the ion oscillation without changing its energy. When integrated over the time of the applied noise, the ion's motion is phase-shifted.

In July 2000 a new announcement, made by the Department of Physics and Astronomy at Stony Brook, proposed the first experimental demonstration of a quantum superposition of truly macroscopically distinct states.[74] A superconducting quantum interference device (SQUID) was put into the superposition of two magnet-flux states: one corresponding to a few microamperes of current flowing clockwise, the other corresponding to the same amount of current flowing anticlockwise. The simplest SQUID is a superconducting loop of inductance broken by a tunnel junction with, in equilibrium, a dissipationless supercurrent, which can flow around this loop, driven by the difference between the flux that threads the loops and the external flux applied to the loop.

In their experiments, they probed the anticrossing of two excited levels in the potential by using microwaves to produce photon-assisted

[72] Chandrakasekhara Raman discovered the inelastic scattering of light by molecules in 1928, with the result that the involved molecules can be specifically identified.

[73] C. Monroe, et al., '"Schrödinger's cat" superposition stat of an atom,' *Science* 272 (1996): 1113ff.

[74] Jonathan R. Friedman, "Quantum superposition of distinct macroscopic states," *Nature* 406 (2000): 43-46.

tunneling. The system is initially prepared in the lowest state in the left well, with the barrier high enough that the rate for tunneling out is negligible on the timescale of the measurement. Microwave radiation is then applied. When the energy difference between the initial state and an excited state matches the radiation frequency, the system has an appreciable probability of being excited into this state and subsequently decays into the right well. This transition between wells results in a change in flux that can be detected by the magnetometer.

At the anticrossing, both levels are below the top of the classical energy barrier. This is essential for the system to be in a superposition of macroscopically distinct flux states since the levels (in the absence of coherence) can only be associated with one well (one fluxoid state supplying one garden) if they are below the top of the barrier. The SQUID exhibits macroscopic quantum behaviour in two senses: (1) The quantum dynamics of the SQUID are determined by the flux through the loop; (2) The two flux-basis states that they found to be superposed are macroscopically distinct.

The archaeology confirms this result. From Adrienne Mayor's work on fossils found in deserts near Greece and Turkey,[75] to the serpent found in southern Egypt, the soil on top may not be the most recent and the tales beneath may not have great age. The system we observe in the sky as we move through it is a superimposition of systems at different levels, but which in summation provide the pattern of connectedness that human cognition demands. Our mythologies confirm our needs and desires and consequently our aspirations.

Memory also is subject to these ramifications. The objects we choose and retain and display metonymically carry the means to recall and the bases from which to make aesthetic shifts. Hereford, from where this is written, is not the centre of the world, it was in fact added, along with the River Wye, to the *Mappa Mundi* at a date not long after the map's first drawing (late 13th-century). "AFFRICA" is written across Europe, "EUROPA" across Africa. England is in the north-west, Sri Lanka in the south-east, Terrestial Paradise in the east, Cadiz and the Straits of Gibraltar in the west.[76] From the US weather satellite NOAA, which uses an Advanced Very High Resolution Radiometer, Herefordshire, where the sun's radiation reflection is not discoloured by sea, is in an area of vegetation vitality.[77] The are scans of neural activity in the brains of people with synaesthesia as they listen to words display a lit area of auditory cortex (not just the language areas) and a significant amount of

[75] Adrienne Mayor, *The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology in Greek and Roman Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[76] P.D.A. Harvey, *Mappa Mundi. The Hereford World Map* (London: The British Library, 1996).

[77] Gunter Schreier, "What Satellites See," *Erdsicht (Global Change)* (Bonn: Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublick Deutschland, 1992) 44-5.

visual cortex is also active.[78] These are extent indicators of extra activity when compared to average human scans.

Gesture as the main communication in humans gave way to verbal language, with structural rules about one and a half million years go and, as a consequence, asymmetric brain hemispheres evolved. Memory forms through patterns of connectedness, in circumstances that encourage it to be encoded.

PART TWO

Evidently so much is part of a multiplicity of invention, involved as each understanding or stance will be, in delusion or deception or misapprehension to such an extent that when Jean Baudrillard proposes that the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced, it becomes readily viable to recognise the human condition. Similar to proposals inappropriately based on logic, it becomes necessarily to spell out aspects of the dilemma encouraged, but to do so without reliance or even aspiration to coherence undermines the process of the proposal and activity, in fact promotes the necessity not to cohere within a system a reader could imagine Ezra Pound achieving. Immediately it can be recognised that incoherence is not in short supply and, what is probably worse, oblivion to incoherence is commonplace.

A symposium held at the English Department in Cambridge is a case in point. I started to rethink and write about Joan Retallack's work after a long spell with deliberate damage to my own work and in consideration of the very different work of Gerhard Richter. In the particular light of the mutual attentions of Richter and Retallack to swerves or unpredictable forms of change, I set myself upon an energetic wobbling spring board. I proceeded to paraphrases Robert Storr on Gerhard Richter and quotations from "Notes" by Richter and by Storr.[79] The considerable difference from Joan Retallack's preferred methodical optimism, offered to her by the works of John Cage and Buckminster Fuller, is the contrast of a profound pessimism proposed by Gerhard Richter. It was with some enthusiasm and not exactly coincidence, that I was also reading Johan Rockström and colleagues recent arguments which, as it happens, bring these two cogent views, optimism and pessimism, together into a new perspective, albeit a recently speculative one. The ludicrous concept that we still think we can consider ways to get through another half century as a civic or social nexus is in itself an optimism and for all of Richter's nihilistic

78 Rita Carter, *Mapping the Mind* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998) 111.

79 Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003); Gerhard Richter, *Text: Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009).

realism he does still maintain, as Retallack does, the aesthetic swerve, or did I say nerve, to carry on. Joan Retallack's proposition is that we should strive to plan for a future beyond 2060 is not made explicit, but necessary for her poetics is to take the aesthetic swerve, take the inevitable wager, and proceed.

The planet's environment has been unusually stable for the past 10,000 years. This period of stability, the Holocene (entirely recent) stability is almost certainly now under threat. A new era has arisen, the Anthropocene, (human recent, coined by Paul Crutzen)[80] in which human actions have become the main driver of global environmental change since around the industrial revolution in Europe. Johan Rockström and 28 colleagues (including Crutzen) from the Stockholm Resilience Centre, propose a framework based on "planetary boundaries." These boundaries define the safe operating space for humanity with respect to the Earth system and are associated with the planet's biophysical subsystems or processes. Many subsystems of Earth react in a nonlinear, often abrupt, way, and are particularly sensitive around threshold levels of certain key variables and swerves.

Rockström *et al.* continue,

> We have found nine…processes (and associated thresholds) for which we believe it is necessary to define planetary boundaries: climate change; rate of biodiversity loss (terrestrial and marine); interference with the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles; stratospheric ozone depletion; ocean acidification; global freshwater use; change in land use; chemical pollution; and atmospheric aerosol loading… Determining a safe distance involves normative judgements of how societies choose to deal with risk and uncertainty… Our analysis suggests that three of the Earth-system processes—climate change, rate of biodiversity loss and interference with the nitrogen cycle—have already transgressed their boundaries.[81]

Allen Fisher had had enough of art, system complexities and refined political and social manners seemed, as Gerhard Richter put it, moronic. The whole business, with a few exceptions, seemed moribund. He had become the subject of the manifestation of truth when and only when he disappeared or he destroyed himself as a real body or a real existence.

For Richter "It was wonderful to make something and then destroy it." Richter's layering of incompatible styles transcend a polemical use of contradiction and became something tense, even whole.[82]

[80] Paul Crutzen coined this at a conference in 2000 and then in the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme publication.

[81] Johan Rockström, et al., "A safe operating space for humanity," *Nature* 461 (24 September, 2009): 472-475. See http//www.stockholmresilience.org/planetary-boundaries

[82] Storr, *Gerhard Richter*, 42; 44.

> Richter pursues no objectives, no systems, no tendency; he has no program, no style, no direction. He has no time for specialized concerns, working themes, or variations that lead to mastery. Richter steers clear of definitions, it is as if he doesn't know what he wants. He can be inconsistent, non-committal, passive; he likes the indefinite, the boundless; he likes continual uncertainty. Richter starts over each day without any assurance that the success or failure of the previous day's work will reliably indicate what comes next, possibility is the product of intuition, trial and error, and an instinctive trust in the voice that says Yes or No to each option that presents itself. This voice does not address art in general, but his own being in that moment of decision...[83]

At the end of the 1960s the art scene underwent its great politicization. objects were bunk, because they had no "social relevance" and were therefore bourgeois. For Richter, Truth is fragmentary, its enemy—ideology—is ultimately murderous, and history is irremediable and, for the most part, irretrievable. Good does not necessarily rise from the ashes; it more likely evaporates into them and is blown by the wind leaving behind a damaged consciousness that must endure not only the sharp pain of specific losses but the constant ache that reminds us of the self-deception and error that are the origins of tragedy. He hopes we get out intact.[84]

Richter's art is never about agony, desperation and helplessness... He often neglects this side of things by concentrating on the formal, aesthetic side in isolation. Then he no longer sees content in form, he says, content does not have a form, it *is* form. Agony, desperation and helplessness cannot be represented except aesthetically, because their source is the wounding of beauty and promotion of torture.[85]

Richter is acutely aware of the insurmountable discrepancy between what can be seen and what can be shown, what can be imagined and what can be represented: "Of course," notes Richter,

> he is constantly in despair at his own incapacity, at the impossibility of ever accomplishing anything valid or of even knowing what such a thing ought to look like... Every time we describe an event, add up a column of figures, or take a photograph of a tree, we create a model: without models we would know nothing about reality, and would be like animals. Abstract paintings are like fictitious models because they visualize a reality which we can neither see nor describe but which we nevertheless conclude exists. We attract negative names to his reality: the un-known, the un-graspable, the infinite, and for thousands of years we have depicted it in terms of absolute images like heaven and hell. With abstract painting we create a better means of approaching what can neither be

[83] Storr, *Gerhard Richter*, 60; 83.
[84] Storr, *Gerhard Richter*, 92; 119.
[85] Storr, *Gerhard Richter*, 120.

> seen nor understood because abstract painting illustrates with the greatest clarity…with all the means at the disposal of art, "nothing."[86]

Richter is wracked by aesthetic and moral doubts exacerbated by his mounting distaste for the hyped-up art world. Art is wretched, cynical, stupid, helpless, confusing—a mirror-image of our own spiritual impoverishment, our state of forsakenness and loss. We have lost the great ideas, the Utopia, we have lost all faith, everything that creates meaning. Incapable of faith, hopeless to the utmost degree, we roam across a toxic waste dump in extreme peril: every one of those incomprehensible shards, these odds and ends of junk and detritus, menaces us, constantly hurts and maims us and sooner or later, inevitably kills us. Worse than insanity.[87]

Joan Retallack's essays in *The Poethical Wager* (2003): "Essay as Wager" and "The Poethical Wager" and "Wager as Essay," provide the ground for offering an alternative view. In the introduction to the first essay, "Essay as Wager" (which is all I will look at today) she iterates, as Richter does, the range of scientific and thus philosophical and aesthetic dilemma's proposed over the past one hundred and twenty years. "Relativity theory, the quantum mechanical principles of complementarity and uncertainty, constituted major conceptual swerves…" She adds to this "September 11, 2001, was a paradigmatic swerve, wrenching a parochial 'us' into a new world of risks without borders."[88] The distinction from recognizing responsibility for the planet as home (in Charles Olson) or the conceptual condition provided by the first satellites around the planet (in Dale Carter and Eric Mottram) are for Retallack of a different order. She poses the question "How can one frame a poetics of the swerve, a constructive preoccupation with what are unpredictable forms of change?"[89]

> Whether global leaders recognize it or not, "world us" is now in a situation where the fractal geometry of coastlines [put into the literature by Benoit B. Mandelbrot in 1975 and subsequently in a popular form in 1977[90]], with their ecologically dynamic, infinite detail, may be a more productive model for the interrelationships of cultures… We learn the most about what it can mean to be human from border-transgressive conversations.[91]

[86] Storr, *Gerhard Richter*, 147-8.
[87] Storr, *Gerhard Richter*, 237.
[88] Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 1.
[89] Dale Carter, *The Final Frontier: The Rise and Fall of the American Rocket State* (London: Verso, 1988) and Eric Mottram, *Blood on the Nash Ambassador: Investigations in American Culture* (London: Hutchinson, 1989).
[90] For example Benoit B. Mandelbrot, *Fractals. Form, Chance, and Dimension* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman., 1977).
[91] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 1-2.

Swerve is the crucial concept for Retallack in this work, it is necessary for her "poetics of responsibility with the courage of the swerve, the project of the wager—what" she calls, "a poethical attitude. Swerves...are necessary to dislodge us from reactionary allegiances and nostalgias."[92]

Joan Retallack's next important praxis is summarized on page 4: "I count on the form of the essay—as urgent and aesthetically aware thought experiment—to undertake a particular kind of inquiry that is nether poetry nor philosophy but a mix of logics, dislogics, intuition, revulsion, wonder."[93]

> These mixed genres are the best way I know to make sense of the kind of world in which we live. To wager on a poetics of the conceptual swerve is to believe in the constancy of the unexpected—source of terror, humor, hope. I've attempted to use the energy that comes from that triad in all the forms my writing takes, to develop a poetics that keeps mind in motion amidst chaos.[94]

Later a new construction develops these concepts and unwittingly helps me to reconcile my own and Richter's position. She writes,

> Because it seems that what is most meaningful to our complex species will never make complete rational sense, will always defy paraphrase and description, may be wonderful and frightening at the same time, that is, approach paradox, genres that wholly depend on principles of identity, sequential narration, non-contradiction can only be of limited help. They're not generous or improbably enough to encompass a complex realist perspective...optimism may be best understood as a constructive form of pessimism...[95]

"What prevents the logic of the essay from being arbitrary is the degree of its engagement as wager. The essay is a commitment to a thought experiment that is itself an ethical form of life." But the location of the essay as wager is "in the intermediate zone between self and world, in the distancing act of play."[96] It is, to recall the low Latin, *exagium*, a trial or testing. Whether that is Francis Bacon and Lord Burghley and before them, Montaigne, and before these writers Caxton, remains a matter of elaboration and decision about choice of precedent. The essay form derives from Tacitus and Cicero and Suetonius and cannot deny

[92] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 3.
[93] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 4.
[94] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 4.
[95] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 4-5.
[96] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 6; 7.

Machiavelli and Castiglone. Retallack takes up the assertion of its necessary importance both for poetics and for ongoing or open debate.[97]

Perhaps it needs reiterating that Joan Retallack recognises the human plight. This is not a blind optimism at work here. As she notes, "the probability of more (or less) apocalyptic forms of brutishness, greed, terrorism, war and genocide is on the rise, punctuated by instances of heroism, patriotic fervor, avowed faith in God. There seems to be little of interest to the media in a cultural ethos that might lie between spectacular event and hackneyed response."[98]

Her attention to the metaphorisity of history enables her to proceed to saying,

> A descriptive legitimation of memory does not change the cultural ethos or the power relations that spawn violence unless it is already enacting a poetics outside the patterns of that ethos. It's the poetics of memory—what is made of it now—that might create difference... This is a question of po*ethics*—what we make of events as we use language in the present, how we continuously create an ethos of the way in which events are understood.[99]

Retallack elaborates on this: "The present is, in fact, made out of the residue of the past... All images are after...all present-tense matters...may be the most relevant focal point for an aesthetic."[100] and

> the location of the making of culture may be the degree of space-time located in the cleft between neurons. That this infinitesimal space-time bracket turns out to be as expansive as the sum total of all thought processes at work on the planet at any given moment suggests how important the quality of those thoughts is to a cultural ethos. What it clearly indicates is that the present *is* activity and visa versa.[101]

She later reiterates, "the ethos of making something of one's moment in the historical-contemporary, is another preoccupation of this book" and her use of *poethics* links "aesthetic registers to the fluid and rapidly changing experiences of everyday life."[102] This leads on to announcing what "ethical questions" become, "wagering on values in order to remain in motion in the face of otherwise paralyzing doubts, if not fears."[103] "A search for new ethical and aesthetic models is inevitably,

[97] John Earle and William Cornwallis, *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes. Vol. IV. Prose and Poetry: Sir Thomas North to Michael Drayton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921).
[98] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 8
[99] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 9
[100] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 10
[101] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 10.
[102] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 11.
[103] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 12.

haphazardly, contingently under way... One model that's been useful to me in thinking about this is chaos theory."[104]

This returns to my earlier remarks. "The shadow question under which we live," as Retallack puts it, "has become *whether* there's a viable future for humanity..." which couples to "There is no temporal direction for gazing at the past or the future,"[105] a shift against horizons, which is also against perspective, is counter-contemplative and signals an older meditative mode, but a mode which is also "non-directionally outward." The figure of outward for Olson was Robert Creeley, for Retallack it is John Cage, "Get up and look around... You will see everything there is to work with right (t)here, at the conceptually contingent location of your besieged senses."[106] Retallack also returns to the work of Mandelbrot, "Imagining a cultural coastline (complex, dynamic) rather than time's horizon...thrusts the thought experiment into the distinctly contemporary moment of a fractal poetics."[107] The moments of decision for Richter and Retallack address their own beings and as such both embrace a poetics with ethics, and clearly this would be a needed emphasis if human beings think they are going anywhere at anytime at all.

[104] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 13.
[105] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 14.
[106] Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems* (New York: Jargon and Corinth, 1960).
[107] Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 15.

Contributors

ALI ALIZADEH's books include the collection of poetry *Eyes in Times of War* (Salt, 2007), the novel *The New Angel* (Transit Lounge, 2008) and, most recently, *Iran: My Grandfather* (Transit Lounge, 2010), a work of creative non-fiction. His next collection of poetry, *Ashes in the Air*, will by published by the University of Queensland Press in 2011. He holds a PhD from Deakin University, Melbourne and teaches composition and literature at the American University in Dubai.

LOUIS ARMAND is a writer, visual artist and Director of the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory, in the Philosophy Faculty of Charles University, Prague. His collections of poetry include *Inexorable Weather* (2001), *Land Partition* (2001), *Strange Attractors* (2003), *Malice in Underland* (2003), *Picture Primitive* (2006), and *Synopticon* (with John Kinsella; 2010). He has published two volumes of prose fiction—*The Garden* (2001) and *Menudo* (2006). His critical works include *Incendiary Devices* (2006), *Event States: Discourse*, *Time*, *Mediality* (2007) and, as editor, *Contemporary Poetics* (2007) and *The Return of Král Majáles: Prague's International Literary Renaissance 1990-2010 An Anthology* (2010).

LIVIO BELLOÏ is a Research Associate at the FNRS in Brussels and teaches film studies at the University of Liège. His books include *Poétique du hors-champ* (APEC, 1992), *La Scène proustienne* (Nathan, 1993), *Le Regard retourné. Aspects du cinéma des premiers temps* (Klincksieck, 2001), *L'Œuvre en morceaux. Esthétiques de la mosaïque* (Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2006; with Michel Delville) and *La Mécanique du détail: Approches interdisciplinaires* (2010; with Maud Hagelstein). He is currently completing a book on Gustav Deutsch.

JEREMY M. DAVIES was born in Brooklyn. His fiction and criticism have appeared in *Mad Hatter's Review*, *The Anemone Sidecar*, the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, and *CONTEXT*. He is the author of *Rose Alley* (Counterpath, 2009) and is an editor at Dalkey Archive Press in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois.

STEPHAN DELBOS is a New England-born poet living in Prague, where he teaches at Charles University and the Anglo-American University, and writes for *The Prague Post*. He is the editor of the Rakish Angel Poetry Pamphlet Series. His work has appeared in *Agni*, *Atlanta Review*, *New Letters*, *Poetry International*, and *The Return of Král Majáles: Prague's International Literary Renaissance 1990-2010*.

MICHEL DELVILLE is a writer and musician living in Liège, Belgium. He teaches at the University of Liège, where he directs the Centre Interdisciplinaire de Poétique

Appliquée. He is the author of several books including *J.G. Ballard* (1998), *Hamlet & Co* (2001; with Pierre Michel), *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart, and the Secret History of Maximalism* (2005; with Andrew Norris), and *The American Prose Poem*. He has also co-edited four volumes of essays on postwar poetry. *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde*, was published by Routledge in January 2008. His recent poetry collection, *Third Body* was recently translated into English and published by Quale Press.

JOHANNA DRUCKER has lectured and published widely on matters related to the history of print, visual poetry, artists' books, graphic design, digital aesthetics, and contemporary art. In addition to her scholarly work, she is known for her artist's books, many of which involve innovative typography. Her recent publications include *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago, 2005), *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide*, with Emily McVarish (Pearson/Prentice-Hall, 2008), *SpecLab: Digital aesthetics and speculative computing* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), and *Combo Meals* (Druckwerk, 2008). She is the inaugural Martin and Bernard Breslauer Professor of Bibliographical Studies in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA.

MICHAEL FARRELL is researching a PhD on the possibility of experimental poetry in pre-WWII Australian literature. He recently edited an Australian feature for *ecopoetics* journal, as well as coediting with Jill Jones the anthology *Out of the Box: Contemporary Australian Gay and Lesbian Poets* (Puncher & Wattmann). His other books include *ode ode* (Salt), *BREAK ME OUCH* (3 Deep) and *a raiders guide* (Giramondo).

ALLEN FISHER is a poet, performer and installation artist. He was a member of English Fluxus in the 1970s and started professional work as a painter in 1978. He has had over 140 single-author publications of art documentation, conceptual work and poetry; part of his processual work now in the Tate Collection. He is publisher and editor of *Spanner* and co-publisher of Aloes Books. He is emeritus Professor of Poetry & Art, Manchester Metropolitan University, and currently we works in Hereford. allenfisherstudio@me.com

D.J. HUPPATZ is a writer and lecturer at Swinburne University's Faculty of Design in Melbourne, Australia. Author of several poetry chapbooks, he also writes articles about contemporary literature, design and architecture, and maintains a regular blog, Critical Cities.

VINCENT KATZ is a poet, translator, and publisher. He is the author of ten books of poetry, including *Cabal of Zealots*, *Pearl*, *Understanding Objects*, *Rapid Departures*, *Judge*, and *Alcuni Telefonini*, a collaboration with painter Francesco Clemente published by Granary Books. *Berlin*, an artist's book with poems by Katz and woodcuts by Matthias Mansen, was published in Germany in 2008. Katz won ALTA's 2005 National Translation Award for his book of translations from Latin, *The Complete Elegies of Sextus Propertius* (Princeton University Press). He is the publisher and editor of the poetry and arts journal *VANITAS* and of Libellum books.

STEPHEN MUECKE is Professor of Writing at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. His latest book, *Joe in the Andamans and Other Fictocritical Stories*

(Local Consumption Publications, 2008) was shortlisted for the 2010 Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature in the Innovation Category.

JENA OSMAN's book *The Network* (selected for the 2009 National Poetry Series) will be published by Fence Books in November 2010. Her other books of poetry include *The Character* and *An Essay in Asterisks*. She co-edits the ChainLinks book series with Juliana Spahr, and teaches in the Creative Writing program at Temple University in Philadelphia.

MICHAEL ROTHENBERG is a poet, songwriter, and editor of *Big Bridge* online at www.bigbridge.org. His poetry books include *Man/Woman*, a collaboration with Joanne Kyger, *The Paris Journals* (Fish Drum Press), *Monk Daddy* (Blue Press), *Unhurried Vision* (La Alameda/University of New Mexico Press), and *Choose* (Big Bridge Press). Rothenberg is also editor for the Penguin Poet series, which includes selected works of Philip Whalen, Joanne Kyger, David Meltzer and Ed Dorn. He has recently completed the *Collected Poems of Philip Whalen* for Wesleyan University Press. His newest book of poems, *My Youth as a Train*, will be published in Fall 2010 by Foothills Publishing.

A native of California, **LOU ROWAN** lives and works in Seattle, having previously spent three decades in New York. His books include *Sweet Potatoes* (Ahadada, 2008) and *My Last Days* (Chiasmus, 2007). He edits *Golden Hadcuffs Review*. He is currently finishing a book of mysteries.

KYLE SCHLESINGER writes and lectures on poetry, artists' books and visual communication. He is the author of six books of poetry, most recently *What You Will* (New Lights Press, 2010). With Jed Birmingham he edits *Mimeo Mimeo*, and with Steve Clay he curates the Threads Talk Series (available on PennSound). He is also the editor of *Charles Olson at Goddard College* (Effing Press, 2010) and is the author of *Poems and Pictures*, a catalog published in conjunction with an exhibition he curated at the Center for Books Arts in New York and the Museum of Printing History in Houston (2010). He is currently an Assistant Professor of Communication Design and English at the University of Houston-Victoria.

ROBERT SHEPPARD's recent critical works include *Iain Sinclair* (Northcote House, 2007) and the editing of *The Salt Companion to Lee Harwood* (Salt 2007), and forthcoming is a book of essays *When Bad Times Made For Good Poetry* from Shearsman. He is co-editor of *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetries* and Professor of Poetry and Poetics at Edge Hill University in the UK. His latest book of poetry is *Warrant Error* (Shearsman 2009).

STEPHANIE STRICKLAND is the author of prizewinning print and hypermedia work. Her most recent book, *Zone : Zero* (book + CD), includes two interactive digital poems, one of which, "slippingglimpse," was introduced in Paris and shown at the 2009 e-Poetry festival in Barcelona. She is collaborating on a poetry generator with Nick Montfort and is a director of the Electronic Literature Organization.

JOHN WILKINSON is Professor of Practice of the Arts at the University of Chicago. Previously he taught at the University of Notre Dame, having worked in UK mental health services for three decades. He has been a Fulbright Scholar at the Nathan Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research, and Carl and Lily Pforzheimer

Fellow at the National Humanities Center. His most recent book of poems is *Down to Earth* (Salt 2008) and Salt will reissue his 1994 collection *Flung Clear* in 2010 with an introduction by Keston Sutherland. A book of essays, *The Lyric Touch*, was published by Salt in 2007.