Caminhando contra o vento
Sem lenço, sem documento.
—Caetano Veloso

Bob Perelman opens his essay on Bruce Andrews:

> Not many days after the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, the *New York Times* ran an article discussing the structure of the building and the possibilities of its being brought down by a larger and more thoughtfully placed explosion. It turns out not to be easy: apparently, each tower is built to withstand the impact of a fully loaded jet liner taking off.

The passage, in part, is a gambit to capture the reader's attention (an aim now assured by its fatal irony); but Perelman is also trying to find the vocabulary with which talk about the architecture of literary and physical violence, and about the structural relation between radical politics and radical poetics.

The nature of those connections, or even the lack of connections, is difficult to describe, and the rhetoric of their correspondence has been heavily fraught with the legacy of modernism. As late as the summer of 1849, with the revolutions in Europe being crushed and state powers being consolidated, Richard Wagner could write: "I have an enormous desire to practice a little artistic terrorism." As late as the summer of 2002, with the rubble still being cleared from lower Manhattan and state powers being consolidated, on-line culture jammers could continue to pay homage to Peter Lamborn Wilson and write about their work as "poetic terrorism."

Indeed, whatever Karlheinz Stockhausen might actually have said about the relation between the Trade Center catastrophe and great works of art, it was instantly legible — and effortlessly translatable to the statement that the event was "das größte Kunstwerk [the greatest work of art]" — because of the familiarity of a Decadent rhetoric that extends back to Lautréamont's cruel and violent beauty and the fall of Baudelaire's *mauvais vitrier*. From the

aestheticization of violence to the definition of aesthetics *as* violence, the sentiment is summed up in Laurent Tailhade's reputed quip, after Auguste Vaillant's bombing of the Chamber of Deputies in 1893: "Qu'importent les victimes, si le geste est beau? [What do the victims matter, so long as the gesture is beautiful]." By 1929, Tailhade's decadent dandy bravura would be codified by Andé Breton in his *Second Manifesto*: "L'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut, dans la foule" [The simplest Surrealist act consists of running down into the street, pistols in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd]."

I am tempted to say that the *frisson* of such statements has always depended on our knowledge that their rhetoric was inadequate precisely to the degree that it was overstated. In any mature accounting, even the most radical poetry is of course nothing like a pistol shot, or a bombing.

I am tempted to say that the manifest irresponsibility of such statements can now no longer be avoided, and that we should be ashamed at the thought that it was ever permissible to invoke them in the first place. I want to apologize for letting their valorization go unchecked and unchallenged, and for the adolescent enjoyment I once took from them without even a hint of the bitter aftertaste they now leave.

I am tempted to say that dismissing such statements on the grounds of their lurid and overheated rhetoric keeps us from looking at their measure of frightening truth. I don't want to now renounce the excitement I still feel at the bitter promise of a poetry as dangerous as a pistol shot, or a bombing.

My ambivalence about these conflicting impulses, if not their immediacy, comes less from the palpable events of September than from the lessons of poetry.

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There was much talk, in late September, about the comfort of poetry. Verse was read on radio news programs. Auden was circulated. I was astonished. It had never occurred to me to look to poetry for comfort. Quite the opposite; what I have always valued about poetry is its restiveness: its difficulties and discomforts and terrors. (I am choosing my words carefully). Moreover, the poetry I value, the poetry of the avant-garde, *must* be difficult — not because it is especially subtle or complex or allusive, but because it makes an assault on the very foundations of normative, communicative language.

An exhausted language unable to bear anything like the human narration; a defeated language unable to make a clear-sighted commentary; a mode of speech, or language itself, incapable of making meaning — these might be seen not as impediments to poetry, but rather as its goal. "Les signes," Jean Baudrillard recognized, "doivent brûler eux aussi [even signs must burn]." He was arguing, in the aftermath of the failed Revolution of May '68, that signification itself is an "organisation fonctionnelle, et terroriste, de contrôle du sens [a functional and terrorist organization of the control of meaning]."

That comprehensive, fundamental assault of a caustic and revolutionary poetic language is necessary because, quite simply, the status quo is unacceptable. And it has grown no more bearable since September. Forty years later and a world apart, the diagnosis is still the same as the one Martin Luther King made, writing from the Birmingham Jail in 1963: "the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists."

Indeed, difficult and frightening times may require all the more difficult and extreme poetry: an unyielding writing that will refuse to mitigate a world which we should not find comforting, and from which we should not be distanced. "Art exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony"; "Art, it is said, is not a mirror, but a hammer: it does not reflect, it shapes." We might look for a poetry that would measure the difference between Shklovsky's stone and

Trotsky's hammer (which would not be their use value; rocks can make perfectly good hammers, and both can be made into weapons with a flick of the wrist).

So the challenge is to keep poetry from throwing up an aesthetic shield between us and violence; or worse, from aestheticizing violence. Or worse yet: that we as readers of avant-garde poetry might grow too accustomed or enamoured of its own violences. "Victory," Guy Debord predicted, will be for those who will have been able to create disorder without loving it."

If nothing else, in the end it may be the difficulties and uncertainties of poetry that will keep its most attentive readers from making securely apodictic and pontifical declarations — even about what they know. Even about what they believe. (Including what they know and believe about the uncertainties of poetry).

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Almost exactly thirty years ago, in St. Louis, the high-rise towers of another of Minoru Yamasaki's architectural monuments were demolished in an act of aesthetic violence meant to cancel and redress the brutally violent aesthetic of his condemned Pruitt-Igoe housing project. The difference, of course, being that the St. Louis towers had been fully evacuated.

In *that* difference, perhaps, lies the poetic model Perelman was looking for. From that model we might be able to reconstruct a sense of the power and place of avant-garde poetry as a writing with all the techniques of terrorism, but without its targets. The space between the structures is tight, and shifting, but I wonder if there is room to pursue ambivalences without repressing any of their terms, and if it is possible to reject the aestheticization of violence and simultaneously embrace a poetics of sabotage, disruption, resistance, and hijack. I wonder if we might understand poetry — once again, or for the first time — as that mode of terrorism in which the victims are merely, and ruthlessly, words.

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I’m walking against the wind — with all its particulates making my throat catch and my eyes tear — but without handkerchief, without documents.

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SOURCES

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