TALKS

Hills 6/7

TALKS

Hills 6/7 **Spring, 1980**

Bill Berkson:
Talk 7

David Bromige:
Intention & Poetry 25

Barrett Watten:
Russian Formalism & The Present 50

Steve Benson:
Views of Communist China 74

William Graves:
The Bathetic 104

Warren Sonbert:
Film Syntax 120

Douglas Woolf:
Tenses 139

Bob Perelman:
The First Person 147

Michael Davidson:
The Prose of Fact 166

Fanny Howe:
Justice 184

Ron Silliman:
The New Sentence 190

Edited by Bob Perelman
36 Clyde St.
San Francisco, CA 94107

Cover by Francie Shaw

Partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

I began the Talk Series in the spring of 1977. Since then there have been 37 talks. A 'talk' is a broad designation—was the situation educational, creational, dramatic? Was information to be presented or were values to be embodied? Was the focus on the speaker or the community of speaker and audience? The answers varied. All speakers were presented with a common problem: to say something in public. In various cases this meant talking spontaneously, referring to notes and texts, reading written out essays, or abandoning written essays in midstream.

The talks presented here have mostly been edited by me in collaboration with the speakers. Any departure from verbatim transcription was made in the interest of concision and clarity.

The following people also gave talks in the series: Carla Harryman, G.P. Skratz, Barbara Baracks, Lewis MacAdams, Robert Duncan, Lyn Hejinian, Tom Veitch, Tom Mandel, Morgan Wines, Peter Holland, Christopher Dewdney, Tony Towle, David Antin, George Butterick, Eric Mottram, Sherril Jaffe, Ken Irby, and Melissa Riley.

Thanks to Maureen Granville-Smith for permission to print the Frank O'Hara letter. And thanks to Francie Shaw, Abigail Child, 80 Langton Street, and the San Francisco Art Institute for donating space at various times.

Bob Perelman
San Francisco
January, 1980

Talk

Bill Berkson: This is not where I thought to begin, but I have a piece that I thought would be nice to read before I begin, while people are waiting for other people to arrive, and it's in my hand, so I'll read or refer to it in some way. For the talk tonight, the only subject I could come up with was "Talking" or "Talk," or how talking occurs in and about poetry. So the heading for this is: "Talk."

"When I was getting in the car to go to California Ted Berrigan was standing on the sidewalk, on 10th Street. He was saying Goodbye. But one thing he said was, 'What are you going to do out there? *Raise chickens?*' Then I got to California, Bolinas, small town, lots of trees, tall grass, new people, & the Pacific Ocean which is surprisingly restful at times. But it took me a long time to see any chickens. I haven't got any. There weren't many people who wrote poetry in town then. Four or five maybe, at most. No active 'scene,' although the moment I arrived there was Joel Weishaus announcing that there would be a Bolinas City Lights anthology called *On The Mesa* & would I give him some writing for it? Anyhow, more people arrived in town, and more writers, poets, Lewis, Bob, Aram, Jim, and so forth. There was a very exhilarated sense of new-home-town community, exciting to all these drifters, so to speak, who had arrived. Then people who were not particularly engaged in writing began to question 'Who are The Poets?'—there was that distinction being made. Who are The Poets and What do The Poets Do? It was like What do these people do that chickens do not do? Pointedly like that. Even The Poets, I believe, began asking this. I mean, the more it was asked, the more one felt 'chicken' for lack of a clear answer. Even so there were plenty of Poetry Readings, right? & The Poets' Orchestra tended to perform, with musical instruments including voice (blowing mouth, as Ray Bremser would say), in a manner not unbefitting some cosmic barnyard. [laughter] However, what was being asked was being asked personally, and taken as such. As it happened, one day someone said, 'Now we know what The Poets do.'

Oh yeah what? 'Yes. They *talk*. They say funny things to each other.' Which was like some slantwise way of construing what Marianne Moore had said about writing a language that dogs and cats would understand, and chickens.''

And that seemed to be not unlike Henry Miller's idea in *The Time of the Assassins*, of the perpetual Rimbaud among us in heavy contradistinction to those more reclusive poets who only write as addressed to other poets. A technocracy, and Rimbaud would always come to blow that away. But in Bolinas then, there were public readings, and actually it seemed that locally there was the avowed intention to write—I don't know how you could ever determine it—''what people want to hear.'' So it wasn't as if anyone was being technocratic, or autocratic. But that, finally, it came down to what was your social self. And it was that you talked, more than other people talked, or that ''we'' said these funny things. So much for Post-Verbal Culture . . .

''Imagine Jean-Paul Sartre in the guise of a tape-recorder reeling off the following sentence: 'Words,' he says, 'are formed by a tongue in the mouth.' It is marvellous to hear this voice, transmitted so, but you know the statement isn't true. The tongue in the mouth is the last place words are formed. The words are almost totally elsewhere, very unsuccinct formations, vapor trails, blocks, layers of them. It's wonderful to think of words, as Sartre did *then*, in the mouth. The mouth is a wonderful *non-site* for words. 'But the form, it may be sleeping too.' True, we are mostly asleep to that particular form, where the words really are, even though we have all this equipment, which traces them, the lost words. We tend to wake up to those traces in the middle distance:

> what musicians call
> the middle voice, to command it
> is to be in business

Maybe Sartre was being mistranslated. Someone says 'I see what you mean,' which is a translation of, at best, diffidence, which is usually a lie. I want to see what I say. (I don't stand for wrong words.) I'm writing this to have it to say. Which is a form of listening. I listen because I hear. The words are pointless. They form a maelstrom. 'A hit? Ergo, swim.'''

One thing that occurred to me while overpreparing this event is that people now tend to be more experimental in talking than in writing, which is usually the case with a ''lost art''; you have to bring in the heavy machinery to even *find* it. Talking is a tall order. I don't really have a plan.

So, I'm going to read a letter. [Interruption for people arriving, chairs being moved, etc.]

Bob Perelman: Could you back up three sentences about talk. Is that the taller order?

Berkson: Let me say one thing first. In case anybody didn't notice, what I read involved at least three quotes. There's a quote from Charles Olson—those lines I find very interesting. I don't know what he means by it—is there anybody who knows what the middle voice in music is, what the musicians call the middle voice?

William Graves: Mezza voce. And it's used very ambiguously. Usually it has something to do with dynamics: not too soft, not too loud. In fact, it winds up being soft. It's sort of a talkative thing . . .

Berkson: So it's talkative.

Graves: I shouldn't have used the word talkative. I see that. [laughter] It's never the most dramatic. It would be used maybe for a frightened kind of passion, when you back up . . . covered, and soft.

Berkson: So what he's talking about is holding the middle voice, like a center voice that is a measure for getting something . . .

Graves: See, music started having two symbols: loud and soft. [laughter] There was never anything in between, so they invented this thing, mezzo voce. But it winds up, by an inflation of symbols, a little softer than you'd think.

Perelman: Also, there's a pun on middle voice in Greek. Reflexive, roughly translated.

Berkson: You and Barry [Watten] brought that, you know. We were talking about personal relationships and how there's a middle distance, a middle space, between persons A and B. And I usually term that a sculptural space, but you could also find it a terrific way of saying loud/soft. ''To command it is to be in business.''

What it means to me is . . . let's get to that. I'm more interested in that definition right now. You really want me to reread all that?

Graves: Well why not?

Berkson: Okay, the Jean-Paul Sartre comes from a new book, which is really a curious item, and beautiful, called *Life/Situations*. And it's all interviews, him responding to people's questions and talking into a tape recorder, and then being transcribed. He's 75 years old and can't see to read and he can't see to write. I don't know whether he can see at all. So his position as an active writer, like typing it up or writing it out is seriously

impaired. Now his form, and our form for Jean-Paul Sartre, is talk. You have these very cogent sentences, I mean, it's not like an Andy Warhol novel, you're not getting the inside ums and ahs you're hearing from me out of Jean-Paul Sartre. It's all completely marshalled sentencing and phrasing and the commas are all in the right places and it looks like writing, but it's talk. In fact, I was hard put to see the difference, actually. Which may be a trick that if you're a 75 year old French philosoph you can master.

* * *

I listen because I hear. There's a sentence in this marvellous novel of Charles Reznikoff, *The Manner* Music, where he says, I listened because I heard. There are two characters in the novel, stars, featured players, and they're both apparently aspects of Charles Reznikoff as he was delineating himself in this fictive form. One of them is a musician whose work you could say in Yeats' sense—but I feel the novel was written to disprove that poem by Yeats—whose work has come to nothing. He never gets it performed, his best friend hates it [laughter], his wife hates it. Nobody likes his music but he keeps doing it.

Perelman: And then he burns it in the end.

Berkson: Right. So then he's on, as Bob Dylan would say, the bummer shore, in the last chapter, and the other character, the salesman-Reznikoff, finds him sleeping on a park bench and takes him to lunch at the Automat and then realizes he's going to take him for dinner at the Automat, too. They're sitting at the Automat on 43rd Street and Fifth most of the day and night together, and the musician friend is pointedly not talking. He's just sitting, eating, and otherwise is abstracted, like supposedly defeated. Meahwhile, the salesman is sitting there and picking up all the conversations in the Automat, all these people and what they're saying. In the novel, there are the notations of what they say. And he says, I listened because I heard. Like what would you *do*, your ears are perfectly open.

"The words are pointless." I mean that. Also, in the novel there's a wonderful self-criticism of the Reznikoff who goes to dinner parties in Hollywood and tells stories. And people are always saying after he finishes, What'd he *say*? Was that a *story*? [laughter] If you know Charles Reznikoff's poems, which are completely beautiful, and completely pointless. You could say they're parables. He tells you the story, and

that's it: what you make of it is what you make of it, but he doesn't elaborate.

The first time I met Reznikoff: there was a cabaret in New York dedicated to getting Eugene McCarthy to be president. One time, they decided to have a poetry reading. And Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, and me and Kenneth Koch read poems there for Eugene McCarthy. Ted read a poem which included the title of one of Reznikoff's books, *By The Waters of Manhattan*, which he read out in this great resonant voice he has. Afterwards, a lovely young woman came up and said, I knew you (meaning Ron and Ted) in Tulsa but you probably don't remember me, and furthermore Charles Reznikoff is my uncle. And how would you like to come to dinner and meet him? Well, Ted had to go back to Iowa, but Ron and I went to dinner, and Reznikoff was there and talked a lot and played with his tie, sort of like Lou Costello. [laughter]

But Ron said a terrific thing to him. He said, "You know, I like your works because they're completely unsuggestive. They don't suggest anything but what they are." Like in complete opposition to John Ashbery, or most poetry that's written today, or has been written for the last 300 years. Poetry that's very suggestive, has all these levels to it, or ambiguities. But Reznikoff is mostly a narrative writer. He tells you the *facts* straight out. And what are they? They're the facts, there's the story, and everything seems to be in the right place. And the lines, mysteriously, since usually you can say they're prose stories, the lines seem to break in exactly the right places. That is to say, they click. But the stories, as he says in the novel, are pointless. They stay put.

Then, in the last sentence, "lost art" was too much. I don't want to read that again. One thing that occurred to me is that people now tend to be more experimental in talking than in writing. That's true, I think. Experiment doesn't seem to be the issue in writing now. You can tinker, you can know what you want to do, or say, I'm going to see what happens, but... It's probably because writing is in a very accessible condition for lots of people. There's been a lot of writing in the last 20 years. *The New American Poetry*, or since Stein and Williams put American writing on a very even keel. So that the experiment is just to find out what you want to do with it. And that's, like, anybody's risk, to be declarative. But talking seems experimental. We should really take a look at that, and find out who are the great talkers. There are the natterers, and the yammerers, and the blowhards [laughter], the ruminators, like myself.

Like I said, I want to read a letter. Which is like talking. Parts of a letter, anyway. (And letter-writing as a form could bear some looking-at too.) This is a letter Frank O'Hara wrote August 12, 1962. You could call it the Unplanned Image letter.

> What we didn't finish talking about in the "unplanned image" in music, I want to add to, which is simply to point out that musical composition, of all the "compositional" arts, is the most governed by formal disciplines. Even improvisations, or impromptus, as a genre, have their compositional rules, because music, as a medium governed by time, must have occasional references, as you know from our 4-hand improvisations: the tendency is always to make a "piece" of some sort, and you don't know whether it's a piece or not unless some convention is at least referred to. This is a great pleasure, since music has more to do with the organization of the mind than with sensuality or sensuousness, and also more than any *other* art with that property. Most often you find that composers have their greatest secondary talents and their greatest affinities with mathematics, for an instance. Almost the only deviation from recognized musical forms which *can* occur are the rhapsody and the tone poem, both of which are formal anti-forms, in the classical sense, in their own right, and in each case are governed by moreorless literary requirements or fidelity to mood or subject matter. In all tonal music the deviations from classical practice (for instance Prokofieff's Classical Symphony or Szotakewicz' First Symphony) are inevitably interpreted as "personality" and "innovation," as were Beethoven's and Mahler's; the atonal school and the serial school is even more rigidly governed by rules and schemata and the (how do you like that alternate transliteration of Shostie, by the way?) "mixers" are governed by the conventions of each. So far as I have ever heard with my ears, there has never been any serious attempt to have an "unplanned image" in music, even in Cage, as we discussed, and Maxfield (not to put him first, but last), Boulez, Schaeffer, Stockhausen, Nonno and the rest, are all planners who simply wish to replace old sounds with new and justify their compositional grandeur on the old basis nevertheless. That is why there is no possibility of appreciation of their work except from the "knowing"; they seem to be hated by those without a fairly superior musical sensitivity and culture, leaving aside intellectual joiners who never listen anyway, and avant-gardists from other media who want to support and enlarge the forward-marching family of themselves. To think that Erick Hawkins understands Lucille Dlugoszewski's music as other than drapery, is impossible. The composition of music, I *think*, is a basically Platonic operation, with the most bizarre sentimental preoccupations acting as both

> inspiration and response-from-the-auditors, executed under an appalling dictatorship of mechanical manipulations and exactitudes which the composer must either use for his own purposes or circumvent. (I think I spelled appalling wrong.) Mozart simply waved them all aside, Rossini laughed at them, Lizst for all his cheapness of imagination worked them to advantage, Berlioz went down fighting, Stravinsky was fortunate enough to consider it all as the glamor of his craft (not Craft), Berg retreated into a great poignant elegance which could have been written at the time of Monteverdi, Ives *aspired* to its difficulties without ever reaching them, Beethoven following Rimbaud's "famous dictum" took them by the throat. Anyhow, there is about as much freedom in the composition of music as there is in a prison recreation yard and I don't think the unplanned image in music has yet become an image either auditory or visual. Not that it needs to. Mozart, in his divinely perverse childishness, could use all the detriments of composition as toys, tragic and all that, so someone else should be able to shoulder the mud-souffle too. Or at least try to. Also, the only truly "revolutionary" composer in history on any scale whatsoever politically (if I may drag up the actual meaning of the word revolutionary) has been Verdi, which tells us quite a bit about musical form in itself, since the revolutionary aspects of the banned operas were always literary before they were musical: it's true that if *Nabucco* or *Ernani* had been boring musically nobody would have had to ban them, but on the other hand... They are "rousing" so there you are. And it is strange, if there can exist in music such a thing as either a new form or a no-form, that Schoenberg was crazy about the music of Offenbach. In fact, I think the general orientation of composers is so simple-minded, that the only great esthetic difference between Buxtehude and Webern is that of period: modern life is such that you better be quick and short or you neither hear or are heard. "Nerves! Nerves!" as Ronald Firbank has said. To each period its own nerves. Same way with organs. Buxtehude had great organs. Webern had great strings. I do not mean that the technical apparatus determines anything, though. There was a quarter-tone piano invented in Vienna for the Schoenberg school, which presumably had 352 keys, and nothing interesting, so far as we know, was ever composed for it, though I did hear a string quartet once by Alois Haba in that technique which was really something. But it was a quartet, with movements, organization, etc.—I suppose Edwin knows precisely how provocative his ideas are.— [I (Berkson) don't remember what Edwin's ideas were, or are.] If, referring to our comparing all this to painting and poetry, you can compare an "unplanned image" to a hunk of the Sistine Chapel or an absolutely spontaneous reminiscence of a Sunday afternoon at 1060 Fifth Avenue

> to a minor poem of Marvell, then it is, as I suspect, impossible to talk of images planned or unplanned, but of the horrible propensity of the human mind for organization in whatever area. From which horror, the saving graces of Mozart, Satie, Chopin, and a host of artists in other media, like Poussin and de Kooning, Keats and Apollinaire.
>
> Incidently (!), I think that your idea of leading through essays toward fiction is very shrewd in its historical analysis of developments, —but you are already at the pinnacle of art: poetry is the highest art, everything else, however gratifying (note?), moving and grand, is less demanding, more indulgent, more casual, more gratuitous, more instantly apprehensible, which I assume is not exactly what we're after.

Barrett Watten: What would the situation be if that letter had never been written? [laughter]

Berkson: Uh, in your life, or mine?

Watten: Well there's a kind of mysticism in that letter, right?

Berkson: I don't know, is there? Actually, no. My after-thoughts say definitely not. In the sense of common sense, which I take to be the opposite of mysticism. There's all the Buxtehude and Berlioz and whatnot, and there may be people who may not click to those names but then you wouldn't in O'Hara's poetry either. No, I don't see anything mystical about it. What do you see that's mystical about it?

Watten: It seems there's plenty of information that could be taken some other way, so that what you have is O'Hara as a person, writing a letter, saying that the personal connection is the best you can get.

Berkson: No, no, he's not saying that. He's just saying this is the way *his* mind works, this is his thought process on a particular subject. You could say he's patiently explaining music to me, about which I know next to nothing. I would instantly defer to his knowledge of it.

O'Hara's reference to art, any art, and I really think mine, too, is: Who does it. It's not granite critical terminology. What strikes me reading any of his criticism or poems, is that his terminology for art is a terminology of social life. And his terminology for social life could also borrow from the stockpile of art criticism. That seems to make living in the total language more possible, make it total, rather than have specialized languages for special experiences. What's valuable for me in that letter, for one, is that an image, or a body of work, can be a person's name. So we have that. We say deKooning does this. We say Pollock. If you want to get picky about it, you say, which period of Pollock. But the name includes... A curiosity of art production is that it's done by people. You name the

name and call up a body of work.

Jeanne Lance: What if he'd done the same thing for poetry? What if he'd done an analysis of poets and come to the conclusion that poetry is secondary to music or art?

[Unidentified]: People speak of music as being the highest art.

Berkson: Sure... and if you want to put it in a certain historical perspective, you can say that it had been seriously considered for a hundred years, really since Mallarmé, that poetry was a secondary art to music. One of the great dopey conceptions of all time!

Lewis MacAdams: Would you read over that last sentence in the letter and then explain to me how that applies in your own work?

Berkson: I would read that sentence, but, ah... [laughter] I would say, more, that my own work would apply to that sentence. Like a reminder.

MacAdams: What is that word, immediately perceptible?

Berkson: Instantly apprehensible. That probably has to do with density of the work. Would I want... total apprehension? Where would that fit with my work? I want poems to be inexhaustible. I sort of insist on it. I'm really not interested in the quick shot and disposable unit.

MacAdams: When you talk about Reznikoff's narrative—works that you get right away...

Berkson: Well, you don't. You get what's there, but with Reznikoff it's not exhaustible. There are the stories in *Testimony*, the court record stories—I wish I had them here. Actually, a lot of them are in this book [*The Manner* Music]. A curiosity about the book is his inexhaustibility for himself. You could think of those stories, those *poems*, as his fragments, as his notebooks. Those same stories occur verbatim as prose in this novel. Hundreds of them. They're not retold, they're the same narrations, but the lines don't break.

Watten: I read that one poem, the story about the dog and the hamburger. In verse it seemed horribly sentimental, but in prose it was almost like the Bible.

Berkson: So, that would be one thing about instant apprehensibility... What do you want? You want it to take up this space on paper, or in a book, or in a magazine. And then somebody reads it... I can see that, but it doesn't appeal to me. I'd rather go for the density.

MacAdams: You mean you work *against* instant apprehensibility?

Berkson: Yes, on all levels, yes.

MacAdams: How do you do that?

Berkson: [laughs] I don't know. Just for myself, I think it's what I'm reading. If you write, first you want to have something to read. I think that comes from a painter: Guston says one of the qualifications for the painting he's done is that it has to bother him for some time. That it contains some element of enigma, or mystery, so you keep going back to it. So that it has the quality of your living time, which is persistently enigmatic. I don't mean in some simple way, like Wow it's a mystery, who'll ever know, but, really, it is. What can you catch, what was there you didn't catch. And I wonder if what was there I didn't catch could be somewhere encapsulated in a poem so I could back and find it.

MacAdams: Could you give an example from your poems where something was instantly apprehensible and then you made it less so?

Berkson: No, no, I don't dicker with it to do that. In writing you can have a sense of surface. What the surface of the words is, then you get a feel of how dense, how multiplicitous—a sense, even a physical sensation, of what that surface is.

Robert Harris: There was a list of terms applied to the compositional arts other than poetry. If you could read that list again. It was a great list of all the things that could be wrong with the other arts.

Berkson: To begin with, I'm not reading this as a model esthetic. I'm reading this as a model, to me, of esthetic *approach*. So you can argue with it as to whether you like Satie or not. Some people would probably think that art should be totally gratuitous. There are times when I really wish it were.

Steve Benson: That means just saying, What the hell? When you're doing it?

Berkson: Yeah. Maybe this talk is triggered by something Bernadette Mayer keeps saying in her writing, which is: "Can I say this?" A very nervous anxious question. Is the emphasis on Can, say, or I? Or this? Or all at once, which would be like a shriek. But, if you're gratuitous enough, you'll say, I'll say, anything. Well, maybe talking I would say anything. Reading Frank O'Hara's poems, you can begin to get this rather terrific sense, Gee that guy will say *anything*.

Perelman: That's what his whole letter's about: trying to get outside of the ordinary seven things you usually say.

Berkson: You can say anything, that's one thing, but the aim is to say everything. This letter makes a loop for me into other writings, like

"Personism," and the poems that came after, like "Biotherm," which are poems that involve a lot of talk, and kinds of talk that Williams never dreamed of. Well, I'm sure he dreamed... There are kinds in "Second Avenue" that occur in *The Farmer's Daughters* but that don't occur in the later parts of *Paterson* or *The Desert Music*, where Williams is really opening out, for him. And for his time he was opening out incredibly. There are people who attended the reading of *The Desert Music* at Harvard who walked out, or sat in stony silence, because he had whores talking in the poem. Marianne Moore hated the poem because these whores were talking, and how could you? In 1956.

Lance: To go back to the letter, though. It's a Latinate piece of discourse to build up an argument and then destroy it in the end.

Berkson: Oh, the letter.

Lance: What's the unplanned image?

Berkson: I don't remember. [laughter] Let me say, it took about 16 years for that letter to make a dent beyond the fact that I received it. Now I begin to see it, the way I might *see* a poem having read it many times.

My emphasis in connection with this letter is toward more inclusivity in writing. That's not experimental. That's one pesistent wish. But it became clear to me, in talking about Frank O'Hara's poetry recently at the New College, that around this time there were poems that suddenly took on a lot more words, or kinds of words, than had been in anybody else's poems, ever, at all. So that things were stretching out. He invented a new kind of poem, actually, that can be placed in the constellation of Frank O'Hara poems. You have the action poems, the I-do-this-I-do-that poems, the love poems, lots of other kinds of poems. But now there was the just-start-writing poem. Which is not like the I-do-this poems, or the lunch poems, or any of them. The just-start-writing poem. And mostly, it's just-start-writing-*talk* poem. It's not like me talk, or Frank O'Hara talk; all kinds of talk start happening.

And it gets really interesting where they get to be like plays. I'm sure there's a connection with Stein, "Lifting Belly"—lots of works of Stein which are called plays or not, but suddenly you're aware of a lot of unannounced voices occurring in those poems. And where are they coming from? But they're all talk poems.

Or there are the TV poems that Ted Berrigan published under the title *The End of the Far West*, which are TV movie scanning collage poems with some fixing, some interpolation. There are step lines; they look like Mayakovsky or Williams lines. Like the poems that start: "A million guys

in this town, and you have to shoot the crime commissioner.'' They're the movie dialog poems, too. The Frank O'Hara dialog department.

Lance: They seem to read more as dialog than as talk.

Berkson: Some of them are portraits. This one poem, ''Biotherm,'' which was almost incidently dedicated to me, but what it is, it's a portrait. I call it a portrait in the vernacular of two. Portrait in the vernacular of *two*. In other words, it's a portrait of a relationship of one and one, and how they talk together. Now one and one never talk together as one and one other. I don't talk to Bob the same way I talk to Lewis. It's a portrait in that vernacular, the talk in that place. And the place in that poem is two people. It's not Second Avenue anymore, it's not time, Easter, or any of those places. The whole location of the poem is the people, the talk.

Lorenzo Thomas: About the unplanned image, and Mallarmé's statement beside the point, I think the writing of a poem is approached because of instigation, and once it's approached from there, there are restrictions, and then there is the problem of the writer's response. And it seems like seeking for the unplanned image in writing or any other art is an attempt to go beyond the limitations of one's own response, the limitations of the restrictions that the art form has accreted to itself, and also to get beyond the original instigation.

I like Guston's statement that a painting had to puzzle him.

Berkson: He really said, bother.

Thomas: That's even better. Alvin Albers says in a poem that when people challenge him on why he writes poems, he says, because I hear voices. And they ask, Well, what is your program, your message; he says, My message is that I have vexed myself enough to write poems. Which gets beyond . . . The restrictions are exactly what this young lady is talking about in the letter. The list of composers facing the restrictions of their own rhetoric is a brilliant smokescreen for hiding the fact that you're up against phantoms.

I wonder about the gratuitous art because, coming out of understanding what the experience means, how anything can be gratuitous . . .

Berkson: The gratuitousness would be saying: okay, I'm going to write a song, and right off I'll know that it's got to be a 32 bar song. And accepting yourself knowing that seems a little gratuitous. Unless you say, I'm going to take the form and experience as much liberty as I can within the situation. Whatever confines. You've got the confines of life, personality, and your art's going to reflect that. O'Hara was saying you can push back that edge.

In a terrific exchange between O'Hara and Edward Lucie-Smith, in this book called *Standing Still*, Lucie-Smith says something about self-respect and poetry, and O'Hara says, ''Well, it's very hard to respect yourself, but I'd like to be *free*.'' Like he says in one poem: ''just free, that's all, never argue with the movies.''

Watten: One thing O'Hara had was the total availability of many voices. He could size up individuals and then plug in voice to that location. From seeing very little of a given person he could let his language act on that perception and get a voice for that person.

Berkson: Yeah. But, contrariwise, he had this phenomenal abilty to get familiar so fast with all these people. The traffic was rugged. It just astounds, how many people can you have in your life on a basis of absolute familiarity.

Perelman: To get way back to what was said in the beginning about that letter: it's not name dropping at all; it's an exceptionally good map of that music. He had the whole thing organized and mapped and down. And at that point you don't want to wander around in the grid. Once you're organized, how do you get off that. Whereas, everybody else, it's still chaotic and doesn't quite make sense yet. For somebody to be on the other side of the organization and to start to play with it, O'Hara sounds like he's talking from there.

Berkson: Yeah, he's not fooling around. He didn't *have* to write that letter, or ''Personism,'' or something for *The New American Poetry* anthology. You put those ideas together when you're launching something, when you're going to make a move. If you group a few ideas, then you can make a move. What did Frank O'Hara do after he wrote this letter? What do you do next? Make a phone call? Write a poem? Shoot your mother? Shoot yourself? More specifically, what's the next poem?

This next note is talking about formalism or no-formalism. There's a continuity of sense, you could call it anti-formalism, but that's too simple. [reads] ''A clear-headed confined lasting approach to poetic form. Know the forms conceivable, all the student work, but even if you don't . . . The form isn't necessarily the focus, nor is the content. I mean: a poem contains itself. What a poem contains is what it contains. There's a containment. Just like your body is a containment. That's *all* that content can mean to me. Mixing up form and content games at this point doesn't interest me. What does it *have*? I have a heart, liver, foot . . . That's my image; beyond the machine image, there's the body image, for what you do.''

In the early talk O'Hara delivered at the Artist's Club, called "Design, Etc.," he speaks of form and poetry as Scylla and Charybdis. "Scylla would be the poet's association with the form he's using. Charybdis is the poet's passion for poetry and his own ideas, including his emotions." Later he says, "Design need not appear typographically [because he's been talking about that]. It is a clear-headed poetry-respecting objectivity, without which the most inspired and sublime love lyrics are hate chants, or just muddy rantings. As the poem is being written, air comes in, and light, the form is loosened here and there, remarks joining the perhaps too-consistently felt images, the line becomes assonant."

All those different things you *can do*, right? Who said, Remarks are not literature?

Perelman: Stein.

Berkson: It was Stein. Somehow I thought it was Cocteau. Apropos of what?

Benson: Hemmingway.

Berkson: And Stein wrote all these remarks. One of the things O'Hara did was extend the possibility for remarks.

Ron Silliman: O'Hara had this incredibly accurate ear for other people's language. The way Pound opens "Canto 84": "Stubborn as ah mule, suh, stubborn as ah mule"—it's a cartoon at best. Most other people's language in Pound is cartoon. It's a lot better in Williams, but not nearly as good as in O'Hara, where suddenly all these voices become possible, articulate, and—talk about the middle voice—very subtle and clear. Yet at the same time, O'Hara isn't bringing in all the theoretical material that people following Olson, like Whalen or Blackburn, bring in to notify readers that they were setting out voice. It's just there. Suddenly he stopped hearing all the static between what other people were saying and what he wrote down.

Berkson: I think he got it by will, by just damn well insisting on getting it.

MacAdams: How do you get yours?

Berkson: Yeah. Could I tell you how I get mine. I . . don't . . spell that out. [laughter] I can tell you . . . I'd like to pass on and get closer to it. I wanted to say something about "Biotherm" and "Second Avenue" and some later poems that stand in my eyes as having a definition—it's like a dictionary definition. I'd like to get past it—where I've got to is: "Poems of charged positive-negative surface that draw subject to them." In O'Hara's case, the charge comes from emphatic verbal process. Seeing

the obvious enigma. Obvious because, as in Whitehead, "the obvious embodies the permanent importance of variable detail." Enigma because importance is the most obvious enigma we have to contend with, okay?

I would go on that. I assume writers want to say what everybody knows, to begin with. That means the obvious. There's a lovely poem by Joanne Kyger, where the lover says, That's so obvious, how can you say that? She says, That's the obvious under our noses, behind our noses, wherever it is. But you can't just go around making up the obvious. You have it, and you have to draw it out by trying a technique that may seem mystical. I tend to start laying the words out and seeing what other words they draw. In many respects, it will come to me as subject. You want this to be about me. Alright, I wrote a poem called "For Robert Smithson." I didn't sit down and write at the top of the page: Robert Smithson has just died, and I'm going to write a poem in mourning for him. Actually, I had been thinking of him lately, and I sat down and started writing a poem out of fragments, notations, phrases I had in my notebook, some of which included some things from the writings of Robert Smithson, or at least one thing. But that's, you know, cottage-industry tips, that's what I often do. I have the typewriter before me and the notebook in which are various accumulations of words and lines I'd like to use, because I want to say them.

So I started typing these lines. Double spaced. Then they were all down there and I read what I had written. And I got the sensation that, without having set out to write one, I had written an elegy. And it was an elegy for Robert Smithson. Conceivably somewhere in this poem Robert Smithson is talking, probably more conceivably he's talking in the last two lines. But then I'm likely to say that's me talking too.

FOR ROBERT SMITHSON

shortage
a promissory note
struck
while skidding
can't you feel
those shifting feet
brain waves
undermining
cliffs of thought
follow up . . .

don't remember
terrific blades
on balls of feet
solar shapeless mass
a mental habit like
a religious pursuit
that grew
they are beautiful, right?
but I am no less alive

Clark Coolidge and I write letters to each other and sometimes send each other what we've written lately. I sent this poem to him, and he came back, liking the poem, but also said: Are you *gainsaying* him in those last two lines? Like: His works are beautiful, but now he's dead, or you're dead, and I don't care. [laughter]

Watten: Well, "they are beautiful" is sort of a giveaway.

Berkson: Yeah. So I said, well, no. I see it as saying *for* Robert Smithson—that poem is talking to Smithson, talking to you, Smithson talking at large (because there's literally Smithson in there), and me hearing him, which is meant to be bothersome. And if I was gainsaying, it's at the most a refusal to mourn, right? But it's more like Allen Ginsburg in "Kaddish" saying, "now to cut through and talk to you."

I never met Smithson. All these people across the country like Lewis, myself, Barry, etc., who've been quite involved in his work and had no personal connection with him at all, just that something in his work lit us up, gave us ideas, and then cooking. And then, out. What do you do? I didn't *plan* to do anything, my usual tack is not—I haven't written a lot of elegies.

MacAdams: Not yet. [laughter]

Berkson: I don't want to have to write one for *you*. [laughter]

There are things in that poem I simply wanted to say, things Smithson had said that I simply wanted to say because I found myself saying them. Iffy changes rung on a song, the shuffling feet which is 42nd Street. I'm reminded of a poem of Ron Padgett's which I like very much; it's a slight poem, completely straight. It has this line in it: "But I'll tell you this." I read it in Padgett's presence and he said, You know why I wrote that poem? Because I really wanted to say "But I'll tell you this."

When I write things down in notebooks, I don't do it just to fill up space. I write them because I think sometime I'll get a chance to use that

word, say that thing in some ongoing context. You want to use all the words. You don't want the words to be foreign to you. That's what my initial statement about words was. The words aren't formed by *your* tongue in *your* mouth until you say them in such a way that they belong there.

I can remember it as a kid and I guess the feeling's never left me—almost that St. Augustine feeling—there are all the words of men, and I come into the world of men. Men's speech, and I hear the men talk, and, is that the language? Somewhere, in my sense of things, there's the distance in that language. Some of it I enter into, some of it I simply *hear*, and then I listen. And some of it, I want very much to say, but have to have my own occasion for saying it. So inclusivity in writing is to minimize that distance as much as possible. So that you *can* say everything. I would really like to [laughs] say it all.

Barry and I sometimes talk about: what does Clark Coolidge *say*. Here was Clark Coolidge coming to me saying, What are you *saying*? And here's Clark Coolidge saying in Symposium: "If someone has something to say, he should be a speaker." But saying is obviously not irrelevant to his writing, and one of the most interesting things about Clark Coolidge's writing, for me, is that he says completely marvellous things and he says very few things that are . . .shitty. Or hateful, or, Gee I wish I hadn't heard that. [laughter] Even though there was a shocking moment at the S.F. State Poetry Center when he read a long poem, and suddenly towards the end it contained this incredibly angry tirade: I, I, I, sentences beginning with I that seemed noticeably in a rage . . . But since you didn't know what the fuck he was talking about [laughs], I mean, referentially. Is it a domestic situation? Whatever? You don't get that reference. But you do get a sense of tone. What is tone?

That seems the most infinitely discussible question in writing: What is tone? Did I recognize that poem as an elegy because it had an elegiac *tone* to my ear?

Silliman: Would you talk about discreteness? I find myself with more and more of the sense that everything I write is everything I write, and it's hard to tell the borders. You seem to be at the opposite pole. *Blue Is The Hero* is a very clear book. You write *poems*. I don't write poems.

Berkson: You don't?

Silliman: Maybe I write poetry, but I don't write poems. It seems like a very different condition. Like with Larry Eigner, the borders between his poems are very arbitrary. But they're not arbitrary in yours at all.

Berkson: Yeah, they're discrete works. Also, they're written few and far between. Or the ones you see are. That's a limitation. That's not an esthetic stance. If you can enjoy it as such, terrific.

I like the image of the meadow stretching away from David Smith's house, with all of his sculptures standing out there like people, standing in a meadow, where else? That's that and that's that and that's that and you can see how they connect. I'm beginning to see more and more connections. It used to seem all too frighteningly discrete. Like continually waking up and finding yourself another person.

The less personal difficulties intrude on anybody's work, the better.

Benson: What do you mean by that?

Berkson: Indulgence. Indulgence in either laziness, or hesitancies, or no-no's.

Benson: Or desperation or pissed-offness.

Berkson: That's okay. There's a lot of that for instance in Frank O'Hara, and it goes on up. You try to push those states to their most visible shining point.

Also, what Alex Katz said recently about manners in New York. What he recognizes as good manners is, rather than indulging in personal feelings, indulging in Big Art.

Erica Hunt: Going back to the problem of inclusivity, it seems to me that there are personal constraints on anybody whenever they sit down to write. When you say you want to be able to say anything . . .

Berkson: Everything.

Hunt: Everything. Everything, okay, everything. But if you say that, what edits indulgence?

Perelman: By definition, it's something you can't name beforehand. There's no generalization that's going to produce all the particulars.

Berkson: I guess it's the sense from Whitman, that anybody is given the possibility of almost infinitely expanding coordinates, of mind and sympathy, including your own sympathy for yourself, and what you perceive as world and cosmos. Taking on the whole thing. That just seems ordinary. Like, thank heavens, it can seem ordinary. Because you have, however you take him, the example of Whitman, or whoever else is an example for you. That's the outer limit, the terrific sweep. In a letter Clark wrote to me, he said, "I take it the issue of what we do is the cosmos." And I wrote back, "I take it the cosmos is each one's full extent." So then you're the one. And then you have your extent. That's all. It's not like saying, I want a bigger garage. [laughter]

April 2, 1978

Intention & Poetry

David Bromige: I'd like to start off reading two pieces I've written. I'll read for about ten minutes. This is from a magazine called *The Falcon*, from a work called "Six Of One, A Half Dozen Of The Other." I want to read two sections from it. Later I'll be talking about how they came to be here. Each has a poem and a piece of prose.

"I CAN'T READ, & HERE'S A BOOK"

When I think my son says something like this
or, this, when he's alone
I see him kneeling alone
in his room, sorting through what objects
choice & chance "conspire"

this is among the most poignant thoughts I know

the book I imagine is a 1945 edition
of Andersen's *Fairy Tales*
illustrated by Arthur Szyk

What makes me so uneasy, here, & why
am I driven to picture it?

How can I know
to what degree he is reflective,
what do I want of him. When he is
alone. When
I am alone. Thinking of him. When
I run out of
the particular kind of energy required
of me to be with him. And would sooner be alone
thinking, of him. However it hurts. Or soothes
what hurts. What displacing
makes him the book, while I am him?
How it feels, to be left out, closed out
of what all those others seem so vitally
to share.

How can I be witness to a scene
that, were I there, would be different again

There's nothing here
I can't ignore, for
it's only in my brain.

He was a new-born baby when we began, & years have passed, while we've been talking here. Are we any the wiser? I've been termed a philosophical poet—& if this means *resigned*, there's no quarrel I care to make. But if it means what I think it means, the fact is, I can't read 4 consecutive paragraphs by any alleged philosopher. This wasn't always the case. Years before I was able to write "A Defect," during my time as an undergrad at UBC, I forced myself to read 4, then 5, then 6 paragraphs in a row, until it got so's I could read entire chapters front to back.

Then came the Kant Final. I came to the question on the Categorical Imperative. "If your mother & Pandit Nehru were drowning, & you were on shore, & there were only one life-preserver, to whom would you toss it?" I looked around the room, where I might have seen any number of friends & rivals scribbling away, in time. Instead I saw my mother, with her huge shoulders & biceps, swimming the length of Brighton Beach. My father couldn't manage one length of the municipal pool. Is that why my mother had gone swimming with Pandit Nehru? Or was "Pandit Nehru" actually my father, & wasn't that why he was drowning? Then *he* would get the life-preserver, for what it would be worth—he quickly grew impatient with mechanical things & inanimate objects, like a number of people. So did I. Did you put your arms through it, or leave them outside? My father would certainly want to be saved. However, it was possible Nehru didn't care to be—possibly he believed he'd been some kind of bug in a previous existence, a water-boatman say, & was now prepared to expiate his previous arrogance. How to be sure? And all the time I was deliberating, he was coming up & going down. Was the water warm, or freezing? It being Nehru suggested the water was warm, but all I could see was myself on Brighton Pier, alone. To find yourself alone on Brighton Pier is not possible in nature, except in a hundred-year storm. And there, in the English Channel, about to drown, was a small swarthy figure alleged to be Pandit Nehru. My mother's huge shoulders swam on. My father's presence, I realized, had never been other than hypothetical—I could hear his laugh above the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, emanating from the hotel where he was trying out his German on a salesman of life-preservers. When I got to the life-preserver, it was rusted to

the stanchions on which it was hung. A bobby approached me down the pier. He was going to order me to throw the perserver to Nehru! No, he was beginning to arrest me for tampering with the equipment. The philosophy professor, pacing up & down the aisles with tenured arrogance and a regularity you could check your watch by, paused & stared over my shoulder. My bluebook was blank. As he resumed his slow parade I blushed with the shame of his imminent disappointment. After all, the slave is the truth of the master—oops, wrong question. —Oh, why couldn't he have thrown out some hint, a single word, *any*thing? —I began to drag the life-preserver from the stanchions—No, dammit, irrelevant—I *have* the life-preserver in my hands, I hurl it toward the leader of India & hope for World Peace! Just a cotton-pickin minute, how do you hurl one of these things? Like a discus? A cricket-ball?—In India, cricket-balls aren't made of leather, because of sacred cows. —Like a boomerang? Now here was the life-preserver, back in my hands. —Nice hands: square, strong, capable, requiring a mission in life—and across the aisle from me, meanwhile, was Omega Andersen, the only student with a higher mid-term grade than me, scribbling furiously in her third notebook. She it was, I realized in a sudden rage, who had given me all this dexamil! She'd *said, she* meant to do it too, for the final. Duped! And by a woman I believed might be sweet on me!

It was then—in the grip of such complex emotions—that I transcended the hypothetical, & handed in my final essay on the Categorical Imperative. I saw Professor Aquaphobia gulp two or three times as he stared into the empty bluebook. But before he could call me back, I was out of the room, out of the building, & out of Philosophy. At least, I reflected, it'll make a story, when the others catch up with me, down at the beerparlor. But when they did, all they could talk of was how Omega had handed in 4 bluebooks, each page covered with a single phrase, repeated over & over: Omega Andersen.

I'm afraid the good news went to my head, somewhat. Later, I found myself at a party where, after the custom of that place at that time, you parked your bottle on the kitchen counter & Watchout! I was just pouring down my throat the last of a halfpint of Seagram's when its owner grabbed me & said, You want the shit beat out of you in here, or outside? I considered the redness of his face as a sign of anger. The painful grip he had on my right bicep counted for something too. I wanted, for the general good, to avoid a messy scene. These halfpints are too small, I complained, & looking around, found a full pint. This will have to do, I told him, & let him have it right between the eyes. Ten per cent of the world is left-handed! Now both my biceps were gripped as my host threw me down the front steps.

I must draw a veil over the next hour's proceedings, but I don't seem able to, probably because I can't remember them. When my

narrative resumes, I'm sitting in an apartment paneled with Norwegian wood. Norwegian wood frames on every picture, Norwegian wood all over the bed, Norwegian wood in every nook & cranny. Thus every empirical element is not only quite incapable of being an aid to the principle of morality, Omega exhaled, But is even highly prejudicial to the purity of morals. I shoulda gone straight home. To secure one's own happiness is a duty. That had been my intention. For human reason in its weariness is glad to rest on this pillow. So, this was the tertiary stage of dexamil.

Omega, I broke in, the exam ended yesterday, this is tomorrow, what shall I say when I get home? Should you be content that your maxim, to extricate yourself from difficulty with a false promise, David, should hold good as a universal law? She's not expecting anybody but me—or so she's given me to understand. I'm afraid you're a man of very narrow understanding, she yawned, You'd better *invent* something.

So it was that when I awoke at home that afternoon & asked my wife where I had been she told me how I had spent the night walking the beach & had saved someone who looked like my mother from drowning & had told the reporters that my name was Pandit Nehru. Why I should believe that I don't know, she went on, Except your clothes *were* soaking wet. She stopped speaking so we both could hear the universal rain beating on our empirical roof.

ONLY FAIR

But Lennie said he got it
so he should get half of it,
some 6 million lire. Only half

was for me to give to you. Later
I open up the banana
& it's rotten.

I sold further poems to *Poetry Chicago*, back in the late 60's, before it caught leprosy, & ushered in the crepuscular decade I'm having a good time in, writing this stuff. I spent the checks in the same way each time, so pretty soon I was a hopeless addict, with all your usual symptoms. For instance, loss of recent memory through being so interested in what was happening right now; or, again, the delusion that

sexual pleasure was intensified—& this delusion was often a *folie a deux*, unless I was very much mistaken; & there was, of course, the sharply stepped-up paranoia. I'd catch myself suspecting that these National Guardsmen meant to prevent us from leaving campus so that we might be teargassed from those helicopters; that this carload of young men who had stopped to ask me directions as I was taking a midnight stroll along a deserted street, & had now all gotten out of their car to stand in a rough kind of circle around me, didn't really want to know how to get to Berkeley Ice Arena, & that the young woman who had given me a flower last night at Winterland, & then borrowed ten bucks for the rent on her pad, didn't really mean to let me visit her there. True, she'd written her phone-number on the only piece of paper available, my immigrant card; but where was my card this morning? True, she'd told me her name—but when I called information, I was informed there were half-a-dozen Janis Joplins listed, all of them on Haight Street. So, I tended to spend more & more time in my apartment, with the blinds drawn, smoking what I could find & listening with sharpened interest (but diminished awareness) to what Bob Dylan & Mick Jagger had to tell me about my unreal condition.

''Only Fair'' stems from that time. It's quite unreal. I never knew anyone called Lennie—or even claiming to be called Lennie; I never dealt in Italian currency; & I never kept my money in a banana—though clearly I suspected I should have. Was I going mad? At last? What was up...yes, what *was* up? Or down, for that matter. One by one, my various codes of belief peeled away; perhaps the hardest to surrender was the Boy Scout code. For two years, because my father knew it would make a man of me, I'd been a Boy Scout: although I loathed myself for it, I slowly assimiliated the code until I forgot where it came from & it thus became part of my nature. I was in the Wolf Patrol. Our scoutmaster was M. Malson, a recent emigre; he'd codified Baden-Powell's original, muddled, rules, until all that stuff about cold showers & the rough male kiss of blankets fell away, leaving an utterly lucid formulation I can recite to this day, I have only to howl thrice—so to speak—& it all comes back to me: A Scout's thought is not restricted in time or place, a Scout can think of an object by itself, & a Scout possesses a certain combinatorial ability. A Scout needs rules: a Scout desires reciprocity: a Scout desires the gesture of giving. Now, in the anguished months of 1968, in one sweat-drenched dream upon another, Who-I-Was-About-To-Become demanded of Who-I-Was that he purge himself of Who-He-Had-Been. Gurus were harder to come by in those days. I wasn't John Lennon, I wasn't Mia Farrow; I was a TA at UC Berkeley, most of whose salary, such as it was, went to support field-hands in Mexico. I had to go it alone. It's a wonder I pulled through at all, & that I was able to formulate a new code of conduct is a miracle,

but, thanks to art, it happened, & I'm now prepared to reveal that code to you.

Leonard—that's to say, John Doe—asserts that his prior efforts entitle him to one half of whatever they produced. Therefore you—that's to say, my Significant Other, on whose behalf I would commit perjury, conspiracy, burglary, fraud, & so forth—you should be prepared to accept, as I must be prepared to yield to you, only one half of what you want, need, expect, or hold me up to blackmail for. Now, what is the result of this? And we must ask too, what is the result of ignoring this code? Then too, we must bear in mind that 6 million lire isn't what it once was. —Well, my time is up, I see. Good luck & Andiamo!

I want to keep this as naive as possible, so I take my definitions from the *American Heritage Dictionary*. *Intention*: a plan of action, an aim that guides action, an object, in the sense of a goal, an end. *Poetry*—well, this is all circular definition. Poetry is what poets do, right? And then you have to find out what poets do, and finally you get to *poem*: a composition designed to convey a vivid and imaginative sense of experience. An object in the sense of a created thing. There are fancier definitions, and we all know none of them work. So let's settle for this. I was a poet before I had an intention to be one. Or let's say I wrote my first poem before I knew what I was doing. Let's *say* that, although clearly I had read poems before I wrote my first. In fact, it sounds like Swinburne. It starts "desolately, and despairing." I can't remember how it goes on.

There was an intense pleasure in being able to do it, even though the second-hand language interferes absolutely with any vivid sense of experience. But I was hooked.

But not for years was it borne in on me that if I could only have intentions of the kind other poets had I could organize my experience around these and thus be able to see that experience more clearly. And that this gain in clarity would in turn allow me to write more poems. Which is after all what one wants, I mean the activity of writing. Because of what's urging one on. I'm talking about an explicit poetics, and I've never had one.

Now, it's true I'm proud of this, but I'll admit it's often meant poaching from the explicit poetics of others. Once I grasped this, I tried harder to grasp what it was I did in writing. But white lilies never grow on stalks of clover. "Born a cricket, he can never be / President of the elevator."

If you want attention paid to your poetry during your lifetime, take

my advice: develop the knack of writing about it, until you achieve such simple clarity that anyone can follow you, including those who still won't be able to follow your poems. All concepts become commodities in these times and These States. Possibly you could jettison the actual poems and devote your energies full time to the concepts in back of them and to the marketing of same. Sarcasm to one side though, it was never a choice for me. I simply could see no way of standing outside the activity I was in. Whenever I sat to write, no matter how good my intentions, something began to darken and cloud my logical process, and this something I call poetry. I don't mean merely the process of darkening and clouding. It was the whole, the logical progression encountering its own miasma. A favorite poem when I was a child, one my father caused me to memorize, was Kipling's "If." "If you can keep your head, while others around you are losing theirs, you'll be a man, my son." And then there was the graffiti in the john in the Heidelberg in Berkeley: "If you can keep your head, while others around you are losing theirs, possibly you haven't grasped the gravity of the situation." Each of these shots is equally cheap. But like a lot of cheap shots, they point to a truth. I must say that at the outset that what I really have to say of course I won't be able to say. Right?

If you won't consider your past poems, it's not going to be very easy to formulate a poetics. And I kept putting it off, and there grew to be an uneasy place in my psyche. A sort of attic. And in the small hours, I'd lie awake and listen to the scratching in the wainscotting.

Barry Alpert came to interview me for *Vort*. And he had questions calculated to reveal to his readership the real grounds of my activity as a writer. But all I could do was ramble on about this or that circumstance of my life. Actually, I don't regard those answers as rambling at all. They strike me as somewhat more specific than the theories would be capable of.

But I was about to say how this attitude began to catch up with me. Luckily, before it did, I found that I wasn't as alone as at times I had thought. I'd read Wittgenstein. "That about which we cannot speak, we must remain silent." Something like that. "We must pass over in silence?"

The shock of recognition in reading this had something to do with my mother. She used to sing me an old Devonshire song that went, "I can't be talking of love, love. I can't be talking of love. There be some things I can't talk of, and one of them be love." I had a sort of poetics in my hands.

And one I held, it seemed, in common with other writers. All conceptualization of experience collapses in the teeth of that experience. The difficulties are as enormous as you could wish, of course. Any word is a kind of conceptualization, if you look at it that way. But, to keep this simple, I'll testify that if I knew ahead of the writing what that writing intended, I either didn't do it, or, worse, I did it. And it came out very bland.

By what standards of judgment? That, I can't say. Either it works, or it doesn't. The reasons follow.

Of course, Ron's right, Ron Silliman, who spoke last week. He points out that we have to learn how to read any new writing. So that our notions of what works are constantly altering. But, at any point along some imagined line of progress or growth or development, one's taste is absolute. But there is that funny area where you say, "I don't see how this works. I can't say it works, I can't say it doesn't, I'm really intrigued."

Michael Palmer: There's that point of incomprehension that writers tend to trust. It's in opposition to the critical faculty that says if there's not comprehension it's untrustworthy. And that's why they don't come to the new work. Whereas you can say I don't know what this is about, but in fact you're willing to go with that as reasonable.

Bromige: Right. That's it. And that comes in where I speak of the difficulties I let myself get drawn into by trying to write criticism. Well, graduate school papers.

Meanwhile, an odd bird called *The Falcon* has been hovering in the wings. And it's time to bring it onstage. Well, I did already. *The Falcon* is published by Mansfield State College in Pennsylvania and edited by one W.A. Blais. He's what we call a friend of the work. God knows how he got onto my writing. If you stay alive and writing long enough, to you, too, will come the mixed pleasure of being solicited for something by a magazine which, when you check it out, has an editorial policy that you can't figure out how it leads to you. I checked it out, and it published Lyn Lifshin, Greg Kuzma, and Jon Anderson, and nonetheless, here was a letter from its editor asking me to send something. He sent it back, but he kept one poem. And I thought, if I was going to take just one poem, that would have been the one I would have kept, too. (You know sometimes you send out such a packet, and you include poems which are not *quite*, they're *good* of course, but... And they keep those and send the good ones back and then they're through. Good will alone is not enough.) So. Bill Blais had passed the first test. I mean, I don't want to make a big deal

out of it, it says here.

But because of the thread of intention without which I could not enjoy or even have the activity of writing this talk, it has to become temporarily important. And so has the poem. So I'm going to read it:

THEY ARE EYES

They arise
intent on us
& their intent's
that we do good,

thus, to this end,
by being small,
they make us spacious
so that we may know scope,

& are circular & flat
to make us know
how round & tall we are,
like wells, we are to lean into

to drink, & dip up
water for our brothers
& our sisters too—
they shine

not alone to say
Let your gleam be revealed
but to remind us of the darkness
each encloses—

aren't they enormous also
to help us in our knowing
of ant or bee or
cell of our own body,

& to warn us
we can be mistaken,
& more than one can count
or even see, because

if a body lose
awareness of its weight
among the billions of its kind
its life will waste—

& they are blind
to remind us
each is
singular

& to insist, You must
use your mind to make believe
the stories of the real you tell
are true, & to that end

they constellate.

Now, if we didn't have things to do that would gradually seem preferable, I could spend forever on this poem, viewed as contemporary document riddled with poetry and intention. But I'll simply remark that it's a poem of someone who wants to tell a story. He has some memory or idea of telling a story to children, possibly around a campfire where you can see the stars. But this storyteller mistrusts the pure pleasure of storytelling. He has this impulse that he wants to do something else with. I think what he wants to do is to set these kiddies up and then pull the rug from under them. Well, why would anyone want to do a thing like that? Well, why not? Probably something akin was done to him. However, into this brutal chain of events, a joker has been inserted: he's not actually doing it to anyone, he's doing it with words. It's as though some sympathy prompted him to do it in words, not in actions. Not that words can't do a lot of damage.

Still, the tone of quiet persistence, even if it was intended as a winning mask to make the face when it's finally revealed more hideous, does that tone vanish along with that action? Doesn't it rather persist longer than anything else in the poem? Doesn't the poem encourage such quiet persistence in the face of all arrogance and mistrust? I think so now. But I never could have intended such a complex intention. I wouldn't know where to begin. If I identify these intentions now, I do so because I know fairly well the agent of them, since it's myself. And I surmise he had those intentions, not otherwise to be articulated, when he wrote the poem. But the interweaving is something else, and in fact without it, we couldn't apprehend the intentions or their precise relations. I don't mean to mock intentionality. Nothing much comes to be without it. But, equally, what's memorable comes to be, somehow, in its despite. This gets problematic in another way, because I'm speaking of this poem as if it were a shining instance. And of course, as itself would point out, it is. There exist no

standards of any kinds that any enlightened person can appeal to to dismiss this poem. And you can't argue taste. You might tell me it doesn't work, and our eyes will meet, and our heads will nod, in sage measure, each of the other, and then, because we live in a continuum, one of us will speak of something else.

I can't, anyway, presume to tell you what this poem means, and I trust you knew that and weren't about to ask me. Not because it's meaningless, but because it says what it means. And in fact, it's far from what's called difficult, not for anyone who's learned to read poetry from the people I learned to read poetry from. It's a kind of "Dover Beach." Of course, Matthew Arnold was next to Swinburne in my first anthology. It's a little more subtle than "Dover Beach"; the syntax doesn't telegraph its punches, but that's about all. In fact, it's kind of crass.

So, a couple of years pass, which is always a laugh. Just think of a day. I can't even think of which. That is, when your life is to be used as instrument to realize an overwhelming intention, it's highly otherwise than when the overwhelming intention inheres in finding out from the life what it is. Or words to that effect.

Barrett Watten: Who said that?

Bromige: I did.

Johanna Drucker: Could you say that one more time?

Bromige: I could say it forever, actually. It's like those studies done on children and how they laugh. When they see a ball knock over a humanoid figure, they'll laugh, not just the first time, but the second and third time, or fifth time. But I bet by the eleventh time they're saying... Anyway, I'll read it one more time. "When a life, your life, is used as instrument to realize an overwhelming intention..." That is, well I don't know, that must say it. I have a mistrust of translating it, because I'm talking now...

Bob Perelman: Translate it.

Ron Silliman: Is it your intention, or the Selective Service's intention which is about to use your life?

Bromige: Really I'm thinking of yourself as drafting yourself to do this thing. But really what I hear resonating is what Kipling said, that you really must name yourself in order to withstand, or survive. As against trying not to do that and then seeing what is there. For me, it's all of a piece with thinking of trying to write a piece on *Intention and Poetry* and then being able to account ahead of its being there for each thing that comes to be in the piece, which I no way could do. It'd be like having handcuffs on.

I can only let one thing lead to the next and try to sort things out. But some of these things have to be here, for me, until we get to the end. Right.

"When a life, your life, is to be used as instrument to realize an overwhelming intention"—come to Rossmore Leisure Acres! But "it's utterly otherwise when the overwhelming intention inheres in the finding out of the life what it is." I don't want to go to Rossmore Leisure Acres today.

And then I heard from Bill Blais again. He asked me for 15 or 20 old poems. He wanted to do a retrospective. And he wanted an interview to accompany this. A retrospective? No one's even heard of me yet. [laughter] How did he find out I was through? Gee, I wonder which poems I'll send. But, as for the interview, that was out. Once was enough. Not even the fact that it was to be conducted in writing, with him mailing the questions and me composing the answers in my best imitation of spontaneous speech, not even that could persuade me. The interview, as a form, is fucked. All the worst aspects of a writer's egotism emerge with ease, dripping with authenticity. And sooner or later they take over the occasion. Read any interview and discover why writers write. It's because they know better than to trust their sanity in speech. Among other beings in a crowded room. When you start to talk, it's always Midsummernight's Eve. And Bottom always wants to play Oberon, or Puck.

So I wrote back that I would pick out the poems, but, as for an interview, I would provide a prose accompaniment. Now we could call that the birth of an intention. But I hadn't any notion what that prose would be. In fact, I forgot about it. I had till June, and this was October. So I did nothing about it, and then one day in January I found I was thinking about it and I picked the first poem and I sat down and I wrote a prose to go with it and it was awful. It was Berkeley graduate school prose. In disgust and boredom I phoned my friend Toby and I went over there to watch Monty Python on TV. The next night I wrote the prose that now goes with that poem. When I sat down to write about the next poem, I wrote another grad school essay. Now once again, the intention to make a poetic object, the object to become an art object, surfaced, and I painted over it, so to speak, until I got the tone I wanted.

But I wanted to say how the title got to be there, because I think titles are interesting in the area of poetry and intention. They exist as a kind of translation between the poem and some imagined reader. I find it a useful metaphor to speak of the frontal lobes and the back brain. There's some evidence that that's how these things work. That I'm much more in my

front brain now than I am when I'm writing poetry, and I would say, not enough, since I can't remember where that was going . . . Well, I've had a pitched battle with my frontal lobes . . .

Silliman: You're winning. [laughter]

Bromige: Oh yeah, titles. Titles do stand there as a kind of explanation for the piece. A translation from writer to reader.

I can imagine people getting a title and *then* writing; it's their private magic. They have a title, it enabled them to write the piece, and so they keep the title. That happens. Or take a process of writing where the title is "15th Light Poem," where it has more to say about the process. Then you have for whom done, which would be a clue, too. Because if the poem's dedicated to Carole Berge and you go and read her writing, you have some better sense of what MacLow's saying.

But I didn't have a title for these pieces and I read them one day up in Sonoma, and Sue Kelly said afterwards, I guess it's kind of like six of one, a half dozen of the other. I said, Yes, that's right! The attitude that turns up in that phrase is pretty close to the tone that's in the prose pieces.

But also, "six of one" has a specificity to it, and "half a dozen of the other" doesn't. If you see seven people cavorting in a meadow you say, There's half a dozen people out there . . . But six is six is six. And the precision of the one as it occurs first—as in the series of writing, the poem occurs first—I enjoyed that. I recognized it when she said it.

Then it became an intention: "That's good. I *intend* to have that as a title." It works to me like a poem. That is, it's dense. And I think it really spoils it to explain it, which is a curious thing. Why hold anything back? As Skratz was saying here last week, When what we all want is the naked truth, why do we have to go through all the seduction that we put one another through? But then that proposes, if I heard him right, a world in which he wouldn't happily live, since when he gets to the naked truth, it's the seduction he's been through that is his delight. But I shouldn't think about it.

So. This is the adventures of a piece of writing, having to do with poetry and having to do with intentions. I'd gotten a reading at U.C. Berkeley in February and I wanted to have something new to read. U.C. Berkeley isn't just any place to me. I wanted to read "Six Of One" to half a dozen of my old professors. In the event, of course, none of them came.

It doesn't matter who comes up and tells you how much they enjoyed it? It does, it's very heartening, and it may actually be the reason one goes on. It may be the whole motivation and spring of it. But there are always

those . . . I mean they're the ones, aren't they? They're the ones you have your eye on. In fact, as it says here in this prose I'm getting less and less patient with, "But it's the ones who won't give their heart you've got your eye on." Because, as G.P. Skratz has shown us, writing is always next door to seduction—boring holes.

You can't worry about whether it's "contemporary." Because then you get involved in that whole world of trying to write pertinence, and we know where that leads. I mean, how could it be impertinent? There was a talk here that I missed, given by Bob Perelman, where I think part of the discussion was to do with, how when we read Homer there are details given that don't matter. It's a very long poem, and we don't have to know that these people who have a minor role in the poem come from the banks of the River Whatever-It-Was. We just don't need to know it. Well, Duncan McNaughton says we do because it's history, and it's put in there because it's a history book, too. But there's another way of reading it, to say that it just doesn't matter. Well, it would be wonderful to be able to put irrelevant things into writing . . .

Silliman: Isn't that what we all learn from reading the *Cantos*? Kenner was sitting down there learning how to figure out "Angold *tethneke*," and everything else like that, and I was learning how to read words without feeling anxious about the fact that I didn't know perhaps the language they were written in.

Bromige: I can't escape from the *Cantos* without the feeling that I am being urged to crack some code here.

Silliman: What you eventually learn is that John Angold is dead, right? That's what it comes down to. That's always what it comes down to.

Bromige: I don't know the reference.

Silliman: It's in *The Pisan Cantos*. It starts off one of them, 84. But the meaning's irrelevant in the long run. I have the feeling that for any number of people in my age group, what they learned was not to feel anxiety.

Perelman: But Pound wouldn't have been interested in your not knowing what he meant. He would have thought, "Well, you're grasping onto the sensational aspects. What's important is the very words I said, and exactly what I meant." That got to be such an obsession with him.

Bromige: [imitates Pound] God damn their eyes! And the l-ight was so b-linding.

Perelman: He wasn't interested in free association. He wanted association under the strictest terms of truth.

Bromige: Was what you were saying, Ron, that the phrase "John Angold is dead" is there for a pleasure of its own, and not otherwise to be . . .

Silliman: Yeah, it moves because at that particular instant it's a good example of Pound's melopoetics, right? Rather than his logopoetics.

Watten: That's not true. He's not trying to . . .

Silliman: Yeah, he's trying . . . I'm not talking about his intention so much, but the way we learn to read him.

Watten: How did you decide that that was good enough?

Silliman: Because I had taken a look around at all the people like Hugh Wittemeyer who had learned to read all of that stuff and came to the conclusion that that was not knowledge.

Perelman: Well, either you're reading Pound as a sociological example of a writer saying something in a society, and we can take all of his assumptions and preconceptions into account as he made them known to himself and to us, or we can just read it as if this is Gilgamesh and it's 3,000 years ago, and here we have it, and who knows what it means. That's what you [to Bromige] were saying before. As you're writing, you're writing for a second person, at least *you* are, I think, very much. You're writing for some you, who's maybe to be seduced and maybe not, but you think of it as some sort of offering, or simple statement to the you. And then the way, Ron, you're reading Pound, it's really much freer, it's totally third person: this guy said this thing and god knows what he meant.

Silliman: I'm not proposing it as the ideal way to write or read, necessarily.

Perelman: But it's a fact for any writer, that he or she is going to be read totally from the outside.

Bromige: Is the difference here that in reading Pound you won't give primary place to the injunction to read Pound as though you were Pound reading Pound? That is, to imagine what Pound thinks he meant when he wrote that? Because that certainly is one way of reading: that we read a text, and we imagine the poet who wrote it.

Silliman: We *become* the poet in a funny, apprehended sense.

Palmer: There's also instant suppression of intent on a formal level in Pound. The previous writer of the Cantos sets out with a notion of 3's and 9's, and a certain number of them, that's absolutely fulfilled on every level of the poem. And intention is utterly in bed with the desire of the poem. There's no gap there. And Pound comes along with initially that same

intent. There're to be 100 of them, 99 and 1 extra, and it's going to go through these stages. Then you realize that that kind of intentionality is utterly without cause in the poem. And yet, the poem's loaded with intent of a different order.

Bromige: Yeah, the intentions he had when he began he has to abandon, and, presumably, the intentions he had later he had to abandon. And in fact, it's adhering to an intention over years that is his lunacy. The intention to prevent any further world war by resolving the economic dilemmas of the world, in the end, has him broadcasting for Mussolini's government. You can follow it a step at a time. It's very clear. St. Elizabeth's is the outward manifestation of that intention he encountered at least 25 years before.

Watten: I was thinking about that line in *The Pisan Cantos*, "Taishan @ Pisa." He uses the @. So that's intention, right? That's like the other pole. And that completely shows. I think at that point he makes a connection back to the intention of the whole "form" of the poem.

Bromige: Do you see that @, written that way, as something you usually see in bookkeeping?

Watten: Sure. It was just that it was on the typewriter. It's a small irony, that the means are at hand. His overall intentions absolutely mesh at that point. So that in your discussion there are plenty of kinds of information that you could also describe as intention.

Bromige: It's very hard for me to read a text and let pieces—no, not let pieces of it go by, because you have to do that—but I can't read a text anymore than I can get through a day without reading whatever happens as signs of intentionality. Why did So-and-so do that? Perhaps it was purely expressive and didn't have intent towards another person, but still, what is it expressing?

[Unidentified]: Wouldn't intent mean like the Latin of it, would it come to mean "grabbing in"? Isn't it a feeling of what the author's grabbing into, and that sense of thrust and grab makes you feel that in some way you've grasped the other person?

Bromige: A funny thing about etymology: You can use it prove whatever you want. That is, a friend starting a magazine up in Vancouver, and wanting to argue that, I guess, prose was as good as poetry—and he ran a number which is well-known to some of you in this room, I'm sure (Duncan did a great run on it), a kind of etymological run, having to do with "prose" and "versus," and so forth. And getting it back to the plough, getting writing somehow to be ploughing, or the movement of

thought back and forth. It's all there somewhere. So, prose was fine even if it lacked verse, in this man's argument. And he proved it, so to speak, through etymology, through an appeal to the roots of those words. Then he said, but fiction was out. We don't want fiction. Well, you go to the dictionary and you find there are perfectly honorific meanings for the word fiction. If you want to dig back it's "something made." And there're wonderful plays going between forging, forgery...

Perelman: "Fict" and "fact" come from the same root.

[Unidentified]: Was "experimental"...

Bromige: "Experimental" wasn't to be a good thing. He didn't want any "experimental" writing, but, after all, just what he wants is experimental writing. But he means, "I don't want anything that they publish in that newspaper *Fiction*."

In other words, we know what he means, because we're alive in the same time that he's in, and we know what those words mean. But when you get back to etymology, it's okay if you can get a good run going on it, as Duncan does in places, but gee, it doesn't prove anything.

Sherril Jaffe: It's a good way to learn about insects. [laughter]

William Graves: Surely etymology is slightly different from what we call personal intention by an author. With intention, either it's accomplished, in the poem, and we have it to consult, in the poem, or it's failed, it isn't there, and we don't have it.

Bromige: That's right. You can't save it by appealing to "what I meant was." If you drop the ball, it doesn't really matter why you dropped it. You can talk to the coach forever about it.

Watten: The perfect type of that is etymology in Duncan and permission, granting himself permission from some outside source. That's the question I was going to ask you. Do you want to talk about what permission you grant yourself, or where you get it? Is that part of intention?

Bromige: Why don't you talk about it. [laughter]

Watten: You get it somehow.

Bromige: Is it at the beginning of Creeley's *Presences* that he says, "For some months it had been as though he had had a caul over his mouth"? And he described some sort of waxy tissue over his mouth.

Perelman: So what do you use, when that happens?

Bromige: But this comes at a time when I can't imagine what the permission would be.

Watten: Duncan takes this passive stance, parallel to Spicer's idea of something coming from outside. And you're not, obviously.

Bromige: But Duncan's very clear that he would be responsible for everything that he recognizes. He says it isn't choice, it's recognition. It's not a dilemma. That's not what Duncan's experiencing, writing. He sees that it's here to be written about. He speaks of it quite clearly. He feels a certain body-tone, which tells him he's ready to write. And the readiness to write, if we're to believe him, and why shouldn't we, occurs consonant with the thing to write about.

Bill Blais came from outside. Kant, too.

Perelman: I wanted to interrupt you very early, when you talked about "reason darkening," right at the beginning.

Bromige: "Logical process."

Perelman: Right. And I wanted to say that sounded too easy and and too automatic. All you have to do is go back into the Celtic Twilight. But I don't think you buy that.

Bromige: I said it's the whole process, it's the logical process, and the miasma it gives rise to that poetry cares for.

Silliman: Has that whole sense of beginning to write, or the content of the writing changed for you? In my mind, you've been 3 different poets in the last 20 years. Does the whole question of writing and your individual relationship to it change?

Bromige: Yeah, somewhere Spicer says that it's very hard to be a lyric poet at 40, because by then you've got so much furniture in your head that you've got to shift it around every time you want to get out of the room. Now, we have a lot of poets who've proved that's not the case. I mean Olson only started writing poetry when he was 40 and had enough furniture that he felt... It was his permission to get there. But, well, each time, you think of a poet, then you think of what else you know about them qualifying any general remark you can make using them as the instance of it. Because Spicer had an intention to remain unconscious, I think that's very clear. He drank a lot, and I don't think that's irrelevant. He wanted to be in an hallucinated condition, and why not. Because before that, ahead of that, what he wanted to do was to write. That seems to be the only thing that anyone in this room has in common with everyone else in this room. That we've written, that we've enjoyed it, sometimes. Though I know there are some here who find writing excruciatingly painful, but still, that's how they get their kicks.

Perelman: Let's go to the Ramrod and have a drink.

Bromige: There's an awful lot of hypocrisy attached to poetics. Because they argue for the general sort of benevolence and goodwill of the

occupation of being a poet, and they don't acknowledge the primary fact, which is that you want to be writing.

Geoff Young: How does intention differ from desire?

Bromige: Wouldn't the desire be first and then you have to look around for the intention? Rod McKuen is what his intention is. That's the object of his intention.

Oh I know. There was a story I wanted to tell. I'd given a reading at Riverside. I went home and the next day the mailman came up the drive and he got out and he had a telegram. And the telegram told me that my father had died. I hadn't even known he was sick. He was an old man, he was 78. He had had an operation the year before, but I'd heard that it turned out okay. He was gaining weight and so on. Well, I'd had a letter from him a couple of weeks before and I hadn't opened it, because in his last years my father was in the habit of writing letters that began, "I cannot tell you with what grief I take pen to paper to address you, my prodigal and ingrate son, whom I shall never write to again." And then, you know, I'd find out I'd caused him an incredible amount of offense through no intention of my own. I just didn't know what it was. So, I also got into a habit, which was to not open his letters until I had a whole day in which, like if it brought me down I could deal with it, I didn't have to do anything else. Well, I'd been writing these pieces, I had to read in Berkeley, I had to go to Riverside, so I wasn't opening the letter. Well, now he was dead. So I opened the letter and it said he was going into hospital. Then I realized that he must have started dying when I started writing the pieces. Then I saw that this voice was my father's. Somewhat, he was tempering it, he was the mask. He was an anecdotalist, and here you had these series of anecdotes running on and, hopefully, carrying a lot of other material with them. Once I saw that, they stopped. Once I had seen the intention of that, I couldn't get beyond it. I put it to myself other ways. I said, "Well, we all know that you can't stay with what you can do. You've always got to move on. We know that's true." I don't see why. I mean, I can't understand the obligation to do that, any more than the obligation not to do that.

But it stopped me. I've written further pieces, but they get to have another tone.

Perelman: You're saying those pieces are in the voice of your father, but they're obviously not. He never would have written anything remotely like them. He would probably write much more like Kipling. And your pieces are so intensely ironic that what they're doing is effectively destroying that voice.

Bromige: Well, I told that story as a kind of red herring, but I see now that my intention was to avoid looking at it. But still, what I was going to conclude from looking at the red-herringness of it, is that it's like thinking about what you do as being a time capsule. That way of reading Flaubert to find out about the alienation of the bourgeoisie in France at that time. Instead of for the pure fun. "They showed her the chapel, and then the long corridor that led to the refectory." Which doesn't seem to me to depend on being bourgeois or alienated at all, but to have a very live ear for people's greed and dissembling.

ESP and telepathy I'm quite sure occur, and how can we predict them? In what sense is it useful knowledge? It's always hindsight, it's always happened. "Oh that's it! I was thinking of you the other night, just before I phoned you long distance."

But it's there. You can think of that as an intention for your work: I will tell the story of my time. But what Flaubert is doing is speaking to those around him very well of what they know, and that makes it good material to go into a time capsule. But otherwise you could think of time capsule writing as being anything at all. Put it in a time capsule and you'll know what banality and lack of direction was in our time. I mean, we won't but they will. We already know.

Once your intention to make poetry public enters the world of publishing, then you see the books they make of what you do. We could think about that, some of us. For instance, Bill wanted a picture. And I wanted, of course I wanted my picture in there, but I didn't want my picture in there. I didn't want it in there unless it would also do something. There were these two pictures, one over-exposed in which I looked about 45, and one underexposed in which I looked about 25. So I cut out one and pasted it on the back of the other. The 45 year old was on the 25 year old's back. Because I had remembered at the end of Book 2 of the Aeneid, it says something in Latin which I like to translate as "Dad on my back, I headed for the hills." Then I learned how to do early Latin script and I measured it and did it and it was all part of the thing. So, to put the cheapest interpretation on it, I had served my own egotism by getting not one but two pictures in there. I had actually had the happiness of finding something and making a work to go along with the work. And I was very pleased. Well, when I got the magazine, the picture was there but the Latin tag had been left out. So I wrote to Blais and asked why, and he said it wasn't his fault, his compositor had presented him with a fait accompli. So the whole poem of that was lost. Unless anyone notices right at the back, after the 6 poems

and the 6 pieces, 26 pp. away from the picture, there's photo credits and it says, "Jim Garrahan, Anchises; Andy Ross, Aeneas." At least it's less obvious.

* * *

Silliman: In those prose pieces you read tonight, each sentence is looking at the sentence before. It's got that "Why am I after that sentence?"

Bromige: Yes, you say something and then you're immediately caught in the consequences of having said it. You go, say, sideways, rather than forward.

Jerry Rosen: In "They Are Eyes," a lot of what that poem was saying was that we know things by contrasting them with their opposites. One way of seeing what you've been doing tonight is to contrast it with an opposite way of handling it: If you spent an afternoon at Yale, and you walk over to hear a talk of "Poetry and Intention," you know what that would be like.

Bromige: It would be like being drunk, and then you'd be hungover later. You'd say: "But that was splendid, and look at my life!"

Watten: But then how is it that someone who starts from such a model of the pre-rational as does Spicer always works within such a predictable and sequential logical statement? There's the type of this whole problem. I think that anyone who abandons intention at any point in the ideology of writing is really copping.

Bromige: Spicer was just begging to be interpreted. Saying: I don't want anything to do with New Criticism, and yet he writes a poetry that just wants to be riddled out at every turn, it's like a come-on. I read Spicer not because of how much he can catch in his net of reference; it's the cut he makes through that net of reference. He raises a lot of things... Try to think of your favorite line of Spicer's and see what's going on. It's the way the line cuts through that's effective. That's what we need a description of.

Perelman: Michael, I wanted to ask you: Are there examples of writers whose intentions are perfectly clear who you can still read? When you really dope out the intention does the writing cease to be interesting to you?

Palmer: It's hard for me to conceive of a compositional process in which intent was always present.

Perelman: As opposed to, in hindsight, having had an intent?

Palmer: I think intent is always present, clearly, in everyone's work

on one level or another. But I mean in the ongoing process of making the work, it's difficult for me to conceive of an intentionality at all those points.

Perelman: How about when Creeley says: Okay, I'm going to write a 5 page piece of prose. Isn't that a totally clear and obvious intent?

Palmer: Sure, simple formal procedure. I'm going to make the poem square or round.

Perelman: But how do you differentiate that from conscious intent at the moment of writing?

Palmer: That's the setting of a proposition about the shape it's going to take. And I think with Bob they're fairly literal propositions. It's like a bowl he's putting it in. And it does shape it. That would be a very different thing from Creeley working at a much deeper level of intentionality. It's prior to the work. And it is a proposition. That's easier for me.

Watten: Let's try to get to this really fine edge of intention. I think we should be coming back to that. Why are people where they are, and in acting . . .

Bromige: Well, you can have a theory that you articulate responsibly, and have your fun with it. And then you have your writing, that it makes possible. But not everything you write because of that theory will be interesting writing. It'll be too thin a demonstration of the correctness of the theory. Perhaps what enters in there, is that you're too sure of your correctness rather than being absolutely suffused with being right. Or consider how it is, when you're describing a shape that you can see but you can't see. It's coming out of the shadows, when you're drawing something and you say: Oh I made that line, and the next line emerges out of what I'll call the shadows. And then theory emerges and you see that that was the figure you wanted. But you didn't know you wanted it when you started, you just knew you wanted something to be there.

Perelman: What about works where you've written a last line, and you don't see any figure. Say until someone else sees it and makes you see it. You were just saying that by the time you're getting near the end of a work you see a figure. How about the many instances when the figure is not clear until well beyond the end?

Bromige: We're talking about two entirely different experiences. One is reading someone else's writing . . .

Perelman: Do you always see a figure before the end? That's what I'm asking. Do you?

Bromige: Yeah, I think so.

Perelman: Well, aren't you interested in seeing the figures that you don't recognize before the end? There're those too.

Bromige: Yeah, but just here where you started to say that, you didn't know, but somewhere in the middle of saying it you saw what you were going to say and finished it. No more securely than that and no less securely than that is what I mean.

Perelman: So, like a complete sentence in whatever form.

Here's a piece of paper with Rauschenberg's intentionality written out. Read this. This is great. Yeah, it's a question from the audience.

Bromige: "I have various tricks on myself to actually reach that point of solitude and solitary creativity. One of them is pretending that I have an idea. But that trick doesn't survive very long because I really don't trust ideas, especially good ones. Rather, I put my trust in the materials that confront me because they put me in touch with the unknown. It's then that I begin to work. When I don't have the comfort of sureness and certainty. Sometimes Jack Daniels helps too. Another good trick is fatigue. I like to start working when it's almost too late, when nothing else matters, when my sense of efficiency is exhausted. It's then that I find myself in another state, quite outside myself. And when that happens there is such joy. It's an incredible high and things just start flowing, and you have no idea of the source. If there's a break in that I usually think of some way to leave the room and fix myself a drink, then I go back and hit it again from another direction, as though I were someone else and hadn't been there."

Anna Hartmann: That sounds like a contemporary account of inspiration.

[Unidentified]: It's so romantic.

Watten: I think that's totally cliche-ridden, and I would like go beyond it. The position is of somebody giving that account of their work and saying that's it, that's as far as you're going to go, and *you're* not going to go any farther.

Young: Why couldn't that be enough for Rauschenberg? God, I mean, you're trying to lay Barry on Rauschenberg.

Watten: Rauschenberg is Nixon to me. We don't need that any more. It's wrong: this limit that's being proposed for what we can do. Rauschenberg is saying: Oh, you can have *ideas* for your work, but those are no good; you can get a little *high*, but nothing's certain . . .

Young: But he's talking about the materials talking to him.

Watten: That's just what I was saying about this question of permission coming from outside. It seems like Rauschenberg is creating this huge

figure of a self that's being "acted on" by these materials. The self is the term that is not dealt with in that statement. He's assuming himself so strongly that no one can contradict it as art.

Perelman: And that all materials are just *material*?

Watten: No, it's the disposition towards those materials which he defines as the process of art. Which is himself, whatever he's involved in.

Graves: You're slipping back and forth between *his* creation of a work of art, and *your* perception of it, and there's a difference. And if he looks upon his creation of a work of art in a limited way I don't see why that has to limit your ability to perceive that work of art.

Watten: I'm not talking about dealing with Rauschenberg fairly...

Graves: But as an exemplum, right? Why does one limit the other?

Watten: I'm talking about the statement. The statement is terribly limiting.

Graves: Limiting to him?

Watten: Limiting to me. It's the 50's; it's back in time. And we can do something else.

Drucker: But does the permission come from outside yourself, I think, is the question.

Watten: No, it has to do with this idea of the self that Rauschenberg is not dealing with. And why should it be Rauschenberg, I mean, who's interested in him, and why is he on the cover of *Time* magazine? I'm not attacking anyone but him.

Silliman: He didn't make that decision to be on the cover.

Watten: Oh bullshit. That's ridiculous.

Rosen: Well, what's wrong with being on *Time* magazine?

Watten: Oh, plenty.

Rosen: What does that have to do with his work?

Watten: You're part of their organization if you're on their cover.

Rosen: Well, suppose they take a candid photo? Suppose they sneak up and take a photo?

Watten: Oh no, it was a big deal to have Rauschenberg on the cover, and Rauschenberg is Art, and Art is the 50's, and we're really going to hang our hat on that...

Rosen: Well, but it was wonderful to go to a museum and see a bed on the wall.

Watten: Yes, it's wonderful stuff, it's great stuff, it's what we have, it's a political deal, it's what we get.

Bromige: Well, I remember that once when I was drinking Jack Daniels the chair I was sitting on was on the wall—

Watten: Actually, we're all on the ceiling—

Bromige: And as soon as I realized it, I fell over.

June 2, 1977

Russian Formalism & The Present

Barrett Watten: I want to make a distinction between two different ways of looking at writing, any writing. One is from the point of view of technique. In editing *This*, the criterion of interest has in general been that a given work comes to an identity with a particular technique. So, how it comes into being is the same as what it does. And I want to oppose to this what the Formalists called the "subjective aesthetic approach," which sees writing as taking its basic values from the categories of psychology or biography. An example of this subjective aesthetic approach to current American poetry would be the recent discussion of Charles Olson as a "big man," in other words a biographical myth reduced to physical size. To quote one of the Formalists, Eichenbaum: "We had to oppose the subjective aesthetic principles espoused by the Symbolists with an objective consideration of the facts." The facts being the writing itself. That is in a few words the type of the modern attitude, and what it points toward is something that will last, that will be a permanent part of the world one is going to inhabit.

I also want to make a claim for technique as the most dynamic way of talking about writing. The recent talk on Olson was a good example of the static approach. From the point of of view of technique, one could talk about Olson for days; there is an incredible formal range in his work. But the discussion of Olson's "bigness" is not so much even biography as a tautology of the nature of literary fact: one keeps on saying "this is Literature" and then it becomes "Literature." So Olson compares with Emerson and Thoreau, but does Zukofsky really compare with Henry James, or Clark Coolidge with Whitman? This is the point of view of working an author into the canon; it is not the point of view of a writer in the middle of his work. The Formalists took a constructive approach to the nature of literary fact; this they called *literaturnost*, and they had a linguistic model for that fact. Nothing was excluded from consideration; for example Byron's biography was discussed as a literary device. Arguing

the poet into the academy assumes a static, tautological biography, leading to "bigness" or "Frank." I want a discussion of writing that leads to a clarification of what can be done.

There has been a tremendous sophistication of technique among certain writers I'm going to deal with in this talk. So that technique itself has assumed many of the constructive qualities that the Formalists saw as *literaturnost*. But there is almost a block at this point: a number of writers have thrown themselves into technique with such incredible force that getting beyond, expanding the range of that technique becomes a problem. In some cases technique has been proposed as a static value towards the production of one kind of text. The Formalists' position was formed against the background of many different kinds of writing. And it assumed a social context for this position that now seems intrinsic to their method. Starting from the point of view of technique did not limit discussion to technique but led to a way of seeing what was active in writing.

The Formalists were literary critics; they functioned as a school between 1915 and 1930, when they were suppressed. The movement was based around two poles. The first to get started was the Moscow Linguistic Circle. The main figures there were Roman Jakobson and Osip Brik; discussion began from the linguistic point of view. There was interest in dialect and folklore, and poetic language was brought up as a problem, an object for study in linguistics. The Moscow Circle was influenced immediately by Saussure. The other group was OPOYAZ, an acronym for the Society for the Study of Poetic Language, and was based in St. Petersburg. The main figures there were Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, and Lev Jakubinsky, coming together from the point of view of literary theory. They were taking on the problem of meaning in poetry as raised by the activities of the Futurists and the Symbolists. So about 1916 several things were happening: there was modernist literary criticism getting started, "the scientific study of literary fact"; there was the interest in relating literary fact to linguistics; and there were the poets—Mayakovsky went to meetings of the Moscow Circle.

There were two main 19th-century influences on this school. The philologist Alexander Potebnya made a distinction between poetic language and practical language, arguing that poetic language has its own laws and should be studied as such. He also evolved a theory of poetic language which was important to the Symbolists. The basis of this theory was that poetry by means of metaphor condenses the forms of the world into images. So that poetry is basically thinking in images. One gets to the

world through the image; the trope is referential and has metaphysical implications. The other great influence was the folklorist Alexander Veselovsky, who collected vast quantities of literary materials and organized a kind of inductive poetics from them. For example he would try to see what plot was doing in numbers of folktales coming out of a certain area. So he was an anti-individualist, seeing literary forms apart from biography, apart from individual writers.

Then there was the influence of Saussure. Saussure saw language as relational, relative to itself. All the parts of a language bear on each other: "In language there are only differences." So the distinction between *langue* and *parole*: *langue* is the capacity to understand what is heard; *parole* is language as spoken. It's literally "I talk, you listen": language goes from one person to another. There's speech, and then there's hearing. How speech is understood is different than how it is made. Or message and code: the message comes over the wire, interpreted by the code. Saussure spoke of the verbal sign as relative, uniting not the thing and the name but concept and image. Saussure also criticized prior linguistics, which were evolutionary and which tried to derive linguistic laws from changes in language in time. So he separates the synchronic model of language at one point in time from the diachronic model of the succession from point to point. This model of succession of moments in language was transferred by the Formalists to the literary plane.

The third influence on the Formalists was the poetic background. Up until 1915 the dominant poetic group in Russia was the Symbolists: Andrey Bely, Alexander Blok, Valery Bryusov, Konstantin Balmont. The basis of Symbolist technique was a belief in correspondence: "that no event is not penetrated, in intersection or collision with, an eternal event." The poem then stands between the outer world and the subject (the world of forms). The problem then for the poet is to generate new symbols, to keep his symbolic function alive. A good American parallel to that would be Spicer's theory of dictation, in which the poem is dictated by a voice coming from outside, from the moon. The metaphor of the radio is the search for new symbols. Also for the Symbolists the implicative character of illusion was more important than the specificity of words. So that one would want a rich symbol: Creeley's "The temper is fragile/as apparently it wants to be,/wind on the ocean, trees/moving in wind and rain." is indistinct word to word, but has a tremendous connotative character.

The Symbolists saw the organization of sound in a poem as being a reflection of corresponding semantic planes. The sound of a poem rhymes

with the structure of the world. Rhyme is a sound parallel between two semantic planes, implying a correspondence between those planes. Thus rhyme tends towards a unity. Creeley rhymes *walk* and *talk*. Both of these words signify activities which the organism carries out. "I want to walk with you, I want to talk with you." The fact of correspondence on different planes tends towards the poets themselves. Thus the poet's production of new symbols evokes magic, breaking ground in the otherworldly. There are a number of religious ideas connected with this; Creeley prays to Hermes, "god of crossed sticks." Of course the Formalists simplified the issues of Symbolism as I am doing here. They made them crude; when a continuity breaks, the issues become simple and one starts from that point.

Coexisting with and very much in reaction to the Symbolists in 1915 were the Futurists. One of their manifestos was called "Declaration of the Word as Such," which argued for the existence of poetic language in its own right. Poetic language begins with sound in the self-evident word; it does not end in correspondence with the outside world. New meaning comes from new sound; in this they were close to Dada and to the Italian Futurists. To get this sound exclusively outside, their cult of self-presentation rose to mythological heights. Another characteristic of the Futurists was the fragmentary nature of their poetic work; their books were often collective, handwritten in editions of 30 copies in which not all pages were in every book. Khlebnikov's *Worldbackwards* was hand-crayoned; there were definite elements of primitivism and of non-individualist, Asiatic influences. This tradition carried on: Burliuk would do books which were one sheet of paper, systematically numbered. And the Futurists were involved in a collective poetic process, "swapping egos," wearing uniforms and in general coming close to the status of a cult.

I want to focus on sound in the poetry of Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov. The following are two poems by Mayakovsky in which sound at the level of the phoneme is used as a structuring device in the poem. Hopefully the pattern is perceptible without knowing the Russian, though the Formalists never isolated sound from semantic possibility.

SHUMIKI, SHUMI I SHUMUSHCHI

Po ekham gorada pronocyat shumi
na shepotye podoshi i na gromakh kolyos,
a lyudi i loshadi—eto tol'ko grumi,
slyedyashche linii ubyegayushchikh kos . . .

The sound element is foregrounded. *Shum* and *sh* carry through the poem: they might be described as self-evident; they make themselves heard.

IZ ULITZI V' ULITZU

U-
litza.
Litza
u
dogov
godov
rez-
che.
Che-
rez...

Mayakovsky's early poetry might be described as asymmetrical, fragmentary, and metonymic: parts are proposed as things in themselves; for a street scene he gives you a lamp. Mayakovsky invented numbers of new words, neologisms, and constructed quasi-kinships between words and sound levels which worked not as parallels but as steps. Parts of speech are often left out; his poetry is highly condensed, pointing towards its use as oratory. It was capable of being heard at a distance, its image sticking out as irregular, active. The word *I* in Mayakovsky's poetry comes across first as sound, structuring a mode of address. This bears on the issue of the ''Ich-dichter,'' the ''I-writer,'' in Formalist theory. From this it was a short step to ''literary biography as a device.''

Khlebnikov was in a way the polar opposite of Mayakovsky. Where Mayakovsky was interested in design, Khlebnikov left many works unfinished, inventing and discarding new forms, scribbling all over sheets of paper. He used words in Russian poetry as they had never been used before, foregrounding archaic roots, dialect, neologisms, and word combinations which gave forth unusual ''light of the image.'' He was not a primitive: his background was in Asiatic languages and non-Euclidean geometry; he was interested in boundless generation, the ''proliferation of new forms.'' One of his inventions was *zaum*, ''transrational language,'' a poetic language operating on the phonemic level, ascribing meaning below the level of the word. David Melnick's *Pcoet* is an American version of *zaum*.

O rasmyetes smekhachi
O zasmyetes smekhachi
Shto smeyutsya smekhami

This is from Khlebnikov's famous ''Invocation by Laughter,'' which plays on *shmekh*, root of the verb *shmekhat'*, to laugh. In the poem a number of endings are added to *shmekh*, creating new words. So you have laughers, laughists, laughites, laughity... The next poem presents what the Formalists called a verbal image, *bobeobee*, in which the shape of transrational language creates new meaning through sound:

Bobeobi pyelis gubi
Veeomi pyelis vzori
Pieeo pyelis brovi
Lieeei pyelsya oblik
Gzi-gzi-gzeo pyelas tsyep...

Which translates:

Bobeobee sang the mouth
Veeomee sang the orbs
Peeio sang the brows
Lieeeey sang the aspect
Gzee-gzee-gzeo sang the chain

''Thus on a canvas of would-be connections/In another dimension there lived a Face.''

From there we arrive at the main tenets of Formalism. First, poetic language is separated completely from practical language by virtue of the self-sufficiency of the sign. This extends the poetics of Potebnya through the influence of Saussure. In poetic language the sign is detached, it does not necessarily correspond. The Futurist poetry I have quoted demonstrates several ways in which this was understood. In practical language the sign points towards the thing; the milkman asks how many bottles should be left on the porch. This leads to automatism, habit. Therefore it is necessary to focus on those qualities which make literature be what it is: *literaturnost*, the ''nature of literary fact.'' In poetry this is sound; in prose it is plot (''the unfolding of the verbal material''). The devices used to construct a work are identical to that which separates it from the practical world. Therefore poetic language functions in a particular way: it defamiliarizes, making strange what is habitually assumed. The Formalists separated poetic ''output'' from its effect: the art-fact, *parole*, is active in the psychological *langue*. Though the Formalists had no interest in the ''creative mind,'' there was a claim for the psychology of effect. From Shklovsky's *Mayakovsky and his Circle*:

> A phenomenon, perceived many times, and no longer perceptible, or rather, the method of such dimmed perception, is what I called "recognition" as opposed to "seeing." The aim of imagery, the aim of creating new art is to return the object from "recognition" to "seeing." In terms of contemporary physiology, we deal with inhibition and stimulation. A signal given many times produces drowsiness and inhibition. That the views I expressed at the time coincided with Pavlov's work was pointed out to me....
>
> In analyzing poetic language for its phonemic and lexical structure, for its syntax and semantics, as well as for its characteristic distribution of words and in the characteristic thought structures compounded from its words, we will always encounter the same property of the artistic: that it is created expressly to liberate perception from automatism and that the aim of the artist is the "seeing"; it is "artfully" created in such a way as to hold perception and to bring it to its highest possible intensity and longest duration, while the object is perceived not in its spatial aspect but, so to speak, in its continuity. "Poetic language" meets just these requirements.

So, an end to sleepwalking through technique. There is an identity then between technique and effect; for the Formalists everything in the work exists in order that it be perceived.

Starting from the analysis of poetic sound. Jakobson: "The function of poetry is to point out that the sign is not identical with its referent. In poetry sounds enter the clear field of consciousness; in prose they are automatized." In "Hedge Crickets Sing" Robert Grenier talks about the phoneme thus:

> —think of *Keats* as really 'milking' words of all possible letter/phonemic qualities without really challenging notion of English word/morpheme as basic unit of 'meaning'—hence 'best effects' all-stress monosyllabic+–"No, no, go not to Leth(e)"—"Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?"—because mind in work really does want to think phonemically, one sounds so 'dense & rich,' tongued... 'meaning' identical to physical fact of *a* sound (everything noted/nought denoted) in series of discrete particles strung together (by Keats e.g.) with gaps—

Grenier is interested in the phoneme as something in itself; Shklovsky said much the same thing in his discussion of *zaum*. *Zaum* is used by Osip Brik in his discussion of semantics: when the rhythmic requirements of a language outstrip what it is possible to say, poetry enters into the area of "transrational" poetics. So Brik saw *zaum* as more than a device used by the Futurists; it is a basic response to unassimilated content. So the demand, the insistence, pushes emphasis into areas where sound takes on

an independent value. Possibly a given poet's language is excessively rhetorical or overloaded with connotation to the point of blur; Brik would say that poet is tending toward *zaum*. Dylan Thomas would be an example of such a tremendous buildup of sound, "almost taking off with blood."

This was a convincing argument against the previous poetic theory, in which poetry acted to condense exterior forms. Poetry exists without image or metaphor in *zaum*; images and metaphor are devices, not the fundamental fact; meaning stems from the self-evident word. Shklovsky writes in *The Theory of Prose*:

> Someone walked down a sidestreet either fifteen or thirty years. Each day he read a sign "Big Selection of Sig" (a kind of salmon), and each day he thought: "Who needs a big selection of sig?" Finally, somehow the sign was taken down and put on the wall sideways. Then he read: "Big Selection of Cigars." The poet takes all signs down from their places... In the hands of the poets, things revolt, throwing off their old names and taking with the new name—a new face... Baudelaire says that the carrion raised its legs like a woman for shameful caresses. In this way, the poet makes a semantic shift... The new word sits on the thing like a new dress. The sign has been taken down. This is one of the ways of turning a thing into something perceived.

From there the Formalists went into the mechanics of sound. "Sound repetition is the underlying character of devices" according to Brik. An example would be the step-wise repetition of *shum* in Mayakovsky's poem. For the Formalists emphasis is made at the expense of other elements in the integrity of the sound. Pound's "prosody is the articulation of the total sound of the poem" goes back to previous musical forms. Mayakovsky's *I* dominates other elements, becoming perceptible as sound; we need this relation between subordinating and subordinate, otherwise we have automatism. So rhythm is seen operating through the dominant semantic units—the phoneme, sentence, word, line, phrase. For example the semantic gap from word to word (the "word boundary") in a line of verse alters patterns of stress. "I live in a *black hole*/the end of the *rainbow*." Here syntax alters rhythm; conversely rhythm modifies or deforms sense. The repetition of *shum* or *I* diminishes other elements in the semantic field; where continuity of statement is disrupted, say by cut-up technique, secondary factors are enhanced ("the light of the image"). Coloration would be strengthened by suppression of a device such as *I* in billowing clouds of affective description. "The time of verse is the time of expectation." "But terror and oppression are necessary": perceptibility comes from the suppression of one element by another in the sound.

This leads directly to the Formalist analysis of rhyme. "Juxtaposition on the basis of partial similarities of two otherwise dissimilar notions is the principle of poetic creation . . . ," but there is non-identity and "more meaning" in rhyme. Since the sign is autonomous in poetic sound, to add a phonetic parallel to semantic planes increases the number of ways that language can be heard. In "milk fits the fitness game," the sound "fit" repeats in "fitness," but "fitness" is something other than "goodness of fit." This brings the slogan off the packaging and into the brain; so "rhyme is an organized violence which proliferates meanings." As in advertizing and elsewhere, the Formalists' model for perceptibility is now a condition of life.

From poetic sound the Formalists went on to the analysis of prose. Plot is verbal orchestration, the manner in which the story is told: how expectation is set up; how digressions, parallels, retardations work; how devices such as repeating motifs or withheld information are used. One of the early Formalist studies of prose compared Gogol's "The Overcoat" with the traditional oral form called the *skaz*. Gogol's story is a parody of that kind of tall tale; so prose was described in relation to how a story might be said out loud. This led to a distinction between the plot, "the unfolding of the verbal material," and the materials of the story. The materials exist in a kind of warehouse of stories in the culture at large. A remark by Shklovsky was that "images come from God." There are no new materials, only new techniques. Another Formalist study of prose was Shklovsky's analysis of *Tristram Shandy*. "*Tristram Shandy* is the most typical novel in world literature." The reason for this is that it defines itself entirely in terms of plot; it's entirely verbal orchestration. Sterne leads up to the moment of his birth for 200 pages, introducing an incredible number of digressions, stopping in the middle of the narrative to comment on what he's doing (what Shklovsky calls "laying bare the device"). There comes to be no difference between the "unfolding of the verbal material," or plot, and the narrator's "laying bare the device." So *Tristram Shandy* became Shklovsky's model for the orchestration of prose.

These are the basics of the Formalist program; they were all articulated before 1921. The test of the method was that writing could be explained exclusively from the point of view of inner form. Biographical, psychological, social, and historical information are all exterior until they are shown to have a direct bearing on the use of a device. But immediately their method was extended to literary history. Starting with the Futurists,

they saw that breaks from the past were expressed by a semantic shift, leading to a new technique; a new technique is the demand of new content. Though the Formalists initially refused to deal with social forms, in the course of time they integrated Marxism into their method. An example of this would be the discussion of the relation of the marketplace to literary forms; Dickens was described as writing for serial presentation. But social factors were always seen from the point of view of inner form, though the social value of inner form was hopefully to be extended. In the mid-twenties the Formalists saw that the emphasis on technique could be translated into construction; for example one issue of *Lef* looked at social construction from the point of view of Lenin's language "as such." The idea of literary fact evolved into a proposal for a literature *of* fact, in which the newspaper would be the new Bible. About 1930 they were made to recant; Shklovsky wrote "A Monument to Scientific Error," renouncing any independence from social fact as perceived by the state. That is, socialist realism. The Formalists then stopped writing literary criticism; their studies were largely blocked. But Shklovsky had a particularly ironic stance; he was capable of making adjustments.

* * *

The split between poetic and practical language could be psychologized into a kind of detachment. So now I'm going to do what the Formalists wouldn't do, which is to describe certain things about the social environment which clarify the identity between poetic language and technique. I want to read a few quotes from Shklovsky's prose that show that the non-functional relation of art to individual psychology or social fact might have been equally an irony of direct perception. Shklovsky wrote a book called *Sentimental Journey*, taking the title from Sterne, about the revolution and civil war: travelling on trains, seeing villages burned, going to the front, and so forth. Shklovsky uses a number of defamiliarization techniques: he'll be talking about one incident and in an offhand way interject a digression on a philological study or on a bomb about to go off. He's shuffling together a tremendous amount of material, breaking the linear time frame, but under it all is the journey, the idea of constant travel. There's a tension between this idea of motion and the numerous events related out of serial order. The abrupt and frequent shifts of language levels break the narrative into a set of nearly autonomous segments. At the same time, these segments form an intricate system of motifs holding

together both the journey and the verbal account.

The entire book is an assault on narrative by event. Here's a description of trenches:

> When you stuck your head out of the trench what you saw was blades of grass; what you heard was the occasional leisurely whistle of bullets.

This has the quality of something frozen in time, utterly disconnected.

> Making the rounds I talked to soldiers. They sort of huddled together. Along the bottom of the trench a narrow little stream ran under the boards you walked on. We followed its course. As the terrain descended, the walls got damper, the soldiers gloomier. Finally the trench broke off. We got off in a swamp. Only a low wall made of bags of dirt and sod separated us from the enemy.

This is a kind of montage, a stepwise unfolding of information. In terms of verbal orchestration, the material is let out like helium from a balloon. Every statement is almost a device in its own right. This is close to Sterne; it is equally close to film. Event seen through technique here becomes a heroic form of sheer being. Here's a description of something he saw:

> Here I saw something unbelievable: a desert salt marsh, it was an enormous smooth inland sea, clearly dead. Long jetties on piles extended into the water. Several good size black barges were being loaded with something or other. But strangest of all, there were no houses along the shore, no people in sight. Only the desert, and deserted warehouses—goods lying about, rolls of barbed wire, several granaries, a dozen cars standing on the tracks. But the port was dead. This is the main port of Lake Urmia, a place supposedly with a tremendous future.

This parallels estrangement, *ostranenie*. In fact estrangement might be the only possibility here. It's almost like being on the moon. The perceiving subject is an irony in itself. And this irony is not only of perception but of any act:

> Through Vonsky, who had just arrived, I somehow got rifles and cartridges and sent the men into battle. Nearly the whole battalion was wiped out in one desperate charge. I understand them. It was suicide.

That's all he says about this incident. He's just consigned fifty people to their deaths, but he's the one who gets to write it up. That's close to the point of view of the book, and it is in fact a great theme of Russian modernism. Something nearly as bad happens to Shklovsky; a bomb goes off in his hands. This is treated as a literary device—perhaps the type of the unexpected digression. He takes a tremendous distance from this event, using it as a recurring motif rather than as an exemplary account. The state

of mind of the bomb having gone off exists before the account; it's very unlike "so it's all come to this," according to Lew Welch, in which the dread is a bomb one can't even see.

I want to put this next to our present situation. In 1973 there was the phenomenon of the gas line; here there was a non-functional relation between the experience perceived and the belief in doom. We all expect raw materials to run out, but we don't know exactly when. And when something actually does occur, the experience itself does not feel like the pre-existing dread. This characteristic of our experience did not obtain in Russia during the civil war. As opposed to the physical perception of the cataclysmic event, we have doom on the far side of the media undermining our brain. We don't believe our senses; the level of automatism we have to deal with is of an order the Formalists would not have believed. The necessity for technique seems absolute in the face of this fact.

The Russian revolution was a period of total reorganization, so that anything one did was a political act in itself. That's close to the design potential of the self-evident word. There is a near identity between Russian modernism as the most extreme and typical case of modernism and the invention of the Russian modernist state. Shklovsky talks this way about the social processing of art:

> In brief, I see the matter this way: change can and does take place in works of art for non-aesthetic reasons—for example, when one language influences another, or when a new "social demand" appears. Thus a new form appears in a work of art imperceptibly, without registering its presence aesthetically; only afterwards is that new form aesthetically evaluated, at which time it loses its original meaning, its pre-aesthetic significance.
>
> Simultaneously, the previously existing aesthetic construction ceases to be palpable; its joints become calcified, so to speak, and fuse into a single mass.

It is not, however, an accumulated response to social condition but art itself which argues in this way:

> We contend, it seems, that a work of literature can be analyzed and evaluated without departing from the literary set... Everything in it is subjected to the organization of the material. But the concept of literature changes all the time. Literature extends its boundaries, annexing non-aesthetic material. This material, and the changes which it undergoes through contact with material already aesthetically processed, must be taken into account.
>
> Literature stays alive by expanding into non-literature. But artistic form carries out its own unique rape of the Sabine women. The material

> ceases to recognize its former lord and master. Once processed by the law of art, it can be perceived apart from its place of origin... Art converts the particularity of things into perceptible form.

"But I know this—my craft is wiser than I am." What is all this technique telling us; more precisely, what is the point of view of technique?

* * *

I want to read the work of several writers whose work might be characterized as showing an identity with technique. The first example is from "Funnels In," by Bruce Andrews. One might assume his work is involved with the surface characteristics of language; so "an armada" has one referent and "whose pollen will not mate at all" has another. The connection is implied by the spatial relation on the page. But hearing it read it seems the surface disjunction is not how it works; so how does it work?

an armada
whose pollen will not mate at all
the animal grace it's everywhere
always a bridesmaid never a bride
float and fade
old awful
are fulfilled
mild-voiced immediately to one over the tube on hook of
the little nations
me own hook

The effect of this on a listener involves what the Formalists called "rhythm as a constructive device." The phrases are units; the poem goes unit... unit... unit. After awhile the structural balance of the phrase begins to be heard; it takes on meaning of its own. To begin with, one isn't particularly hearing the words because one is involved with their referential shifts; it takes work to get from one isolated plane to another at the speed of reading out loud. But what actually happens is that the rhythmic parallels turn into a meaning-structuring device. After ten minutes of this one starts to assume a rhythmic point of balance; the words take on weight in relation to that.

Bob Perelman: He seems to be, especially in this work, always going back and forth between very familiar language and very unfamiliar language. It's defamiliarization. So "always a bridesmaid never a bride." When he comes to that, it clicks in immediately: that's just a cliche, and he hears it in this easy intimacy, with no dissonance. But after awhile of hearing that in a disjunctive context, "always a bridesmaid never a bride" sounds just the same as "not as deviant enough." All of a sudden the non-syntactic or unusual phrases take on the same weight as the cliches. By playing back and forth between the familiar and the unfamiliar, he makes you familiar with the unfamiliar.

Watten: The semantic shift is one way to make things strange; Shklovsky is doing that in his prose. But I don't think it's working like that. One gets completely exhausted by all this semantic shift; you hear it as sound and wait for the meaning to catch up. The fact that the semantic shift is constant doesn't make for any new perception; it works out of a kind of automatism to begin with.

Lyn Hejinian: Because it overloads?

Watten: There's no way of keeping up with all that. It's the rhythmic insistence that finally catches up. So we have the experience of hearing that. If one wants to be *literal* about how this works—I don't want to appreciate it at a distance and say that because it's shifting semantic planes it's defamiliarizing me, no—the effect seems to be of a word machine that he's set up, like a wave generator or a conveyor belt.

This tactic seems to prove that any voice can do this. Anybody can start talking: eventually if we keep listening to him, we're going to hear the inner consistency of his sense. Andrews' work is paradigmatic in this way; it makes poetry read out loud into a problem for design. Then what are the specific language qualities being brought into the work? In Andrews we return to the semantic shifts, various bits which can open up and expose mental space. Here *parole* is structuring within *langue*; the inner space of language is altered by a mechanistic act.

Robert Grenier: Williams identified with the phrase in his variable foot. Although it seems more associational; you could have variance in the possible number of syllables included in roughly parallel time units, as one line follows another down the page. So what this seems to be doing in part is dissociating that form of the variable foot from specific statement to the extreme of sound that you hear for its own sake.

Watten: So in Williams there is an entire range of meaning in that line and in the variable foot. It doesn't stop with the phrase; the fact that

Andrews uses this disjunct content qualifies the sense of the metrics. Every phrase is going to be an integrity; the repetition finally makes us hear it that way.

I thought I'd go on to two of Clark Coolidge's works. The first is from *The Maintains*:

cold
inroad
insectarium etcetera
a coroner or guest of some other species
something something firmly
not a mean little sense for size
as edge or the inside curve or turns indoors
the angle beside or number as in ten
chemicals usual parts in a plural
to that which sits in pinpoint speech
flat
undone
brain of an agency
a thin part having absence
having only one lean as said of a roof
occurs
or lets

The line here sets up a point of equivalence. This work comes out of the dictionary; every line in this stanza might be heard as a different definition of one word. It's working from all the possible definitions of *the word*; a spade is a card, a shovel...

Tom Mandel: It's a lot like what Potebnya says. It is a condensation along which you can travel back to its source.

Watten: It's very fluid. It works in the opposite way from Andrews; it's additive rather than isolating, so it builds steam. There's a metonymic quality to the lines; they seem to refer to, they're *of* the big definition. So, *word is* cold; *word is* inroad; *word is* insectarium. I hear an "I state" or an "is" behind each line.

Grenier: There's also a correlation between and among the different parts. The separate lines are not heard as separate. "Present" would be a modification of "percent." So that there would be structures and correlations among the units. That's a significant point. He's formulating a congruence; it's not simply dissociative.

Watten: It doesn't involve mechanistic ideas; there's the musical analogy. These are materials, and they're being brought together in the

making of a work. There isn't the sense of tearing apart, exposing new areas in the head. The intention is not to disrupt semantics. In Andrews each phrase tends to stop; each one evaluates itself in a particular way. Whereas, this builds momentum.

Morgan Wines: In "the angle beside or number as in ten/chemicals usual parts in a plural," you don't know from the line break entirely if there's a modification or an elision going on. In fact, there's a little bit of both. It is actually relational that way.

Watten: Coolidge is actually making a new syntax out of rhythmic demands; what I have learned from this is that a language can be *made*. Maybe it's going towards sound in the way Brik described; maybe it's going towards *zaum*. There's too much signification, and the rhythmic insistence is too much. It's detaching and becoming transrational sound.

Mandel: And then the sound is subjected to musical composition. Not so much in this, but "Weathers" can sound like Haydn.

Wines: I'm saying also that he's creating relations as he goes which cannot be described by the kernels of ordinary syntax.

Watten: Here rhythm is a deforming agent, in Formalist terms.

This is the most recent prose of Coolidge's I've seen, from "Weathers," section XVII:

> Partly stone only to see beneath the red slips. The fishing particle, on and off, innards of glass. Sun parts hardly, seems to move. The jetty I'm on of tons, afternoons further planks, oil glow dome pending. The salamander owns munch breccia, clots the window in a skid-to piping, glance off sleeving collides. Of a wind and burn scratch reach, the maundering columns. Streaks to score, go on melting button the barks. Do too scooping handle greys form a point off the scarp fist, knuckle crimps eject of pint tone. Lurid imported word impacts, pans....

There's a tremendous sophistication in the interrelation between parts of speech and rhythm, a tremendous synthesis of the original propositions of *The Maintains*.

Perelman: There is this tension between parts of speech. There are sentences, and there are nouns and verbs, and ghosts of nouns and verbs. Nouns become verbs, like in this one sentence: "Lurid imported word impacts, pans." *Pans* there is a verb; then *word* coming from some other source implodes or impacts, but also pans across, and gives you a whole sense of association. But also, given this context, *pans* could just be *pots and pans*. There's no grammar that necessitates one or the other. So you get this vibration or blur all the time.

Stephen Rodefer: Sometimes that difference would be defined by the way Coolidge would read it. Because you could also say *The* maintains.

Watten: But the emphasis is relative, so it is going to be both. In the Formalist vocabulary, semantic ambiguity increases coloration. This interchangeability of the parts of speech would be an example of coloration being foregrounded because there is no dominant. It can go both ways.

David Bromige: But it does emphasize ambiguity, where a practical language would wish to deemphasize it. Here the foreground element is ambiguity.

Watten: The language is in a sense contextualized by itself. There is ambiguity in statement, setting up an incredible number of resonances between words. And it does tend towards the autonomy of sound; it does not tend towards form. Coolidge's poetic project involves a tremendous overload; this is part of a thousand page poem.

I'll read this paragraph from Ron Silliman's *Ketjak*.

> Revolving door. The garbage barge at the bridge. Earth science. Resemblance. Fountains of the financial district spout soft water in a hard wind. The bear flag in the plaza. How the heel rises and the ankle bends to carry the body from one stair to the next. A tenor sax is a toy. She was a unit in a bum space, she was a damaged child, sitting in her rocker by the window. I'm unable to find just the right straw hat....

Ketjak is a sequence of thirteen paragraphs; the number of sentences doubles from one paragraph to the next. Sentences from paragraph A repeat with the addition of new sentences to form paragraph B. So in terms of Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose*, the verbal material unfolds: each sentence is a device. Every sentence becomes a motif; this is close to Shklovsky's characterization of Sterne. *Ketjak* is a typical novel in the tradition of *Tristram Shandy*.

Bromige: You find out more about each sentence as you go along, in the way that you find out more about a character.

Grenier: Another thing that maintains *Ketjak* for me is the interest in so-called poetic language at the same time that language is operating in very simple practical ways. All these sentences give information as to the specific time and place of composition. Form and content don't have to be opposed usages. You can have structure that generates its own form at the same time assertions are made about something outside the sign.

Watten: There's almost a contradiction from one sentence to the next. Some of them we've heard before; some we haven't. Some of them are perceptible images; some are things people said. Some of them are

ideological and tend to describe what the work is doing; some are facts. In other words, it's not a list.

Perelman: Many of the sentences have a common moral passion which spans a continuum from personal noticing to ideological, political commentary. There's very little quotation of off the wall language just for the sake of shifting.

Watten: There's a tremendous human identification pattern in the work.

Steve Benson: Earlier you were saying that nowadays, we have a hard time predicting what it's going to be like. Or what we do expect we don't have ways to relate very effectively to that which actually happens. So it's hard to tell a reasonably successful status quo from a viable opportunity for a good change from a disaster area. In this work there's a certain dynamic or dialectic between knowing what to expect and not knowing what to expect. There's a really interesting recognition of the issue of monotony or boredom or flatness. Because there are surprises, and there are totally predictable things. How does this relate to the level of automatism being very high?

Watten: You're never quite sure what the scale of your activity is going to be. The continuity has to be internally produced. There's no way up, or around, or out; the scale could be very great or very little—one doesn't know. Are we in a dire situation, or do we have a relatively comfortable life? *Ketjak* seems to think its way out of this box. It shows a way of thinking unit to unit in one's experience, dealing both with "maybe this is all very big" and "maybe this is all very little." Either case takes its place in the work in an orderly fashion.

I want to go on to Bob Perelman's work. This is from "How To Improve":

> Suppose we examine a great deal of care. First, its definition: a state of being. Splendid. 1) Emitted or reflected. 2) Appearance used figuratively. 3) Conspicuous. The *splendor* of *rare* disregard. *Accuracy* applies the star. And a star shines with accuracy. We learn through meaning to *shine*. Splendid. A distinct gain.
>
> Turning, we are stuck. We notice our ears are trained. Soft harmonies of deeptoned, nevertheless quiet, repeated questions suited to the context enrage the attention. It is no good. Every thing uses any music to make the use of us sound so precise. Submerge valuable connotations. If they survive, they have their duties....

This seems to be an essay on how to make language into a language talking about itself. So this is an example of a kind of permanent "laying bare the

device.'' But if this is an argument about how language works in terms of how language works, there are plenty of problems: one loses track of the voice of the speaker in the high degree of semantic broken legs. In Shklovsky, ''a work is created artistically so that its perception is impeded, and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception.'' That ''impeded form'' occurs here; its difficulty draws out the point and spreads it over a wide area. The fact that the argument has a busted formality makes the splendor of the language available.

Silliman: What about the argument of the form? It would appear to have specific conditions for furthering itself that would be different from the usual poem, more like an ''essay.'' Yet at the same time it's internally constantly arguing all those affective terms that are poetry. Like ''Abandoning *splendor*, it can be seen. Figurative fundamental sense without implications of appearance.'' There's a lot of internal rhyme within a ''non-poetic'' genre.

Watten: There are parallels that are not quite insisted on and not quite followed through with.

[Unidentified]: It's a very funny work.

Watten: Yes.

This is from *Without Music,* by Michael Palmer:

The death of blue weight
or look I'm listening

Evening inside
or look I'm lifting

one thing with one hand
several things with three fingers

and look he's listening
let's say bone somewhat modified

bone in the process of reorganisation
according to a model

of the final monument
to the Third International

wood, about 15'' high
figures walking in place

figures carefully located
on a balcony over water

or of course over water
The sister is weeping

My sister with her parasol
The pens and red pencil

Reading aloud is for emphasis
Reading aloud is to practice

There's a deft use of parallels that aren't brought to complete parallelism. According to Brik, ''the purpose of parallelism, like the general purpose of imagery, is to transfer the usual perception of an object into a sphere of new perception, to make a unique semantic modification.'' The semantic shift on the level of phrase to phrase sets words adrift, gives them autonomy. The semantics parallel the phrasing, so you have ''or look I'm listening'' and ''or look I'm lifting.'' What does this do? The work seems to proceed in a plus one/minus one manner. Perhaps there are *exactly* two possibilities for sequence, in the sense that there is exactly a couplet: a line either follows logically the line preceding it, or the line violates what immediately preceded it and brings up something before that. There are two options; the poem has an integral step by step movement. There's a conflict between the kinds of parallelism; the word is set adrift, towards a musical or sound signification.

Perelman: In Michael's work there is always this agonized political position which is hidden way under the aestheticized surface. ''of the final monument/to the Third International//wood, about 15'' high.''

Watten: That's true, it's like a toy.

Perelman: But it's not a toy to him. He *says* it's a toy, but . . .

Watten: But it's not heroic obviously, to call the monument to the Third International 15'' high. He's taking an anti-heroic position. The scale problem we mentioned in talking about Silliman's work—we don't know how big things are, we don't know how little things are, so how to keep going—is an essential problem in Palmer's work. The variability of scale means that only the inner argument is possible. There's history and there's the position one's in; you can't get from one to the other. It's a real limit.

Grenier: Would you say that the poem is an expression of the problem of the position one's in or a recognition of the limits of the available structures?

Watten: To put the monument to the Third International after ''bone in the process of reorganisation'' tends to diminish faith in the idea of reorganization.

Erica Hunt: But it could be the fact of doubt. Right after that line "according to a model" there's a shift in tactics. It seems more strung out; all of a sudden the Third International comes in, then there are figures over water. Whereas acoustic phenomena are a focus in the first three stanzas, and "bone" is "in the process of reorganisation." There is reorganization of the first part from "according to a model" down, so there is a consonance between the formal properties and what it's actually doing. You seemed to indicate that you didn't think the writer thought reorganization possible. But there it is happening.

Watten: In "reading aloud is to practice" there is the figure of the poet reading to himself. "Reading aloud is for emphasis" might be Mayakovsky. There is frustration in the position taken towards the materials in the poem, for instance in this last couplet. I think that's a limit, but it's identical to the technique.

Bromige: You feel it caps it off too much, or too quickly. Whatever meaning's been generated in the poem.

Watten: No, *literally* "Reading aloud is for emphasis/Reading aloud is to practice": we might as well be talking to ourselves as saying anything. That implication can be taken directly from that couplet.

Bromige: Well, *praxis*, though.

Perelman: It has a double meaning. There's somebody who says you should be playing concertos, and the bad artist gets stuck on Czerny, scales. You can say practice means solipsistic, onanistic activity that doesn't go out, so that the second line shuts off the extroversion or the social consequences of the first. But, there's the other meaning of action and *praxis*, and then emphasis is the negative word. And emphasis in the first line implies rhetoric and big bluster, whereas the second line is a much truer, more conscious activity. I think that's what Palmer means there.

Watten: But still the ambiguity is right there on the page. So there is the question of scale, of big and little; the poem does split the problem into itself and everything else.

This is the introduction to one of the sections of *Third Factory*, by Shklovsky. I want to use it as an example of parallelism being thought of in terms of construction, including "the setting adrift of autonomous elements." It uses a number of parallels: shape, red elephant, natural history, history (a red elephant), childplay, and the possibility of saying something.

> "Red elephant, my son would be lost without you. I'm letting you into my book ahead of the others to keep them in their place."
>
> The red elephant is squeaking. All rubber toys are supposed to squeak; why else would the air come out? . . .
>
> My son is laughing.
>
> He started laughing the first time he saw a horse; he thought it was doing four legs and a long nose just for fun.
>
> We are cranked out in various shapes, but we speak in one voice when pressure is applied.
>
> "Red elephant, step aside. I want to see life seriously and to say something to it in a voice not filtered through a squeaker."

That kind of parallelism interests me in my own work. So I'll read an excerpt from "Plasma":

> They lost their sense of proportion. Nothing is the right size.
>
> He walks in the door and sits down.
>
> The road turns into a beautiful country drive. The voice isn't saying something, but turning into things.
>
> Irregular movements spread out the matter at hand.
>
> My work then is done.
>
> His earliest dreams were prerecorded. Pointing a finger at a child in the act of play.
>
> Light grows from the corners of the state map.
>
> The universe is shaped like a hat. I lose interest and fall off the bed.
>
> Tips of the fingers direct the uncontrollable surface.
>
> The dim-witted inhabitants fuse with the open areas. All rainbows end in the street. . . .

Grenier: To return to where you began, I'd like you to talk about your interest in method as an approach to writing. One might think that Formalism is simply the extention of the identification of linguistics as a science vis a vis its proper field of objects. That is, the specialization that evolved into a "rigorous" science in the latter half of the 19th century, and its insistence on its own restricted subject matter, the materials of language. And the extention of that science to the description of verbal facts in literature. So, one might think that this was merely a historically inevitable approach to a description of literary possibility. What do you think is the use to you as a writer in looking at words along these lines?

Watten: Modernism was heroic and had a tremendous faith in the future. And I identify that with the distance and objectification involved in that modernism. So that one has one's work before him; I want to look at work that way.

Grenier: What did you mean when you said that parallelism made it possible to go forward? What's the significance of that gesture as a writer?

Watten: Faith. And I mean this, too; this is something that is characteristic of the modern position: it's possible to make a world in which one would want to live. There are plenty of parallels between design, architecture, and painting that are very inspiring, and then there is the subjective aesthetic *bulge* in between that seems defeatist, unreliable, and disgusting.

Bromige: Who do you mean? Bukowski?

Watten: I mean my personal gripe against "the self" as the meaning of literature; I don't want to have to define it beyond that.

Bromige: I didn't quite hear you.

Watten: That "the self" as the meaning of literature as we have experienced it in American art since World War II has become a total drag and limit. There is a disjuncture occurring now in form because there is new content; there's something that hasn't been said, and that's what I want. It's not an absolute. You can talk about Olson or O'Hara in terms of technique and be very inspired by what they did; or you can talk about the belief in "the self." The automatism, the big dream that we live in, has something to do with the forms that we write in now. That dream is only further confused by "the self."

Grenier: When I was going to college as a freshman there was a text that was presented, a standard for that time, which was Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*...

Watten: You mean what's the difference between Formalism and New Criticism...?

Grenier: What's it for you? What's the difference between the identification of the values in a poem as literary criticism and your own sense of...

Watten: Total. There's a real confusion in American criticism as to how close the Formalists were to them. The Formalists saw language as relative to itself; the New Critics basically saw language as symbols for objects.

Mandel: And also for the moral order.

Watten: So the language model being used by the two schools is totally different. As a result of New Criticism you have James Dickey saying something like: poetry is less than the real world, because the word *tree* could never be a tree. The only similarity is that they saw literature as an object for study. But their models of language were vastly different. I'm speaking from the point of view of language as technique leading to

what can be done. The Formalists elaborated this distance in terms of a scientific discipline. I don't need to do that; it's already been done. But the difference between what they did and what we have to do is one way of establishing our position in cultural time.

Steve Abbott: I have a question about emotion in relation to this. I can see that the self in Shelley is "I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed." That's like gushing sentimentally over my own emotions. But what are some other ways emotion can be used?

Watten: Any way. Futurist poetry is very emotional—tending towards transrational—so it was a complicated problem. The Formalists talked about the difference between "emotional language" and poetic language. Emotional thematic material they would show as being handled by technique in a particular way. But they would never say it wasn't there.

Mandel: Isn't emotion in language like calories in food, it's there. When you cook you don't have to provide the calories.

Watten: Rhythm, rhythm. There's nothing proscriptive here; how do you make a poem?

March 18, 1979

Views of Communist China

Note: The following is my transcript, as complete and unrevised as I could make it, of my talk of May 19, 1977. The fourth in the series, it took place in Bob Perelman and Francie Shaw's loft apartment on a third floor in the South of Market district of San Francisco. I announced the title well before I had chosen what I was going to talk about or what materials I would use. My most valuable source for research in advance turned out to be a serialized version of Orville Schell's book *In the People's Republic* that appeared that Spring in *The New Yorker*; I am grateful for his permission to publish here material derived from it. On the day of the talk I moved as many of my own household furnishings and decorations into the loft as feasible and arranged them in the big front living space in positions analogous to their situation in four rooms and one hallway of my apartment about a mile away in the Mission district. Francie and Bob and I had dinner, I gave Bob the special instructions for his part, I went home and washed and changed into my suit, returned 15 minutes late, put on Bob's blue hooded sweatsuit and a pair of glasses I'd worn as a kid, and Bob started the tape.

— Steve Benson

* * *

[Sound of conversations overlapping]

Bob Perelman: It was growing dark, and the evening cool was settling in, several members of our group that had been working in the factory were, had walked out the gates toward the vast apartment complex for married workers, this was in the, in Minhang, which in '57 had been a village of only 3000 people, now it was an industrial hub of some sort, about 80,000 people. [Sound of conversations filtering down to silence] There were department stores and swimming pools, very up to date town, 4 secondary schools, 15 elementary schools, 2 hospitals, and our group walked down the uh lane between the, tree-lined lane between 5-story department houses to visit Master Ch'en, and his family. Master Ch'en

works in workshop number 11, and his wife works in the small general store that serves the factory. There were, there was uh really tons of small children running around to . . meet us, running and . . laughing and tripping over each other to keep up with us, and they always left a space around us and uh they never got very close. Um, Master Ch'en's building was uh creamcolored and it was around a courtyard, there were, in every window there were faces looking out at us and uh talking about us as we approached. There were hundreds of children in the courtyard, and uh we walked up the dimly lit staircase to the Ch'en apartment on the 5th floor, and every floor we, as we walked up each floor families came out and uh . . um . . applauded us on, and it was almost like some sort of obstacle race, and uh coming around up to the 5th floor we saw . . Master Ch'en and his children waiting on the landing. He he was a uh small thin man and he had a kind of a nervous habit of blinking, when he was uneasy, and uh he led us through a a windowless uh . . sort of sparsely furnished anteroom into a bedroom and there were two uh ready-made, uh two neatly, neatly-made double beds and the entire apartment was just that, just this anteroom and then the, and then the rooms with the beds in them. There was no wall separating the beds, there was just a curtain that could be drawn on a wire and uh under one bed, actually, sort of surprising, was a uh spittoon. So there were trunks stacked in a corner, and a uh wooden table occupied the center of the room, and the table was piled wth candy and gum and (sharp intake of breath) glasses of tea and carefully shined apples, and uh we just sat around on . . beds and the chair and, and on the floor, and we waited for Master Ch'en to speak.

[Pause, small outbreak of laughter among those behind BP, who has all this time been wandering through apartment holding tape recorder and speaking from notes and finally sitting down on a chair in the front part facing Steve Benson who has been sitting there on a little cot wearing BP's sweatshirt and his own childhood glasses, looking blankly before him, smiling shyly as people come towards front of apartment]

Steve Benson: We have lived here only one year. But I have worked at this factory for 24 years.

[short pause]

Perelman: Were you here when Chairman Mao visited in uh '61?

Benson: Chairman Mao? No, I missed him. I was in the city . . It was a weekend. But what does it matter. "Wherever the red sun of Chairman Mao shines, there it is light," and I can see Chairman Mao's presence.

Perelman: Master Ch'en, uh after he said this, just sat tensely on the

edge of his stool, it was as if he were a child finishing a recitation and awaiting a teacher's reaction. And we just, it was a moment of . . silence . . .

[30 seconds: sound of SB standing up, shuffling about to offer cigarettes from dish to adjacent guests, lighting one for himself, breathing in, car screech outside]

Perelman: His uh, young son came in at this point wearing uh some kind of crimson neckerchief and uh and sat behind him at the back of one of the beds watching and listening and then Master Ch'en began to talk of his life, as if, really as if he knew we expected it of him, sooner or later, and uh, everyone was rather relieved when he . . started, and he became a little more relaxed as he spoke. When he, when he was, when he told us of uh . . how his mother was lost in the, in the 30's when the Japanese invaded Shanghai, he was really . . momentarily overcome with emotion . . .

Benson: We couldn't find her after the invasion. She just disappeared. It was not until 1960 that, with the help of the party, we learned where she was, and we were reunited.

Perelman: As he said this his eyes were, uh, watering.

Benson: When I was 14, I began to work for a man in a hardware store in Shanghai. He let me sleep only 3 hours each night. It was then that my eyes began to go bad.

[points to glasses]

[speaking with many pauses, sometimes between each word, as if for emphasis or from difficulty]

My boss expected me to work like an animal. I knew that I could not survive such suffering for very long. Finally, I ran away and became a small-time peddlar. But it was not easy to sell my goods. People did not buy them. So, again, I was forced to move on. This time, I went to the country, and began to work for a man who kept cows. But I was not able to make a living working for this man either. There is an old Chinese saying—"All crows are black." Again I fled. By that time, I was 16. I went to join my father, who was then living in Chekiang Province. He was a tailor. We went from house to house making clothes, although we had almost none ourselves. Our income was meager, and we could hardly survive on it.

[pause, head lowered toward floor]

People my age or older have a deep memory of those days. We have a strong hatred of the old society.

For 3 years and 6 months after that, I worked in a knitting mill as an apprentice. Then the factory went bankrupt. It couldn't get enough raw

materials. So . . I was laid off . . and was again at loose ends . . . I couldn't find another job in a knitting mill. I couldn't find another job that I was trained to do . . . I ended up as a janitor, mopping and sweeping . . . Then came 1949 and liberation. We stood up at last. It was then that I came back to Shanghai to work at the old Electrical Machinery Factory, which was still in the city.

[looking up more, gathering more authority in voice]

As Chairman Mao has taught us, "we must work for our self-reliance through struggle." So after liberation, our situation improved tremendously. There is such a difference between the life of us workers before the liberation and now. Before liberation, we had only small shacks and huts. And now, look! We have apartments. We pay only 4 yuan a month in rent. I make 90 yuan a month, and my wife makes 70 yuan. We even save a little money each month.

In the evenings I come home directly after work, except on Mondays and Tuesdays. On those evenings, we have study groups. We're studying the dictatorship of the proletariat now. Other nights, I just come home and read, or listen to the radio.

Perelman: He pointed to a red plastic radio that had been playing quietly.

Benson: I made it myself.

[light laughter from group]

Perelman: His teenage daughter, who had just come in the room, at this point jumped up and turned up the volume, of the radio. There was a lot of crackling, short-wave noises, and we heard a western-style orchestra booming out some sort of Chinese folk tune.

Benson: Its tone is still not good—I must fix the bass . . . I'm working on it. Some of the other workers like to get together and talk about international affairs and politics, but I prefer coming home and just being here with my family. And I like to listen to music.

Perelman: In response to a noise in the courtyard, perhaps he was anticipating our departure, Master Ch'en leapt toward the window, which was open, and he listened to the voices outside.

Benson: You hear the noise outside? It's the children. They all know that foreign friends are up here. They are welcoming you. The children now are so lucky . . . They never knew the bitter past.

So, this is, like, my living room. [long pause, having taken off sweatshirt and glasses] And these, these 2 beds come from Orange County, and . . we've had them like in different arrangements in the room

in different times. Um, when we first moved in we had like this higher bed over here and then the lower bed was, it folds down and you can sort of tuck it under, and it would go down and you sort of push it underneath one end so you're sort of leaning against, lie down on it leaning against this bed, it's like an L shape. And then, there was the time we had that reading for, is this an ashtray?, for The Winter's Tale, when, uh, we moved them around so that one bed was over here like that, and one bed was over here like that, and then later we had like, another thing we had like, it's ama—, they always seem to move like when we have *events*, when there's some sort of performance or something, another time there was like a party we had to look at home movies, so then we put them both in the alcove that's formed by these 3 windows here so that one was like that, and one was like that, because then you can, you know, look through these open doors into the study and can see the movies projected on the wall in a big screen. So it's very comfortable, we could all sit down and some people could sit on the floor. And, so that was like a few months ago, and then, we just decided to switch it around more recently, and uh, or *I* decided I guess, I, John doesn't, uh, I wind up pushing things around a lot when I get impulsive, and so I put, like this so it really fits right into the alcove of the windows here and it's really nice in the spring and the uh at late afternoon the sun's just coming right in here and it's a good place to read and, just lie down and relax. And push this one up. The rug, uh, I'm just going to hit things like as I think of them, right. I'm not necessarily going to organize this uh too much because, if I'm going to show you the house I just have to show you one thing at a time. This rug we got for free. We got it when we bought, um, let's see, the chair that Susan is sitting on, and the desk, that G.P. Skratz is leaning on, and, uh, a few other things, the kitchen table, which we paid good money for but the rug they just threw in for free because it was, you know it's so flea-bitten I mean you can see here it's just falling apart. S—, and they wanted to get rid of it, they were moving to uh Oregon I guess. The guy who sold us these things was . . sort of an organizer, like uh, he moved from city to city and he would just organize people, like consumer groups or political groups, to get things done, that they felt like they needed to do. And uh, so he had like a new job that he'd arranged up there. It really fascinated me like . . that he would, he would just go from city to city whenever he needed, whenever he felt like there was something that would be worth doing, in that place, he would move around. And the rug, like the main problem with it, is that, uh, it flakes a whole lot. I mean it's

n—, like a nice rug, and it fits in with the pale blue walls and with the blue of these, and so forth but uh, it even fits in with the clothes that I wear, I usua—, I mean I usually seem to wear like br— blues and browns and greys and stuff. I've been thinking about that lately, you know, wonder whether like, do I try to *mute* myself in some way by choosing the colors that I choose to wear. And . . anyway it, it flakes like, it, it's always like leaving all this crud all over the room and whenever you sweep it up it's like . . disgusting, it's like all this little stuff and you *can't* really sweep it up, I mean you sweep, you sweep the rug and you just wind up like blowing all this extra crud *up* which it otherwise would sit *in* the rug, you're just *creating* more dust when you do it. So I always try to sweep it over here, but first like I usually hang something over the records there, so it's not going to get into them, or into the phonograph, or into the books that are on top, like between the records and the phonograph, and then like sweep it back, here, sort of in to this area back here, and *try* to get up as much as I can. But you can probably see, I mean I haven't tried to clean up too much today in particular for this. And the, like the running boards here are like *covered* with this like little pale, blue, dust, cause it just, it just gets all over them, whenever, like any, any sweeping or walking around a lot . . Sweeping really creates it. So, like, I try to really put things up, in my house, for, like, I just, I put things up like whatever I'm interested in seeing, things that seem, I guess, I choose things that seem kind of problematic to me, what I'm curious about, what the effect of it will be. So, then I change them around and I, I move them, in different places, like this sheet of paper here, it didn't used to have any of that ink on it, and it was over in this corner, and, I got it at the bookstore. They put in all this packing paper, that you like, uh, can sort of pull out and usually you just throw it into the wastebasket but I began to think well there's all these enormous sheets of paper that you know you could draw on them you could do something with them. So, I took this sheet out, and uh, then I set a few of them aside I mean *all* that paper is from the bookstore and there's more over, uh, like by the desk, where all those envelopes are stacked, that you know like I can *use* sometime, I guess. And, and anyway like when I *unfolded* it I thought I'd just sort of make a space of paper on the wall, but when I unfolded it it sort of like the middle stayed bunched out, as I was tacking it up, and it, it was an amazing effect . . um, if any of you were here, while that was still up, before I moved it, it was like, this *butterfly*, sort of these *huge* open wings that were like, *up* there, and after a while, I I mean it was like *splendid* in some ways, it was like very remarkable, but it

got so that, especially if I was lying down here, I was aware of, this, I mean it was like it was trapped in the house you know. It was like, it was sort of, I realized when I took it down that it reminded me of the raven.. Nevermore.. So I kind of got scared and I took that down, and I wadded it all up differently and I put it up there next to those Chinese children's postcards, and uh, drew some lines on it, put some more papers up there.. which I sort of, every day or 2 they fall down and I have to like rack them up again and see what they'll look like. So there're these various collages and things. Um, I don't know if you saw it but there's some beer, I'm going to get a beer, there's beer on the kitchen table...

[sound of group moving through apartment, steps, voices]

Michael-Sean Lazarchuk: —well why can't you just *say* that?..

[poptops, steps, voices]

Benson: This uh, this statement up here was something that um, some of us made at Bob and Francie's house. We laid out this big sheet of paper on the floor, and Francie has a lot of stamps that you can use to like make up words, and put things down, and we decided that, we'd done a few different things with poems and we decided to try to do a story—[Sam Gallup asking if he can eat an orange or draw with felt pens from kitchen table space] Sure, sure go right ahead... We decided to like try to make something narrative, and so we, we put it out on the floor, and it was me and Carla and Bob and Francie and, um, Charlie Grop, Gropmen?, right, who was like somebody who I'd known in L.A. who was a printer and he was visiting, and we just decided to like, we would, different ones of us would like do different phrases and try to eventually get them to run all together, so that they would be like, a *story*. So, you can look at it, you know, now or later, it doesn't matter. But it seemed like having something way high up there over the door and over the stove was like *helpful* in the kitchen when people are visiting and they don't, you know, *know what to say* or something, or they're really *bored* or confused, they're new in the house maybe, so it gives them something to look at and it immediately like clues them in that uh you can say *anything* and it's all right.

Sam Gallup: You got any more of these.. [speaks too high and soft for tape]

Benson: So, anyway yeah really this is getting kind of out of order in terms of a tour. [poptop] The other decorations in the kitchen are mainly over, over the table, and um, like actually this is, this is our most official gallery, [more SG] is this section over the kitchen table. Let me turn the light on so you can see it better.. Um,.. I like half lights, partial light, and

uh [voices in background].. So we decided a long time ago that we would have a *gallery* space in this little place under the cabinets and over the table, and tr—, we sort of like made an arrangement, actually, that we would try to change it, was it like every week or, not more than a *day*??? Not more than a week?! Something like that. [laughing in group] 3 days.. We had some, it was, it was a controversy. [poptops] But actually, the present exhibit has, substantially been there for about a month and a, or 2.. Um..

G.P. Skratz: Are those bubblegum cards?

Benson: Those are King Kong bubblegum cards.

Skratz: Oh. Far-out.

Benson: Right. They're really wonderful.

Skratz: Can you still get them?

Benson: They're still available, I just saw a discarded wrapper on the street yesterday, so I know they're still being bought. And [more GPS], the wonderful thing about King Kong bubblegum cards is, that, um, on the other side of them, are fragments of, uh, the entire poster of King Kong, right? So like if you collect enough of them you can like *get* the whole thing.

Skratz: It's better to just have a piece of it.

Benson: Well, that's true—

Skratz: —than have it like that.

Gallup: Else you can turn it over and see what.... This is what this one's going to end up to be. Like that, see?

Benson: Right. They all, they *all* end up being King Kong because he's like the only really point of interest in the whole piece... And so, then the other things on that little ledge, I mean some of them are things that, that we use, I don't know why the aspirin stays there but I kind of like the look of it, and, you know, a few postcards..

Gallup: This part is one of the parts of that, this part is part of that.

Benson: Right, right, Exactly. But they're *all* part of that. And they're not part of anything else.... So a lot of people think that says, PARIS.. [laughing in group] And the fir—, in fact the first person who ever recognized that it said BARS.. was, uh, somebody who was over just the other day, and it's, and it, it struck me like as interesting that it was a gay man who would say that that was BARS, and and that nobody else had thought of that as BARS before.

Kit Robinson: No, I had, I had.

Benson: You had?

Anna Hartmann: I had, the first time I saw it.

Benson: But did you . . —

Perelman: I did too!

[laughing in group]

Benson: Okay, so maybe that's me, right? Yeah, I'm, it's some what do I hear, —

Perelman: I had also thought it might be BATHS.

Benson: What do I hear? BABS?

Perelman: BABS.

Benson: Or BATHS?

Erica Hunt: BATHS.

Skratz: BATHS, of course!

[Unidentified]: B-A-T-H . .

Benson: Without the T . .

Lazarchuk: Who wrote HORRORS?

[Unidentified]: CARS . .

[much overlapping of voices trying out options, at least twice as many as here printed]

Benson: Yeah, so well maybe it's not what people see but what I hear.

[several voices overlapping]

Wraps? Raps?

Perelman: Who drew that picture of you?

Benson: That's, um, by a woman named Martha Straley, who, um, is like a real friendly outgoing, effusive person that I know in L.A. She's married to a guy who uh, was at the school where I was teaching and where Carla was teaching before we came up here, and uh, . . She had *one* other picture that she'd drawn of her husband and I said, Gee that looks great if you ever want to take, do a picture of me, you can and so she just immediately did it. And uh, was it you who said, that it looks like Bruce Andrews?

Perelman: Exactly.

Benson: But I think it looks like me. So. We'll find out.

[long pause]

So, like that's a funny thing to have in the bedroom. There's really a minimum of mirrors around here, and uh, I don't know if that's intentional or if . . I think I'm really trying to get away from mirrors, I think I've been too obsessed with mirrors, in my life, . . So like, aside, aside from that one mirror and the cabinet mirror in the bathroom that's it in the house . . . Although the window that's like behind the mirror sometimes serves as one when it's dark, and you sort of see a lot of reflections through that. It's

kind of, it's it, it's like a weird thing, I've never put a curtain over that window that leads out into the back hallway from the bedroom, and I, so like I don't know if that's because, like I have, like these, exhibitionistic impulses, or if it's just, I don't, like, the idea of privacy, or that I like to look out and not have to make a decision about whether I'll be able to see out or not.

Perelman: Maybe it's related to the absence of mirrors, you know: if *you* don't see yourself at least *somebody* will.

[laughter from group]

Benson: Right. Yeah, I think there's something to that . . .

[long pause, some voices]

Carla Harryman: —can't get out.

Benson: The closet is, like, very narrow, and I don't know, I don't know if anybody knows why a closet in this kind of a building, this building's like built in 1900, it was through an earthquake. It used to have, like, a chimney, and the fireplace, in the study, you could uh build a fire there and stuff but in 1906 the whole chimney caved in, so the fireplace was filled in. And so that's why the desk is right in front of the fireplace, otherwise of course I would leave that clear and we'd probably use it sometimes. But I don't understand why, . . Maybe back then they just used "armoires"? But in this neighborhood, that seems odd. Well I don't know . .

[poptops]

Perelman: They used what?

Benson: Armoires, right? Like, a big cupboard that would keep—

[Unidentified]: Wardrobe. Wardrobe.

Perelman: Oh.

Benson: Like a wardrobe. In English? Yeah. But it's really, like all the clothes sort of stick out of the closet, and I wind up using the hook on the door entirely for pants and I don't . . I don't know I mean part of like, I've always just had this fantasy of like guiding people around my house, you know, and, I don't know if, I mean that must have something to do with not putting a curtain over the window too, but . .

Skratz: [laughter]

Benson: [voice slurring with beer and enthusiasm] I've always had this fantasy of like, look at everything, you know, see everything that's here, and uh, so like when people come to visit, you know, if they s—, if they seem interested in poking around and sort of looking at my private papers I nearly always encourage them, say, Oh yeah, you know, just

brush through that, and see what you find, and just, open all the drawers. So, . . what was I leading up to?

Hartmann: The price of tea in China.

Skratz: [laughter]

Benson: I don't know.

Francie Shaw: Why a narrow closet?

Perelman: Guiding people around your house.

Benson: Oh, *I* know! It was that I don't, I think that part, another, like, part of the reason why I want to do this, is because, I don't really know myself *why I arrange my life* the way that I do, and so I sort of feel like if I'm explaining it to people, then maybe I'll see some validation for it or, like, the patten with which I live. Like, maybe something about it would make more sense to me. So, I think that has something to do with it.

[a throat clearing in group]

And like, is my house a neat house or a messy house?

[laughter in group]

I don't know, I don't know. I was walking around this morning and I thought, this place is really sleazy, but then other times, right now I mean it looks like it's sort of very neat and everything's sort of in its place. You don't think so?

Melissa Riley: No, I mean, cause there's nothing *there*.

Benson: Well, the walls . . you mean, like . .

[laugher in group]

They're kind of bare, I know.

Perelman: Why did you take down that sort of vertical triptych of pictures that was in the, living room, where you had uh, —

Benson: Right.

Perelman: —the horse in the middle, and then the—

Benson: Right. Well, I just—

Perelman: —Pollock on top—

Benson: I get restless, —

Perelman: —Turner on the bottom?

Benson: Yeah. I mean I still have those pictures up but I get restless and I feel like I need to, I need like a different input. Cause it's sort of like I arrange these things as though they're like for my, as though I'm to study them, and then there's *also* this sort of motivation of, well, people will—

Perelman: What's going on?

Benson: —see, you know, something? People will come in and they'll see like this is more, . . This is more surprising or interesting than

just looking at a T—, a Constable picture. That picture, like, it, now it's, it's over there by John's desk, it turns out, um, I bought it partly because I thought well that's *really* a *surprising* use of color, and then I found out through looking in a *book* that I have in the other room, in the front room, of Constable pictures, after I'd had that picture for like . . 5 or 6 months I looked it up? I don't know if *you* were there? Somebody was with me at the time, and uh, the color was just completely wrong, [laugher in group] and it wasn't intentional at all, and then I really appreciated what a bad picture it was.

Skratz: [laughter]

Benson: But, uh, . . yeah, I used to have like the Pollock, with, which one, I think it was the Pollock at the top and then the Delacroix horse and then the Constable landscape, and it seemed as though there was some kind of progression or something there, to sort of run them together. It seems, I mean it's sort of like this interes—, *why* am I interested in *series* of things? I don't know if that's a heartfelt interest or just like wanting to systematize myself . . or see things in perspective, see like well there's, there're contradictions, there, sort of like, accept that. Not fight it, not say, well there's just this one thing . . . It's also like not wanting to say, well this is just simply completely gorgeous or beautiful or warm or I just love this, but sort of to al—, like I always want to make it a *problem* for myself, it seems. So uh, maybe I got to like that too much, and so I felt like, well, enough of that.

Barrett Watten: Steve, how come you have such, sucha, such a small amount of stuff on the walls of your bedroom.

Benson: Well, I think, I don't know, . . I mean I have a feeling maybe that's part of the same, like it seems like you put something on your bedroom, that really means . . affection, to me. It really means caring, to me.

David Highsmith: The mirror might symbolize that.

[laughter in group]

Benson: Give me a hard time! So, before, I had almost nothing on the wall except uh, that the picture by Lisa that's the copy of a Matisse that I then I put in the hallway, and I had like a Joe Goode poster, which was like a black and white rendition of a print that he'd done, and I had that, I had nothing but those, and then the, those flowers . . Does anybody know what kind of flowers those are? Azaleas? . . that I got from my greatuncle.

Hunt: They look like primroses or something.

Benson: Primroses?

Perelman: Primroses!

[muttering in group]

Shaw: What?

Benson: O-oh.

Shaw: No. They're not—

[muttering in group]

—different leaves. They have a center.

Perelman: Actually, I, I'd like to ask you about that mirror. [poptop] Because it seems so . . For being a face mirror, it's so huge. I've seen face mirrors before but that is in area 3 times—

Harryman: [laughing] It's the only mirror in the house.

Perelman: 3 times bigger than—

Benson: Right.

Perelman: *Do* you *use* it? Do you look in it a lot, or do you—

Benson: Yeah.

Perelman: Yeah.

Benson: I mean I look in it, I mean it's not good for anything except to straighten my clothes and, you know, or see, or if I want my hair to be combed or something, to see if that's happened. So I just like, I lean it, I tilt it in a certain way so that I can stand like about—

Perelman: You get the whole—

Benson: —about this far back and then I can see from about here to here, or something, so it is, like, a long-range mirror, but it, I really have always wanted to have a mirror with like this concave side, you know, and, and then—

Perelman: So you can see way up on your face, you know, really close up.

Benson: Yeah. It's sort of like a zoom lens or something.

Lazarchuk: Wouldn't you really rather see Wayne Newton, you know?

Benson: Wayne Newton? I don't know, I've never seen him.

Lazarchuk: Look in the mirror.

[laughter in group, pause]

Benson: But, but that's that mirror that was in the movie that I showed at 3rd Floor Bookstore, when I said, uh, there's something in here that nobody can recognize, but, it's actually my body. And, it was like this scene, it was like all this *golden light* and it was like very, like, something was flashing around and you saw *something* that looked like *physical*,

which was my shoulder, or my armpit, or something like that . . . . I don't remember what you asked.

Perelman: I just, about the mirror, if you looked at it every morning . .

Benson: Yeah I look at it, in it, through it.

Harryman: Do you always keep the posters you put up on the walls, current? You know, announcements for events?

Benson: Oh yeah! Yeah I usually, I keep them, uh, . . well, some of them I keep on the bulletin board there, and some I keep like on the door, on like the kitchen door, right here. We're leaving it open right now so you don't see them, but uh, cause they're like behind the door, like we try . . I guess what it amounts to is I don't like seeing *all*, I like keep so many of them, you know all these movie posters and s—

Harryman: Do you have a lot of them?

Benson: No I throw them away as soon as they're obsolete. I don't want to have them around. Do you save yours?

Harryman: Well I usually just forget to take them down for about 3 or 4 months and then I— [laughing]

Benson: Yeah, well having the door closed so much of the time, or rather open, I mean, like it's open so it's up against the wall so we usually don't even *see* those things unless we close the door so we can look, cause it's always more convenient to have this door to the back hallway *open*, so, sometimes they do stay up, just because, we haven't really been paying any attention, we've been looking in the pink section or something. So every once in a while I pull them down and try— I just put the tacks back in, without the announcements, cause . . . then I figure there'll be more announcements, they'll be coming in, soon.

Watten: Do you have a lot of stuff in your medicine cabinet?

Benson: No. Real little. Do you want to know what I have in it?

Watten: [laughing] No.

Perelman: What scent, what scent is that body oil?

Benson: The body oil is, uh, natural, it doesn't say. It's natural because that's the cheapest.

Perelman: No scent . . .

Benson: No, well it does, actually it has a rather—

Perelman: Oily.

Benson: —strong scent.

Harryman: Can I smell it?

Benson: Yeah. Please.

Highsmith: Natural for what animal?

[laughter in group]

Benson: I don't know, like whatever animal, uh, sweated it out in the first place, I guess.

Gallup: It's peanut oil, . . *pea*nut oil!

Skratz: [laughter]

Gallup: Smells like *pea*nut oil!

Perelman: It's Wesson Oil.

[laughter in group]

Gallup: It *is* peanut oil.

Hartmann: Does it smell like anything?

Highsmith: I think Sam's right.

[laughter in group]

Benson: Well gee whiz, why'd I go all the way to Berkeley to get that?

[laughter in group]

Gallup: It's just peanut oil.

Skratz: [laughter]

[pause]

Watten: Do you put things around to see if people will notice them?

Benson: Oh yeah, —

Highsmith: Do they?

Benson: —absolutely. Um, *some*times. I mean, s—, a few people come in and they sort of like . . if we spend all our time in the kitchen then they sort of say now wait a minute before they leave and they walk around through the other rooms to see if anything has changed.

Hartmann: Do you ever spend whole days and rearrange everything?

Benson: It doesn't take that long.

Skratz: [laughter]

Benson: Um, but sometimes I, I'll spend a while—

Hartmann: Do you try to do it all at once?

[pause]

Benson: No.

Highsmith: How long would it take to do everything?

Benson: Um . . To *do* everything?

[Unidentified]: Everything?

Highsmith: At once.

Benson: Oh, . .

Perelman: Wouldn't it depend on the thoroughness with which you—

Benson: Yeah.

Perelman: —you know, placed, carried—

Benson: How far away am I going to move things, or am I just going to throw everything away and get new stuff?

Watten: Are you going to put it all back in the same place when you take it home?

Skratz: [laughter]

Benson: I really don't know.

Skratz: [laughter]

Benson: It's like, it's a decision which I haven't conceived of very clearly.

Skratz: Why don't we see? Why don't we move everything around and then put everything back?

Benson: Oh, do you *want* to? It *is* an idea.

Skratz: We'd have to take a vote, probably. If everybody wants to.

Dorothy Phillips: Steve when you dust your shelves do you take everything off them and then dust them and put everything back?

Benson: No I usually dust, I push things towards the back and then dust around them, and then I'll maybe I'll push them forward and dust—

Harryman: Do you ever really dust?

[laughter in group]

Benson: Yeah! I do, I do, in fact that was one thing that I *did* do *today*.

[Unidentified]: Do you vacuum?

Benson: I don't vacuum, I don't vacuum, but I did do a little dusting, on a few things.

Highsmith: Do you have times when there isn't any dust?

Gallup: Don't look like it to me!

Benson: Times when there is no dust . . I haven't noticed. I usually don't notice that there's dust or not dust.

Perelman: What about the little, uh, tiny little, uh—

Gallup: Do you want an orange? . . Want some raisins?

Perelman: —the tiny messages on the strips of paper, I saw, I couldn't read one very well but it seemed to say WHAT DO I EXPECT FROM EXPERIENCE? The one up in the front room there . .

Benson: This is like, um, . .

Perelman: It's new, isn't it?

Benson: That—yeah. Yeah, I mean *you're* seeing those.

[pause]

Perelman: Well, they are, here, aren't they?

[laughter in group]

Benson: Sure . . sure . . I mean, you're a guest.

Harryman: [laughter]

Benson: Yeah.

Lewis MacAdams: How come you want people to notice the stuff in your house?

Benson: Um . . . I don't know I mean I think it has like, it's some odd feeling that I have like that *I* don't . . appreciate it enough by myself. That's what I think it has to do with.

MacAdams: It's like assuring.

Benson: Yeah it's like assuring me that like it's good stuff. Or that it's a good way to look at stuff, or something. And it's, yeah it's like validation, or something. And like, *enjoyment* I mean I feel like if somebody came in and they really . . were interested [SG singing a little tune], I mean it's, it's some, it's like a performance thing, is what it is I guess.

Watten: Do you ever feel angry because people don't get it?

[laughter in group]

Highsmith: Does that make it invalid?

Benson: [in undertone] I don't know.

Perelman: How about somebody you've really wanted to impress and they come in and they just don't notice.

Lazarchuk: They're really *not*.

Perelman: Yeah, they're just, you know . . What has that done to you?

Benson: Um . .

Perelman: Does that lower them in your estimation?

Benson: Yeah. I mean that's sort of like the same question as Barry's.

Perelman: Right, right.

Benson: I feel like, I've really tried to turn off my feelings about that, and like ignore whether . . like I, I'd pretend to myself that I don't really *care*, whether they're interested or not in what's there, and then I pretend that, like, I wasn't expecting anything about that, at all, and I don't, and *then* I don't really know whether I was or not. [poptops] I don't really know whether—I mean it's not as though it's a big . . plan, necessarily, that um, people are going to get a certain *hit* off . . having these things up, you know . . so I don't really have an expectation that they're going to uh, love it, or hate it, I mean like if they really . . think something's repulsive,

then, . . well, then, they would never show that, so that's . .

Perelman: Have you ever put anything that you thought was repulsive up?

[pause]

Benson: Well in some ways I thought that butterfly was kind of repulsive . .

Shaw: [laughter]

Watten: Do you think the stuff on your walls is an allegory?

Benson: Well, . . define allegory.

Watten: It's a, it's a story which typifies your experience more generally than someone else's.

Perelman: And it's in code too.

Watten: Yeah it's in code, just a code story, right? You know, so that the things on your walls make up a story which add up to some kind of moral, some way of pointing to something that's going on, that you wouldn't see otherwise.

Benson: Yeah.

Watten: Well what is that?

Gallup: Can I use these?

Benson: Yeah, go ahead . . . Um . .

Watten: I mean if you were to say it wasn't an allegory then you could say well it's just what I look at.

Benson: But it's true, I mean I put things up thinking that they have some sort of significance or that I want them to have like a meaning. That's really a part of it . .

Watten: Yeah.

Benson: So it's, and it's like, it's, yeah, it's sort of like, you know, the story of me, or something . . so it is, uh exhibition . .

Highsmith: Do, do objects fail you in not taking on significance?

Benson: No.

Watten: [loud whisper] Yeah!

Benson: Well, I mean, to me, they seem to take on significance, but it's us—, they fail me in like, like in getting—

Highsmith: They fail to assume the role?

Benson: Well I don't have their role mapped out for them, that well. Do you mean they fail in other people's eyes to assume their role?

Highsmith: You leave, you leave something to them, you leave something to the object—

Benson: Yes—

Highsmith: —some sort of will to, will to power to the object, so some significance in the object does not assume it, does not become significant.. people don't see the significance and the object fails..

Benson: Oh, you mean for other people, in terms of whether they see the significance of it. I mean that's a problem, like for me, it winds up being a problem when like for me there's a lot of significance there and other people don't see it and the significance kind of gets very worn out, because I see it a lot, and maybe other people don't see it very much. That's true, so that's like a kind of a failure.

Perelman: But I never get the sense that the objects that you pick, that you never *lean* on them very heavily and you often pick rather eccentric objects where part of the meaning is, like, oh *that's* weird, not that this is very important and we have to get it, but it's like, sort of way off there, and in you sort of getting over to there, that's.. where the interest lies. Is that, do you think that's right?

Benson: Well, I'm not sure, can you give any examples?

Highsmith: Transportations..

Perelman: Like *that painting*, or, uh..

Watten: You name it.

Perelman: Or.. let's see, or the *flowers*, or things where, where it's clearly not..

Watten: They all seem—

Perelman: ..totally articulate, they're all like—not they're all, but a lot of them, you seem to have some, some penchant for, things that are half-articulate and then half, really, bound by cultural limitations that are obvious to the viewer but not to the object. You know, things that..

[laughter in group]

You know what I mean? You know what I mean?

Watten: They haven't quite arrived.

Perelman: Yeah.

Watten: They haven't arrived yet. It's not there yet. So when do they arrive?

Perelman: It's very instructive though, it's instructive, I mean that's—

Watten: That state, of being not there—

Skratz: Of, of, of being—

[laughter in group]

Watten: That's it.

Skratz: Well *almost* not there— Well like, those, those flowers are

great in that, in that sense, the way, the way, the way you described it, you know, like of being, uh, limited by these, this strange cultural *trip*, but but being very beautiful within that sense..

Lazarchuk: —dwelling on the importance of that, you know, miniscule little *whatever* it is, it becomes a very big thing, in all of our lives, just for hanging there.

Skratz: Right, right, it does, you know, well anything does—

Highsmith: —in the window as well as hanging [laughter]

Skratz: —you know, to put *that* there, instead of one of your photographs, say, you know, which is, you know, which would be a lot more sophisticated, I mean, I think, I think that's uh.. I mean that in itself is an artistic gesture and then, and it's, and it's, it's not just you know, like *arriving* somewhere, you know, obviously that painting is going to be where it is, you know, I mean, you know, it's not *going* anywhere, it's static. [laughter] You know..

Watten: It's sort of out of context. It should be in some other living room—

Perelman: What do you mean some *other* living room?

Skratz: Yeah, yeah, right, it should be in some living room in *Kansas*—

Hartmann: It's in the bedroom.

Watten: It should be at *Steve's*.

Skratz: But here it is here in an artist's studio.. [laughter] You know which I think, you know makes you *see* it on this whole other level.

Highsmith: Making sacrifices for the sake of art, being more inarticulate than one would normally be.

Skratz: Well, well, what you say is that inarticulateness itself becomes, you know..

Perelman: So, it's object as suffering Christ, right?

Skratz: Yeah, right [laughter]... I'm not sure I made that clear.

Perelman: It's a what, Lewis, what did you say?

Harryman: Pilgrimage. Is that what you said?

Benson: Do I think of my life as a pilgrimage.

Lazarchuk: Put in context with the rest of the house it works wonderfully.

MacAdams: Cause this all seems like a very shrine-like, uh to make a museum, discussing your objects, like it makes it seem like a shrine, that you're kind of dead or abstracted into some kind of artistic sainthood or something.. but what does that, like here we are in this shrine.. or this

event which is a shrine . .

Riley: I don't think it's any more than anybody else's really.

MacAdams: Except that we're here, for, you know—

Riley: I know but I still don't, I don't see it that way at all.

Perelman: Well it is more th—

Shaw: I don't either, I see it as more—

Highsmith: How many have travelled to get here?

[laughter in group]

Perelman: But but, yeah . .

Benson: Well, I mean it does, I do ha—, there's something like a pilgrimage quality that I can identify in that like I often get into a feeling like that I'm not there yet, and that I'm like mo—, I'm moving and making movements to try to get . . to . . you know, . . get to, some sort of a, a place where I'll be there.

Carol Gallup: Yeah but then what would happen when you get there?

Benson: Well, I don't know, but obviously it would be like less . . calculated, than it is now . .

[laughter in group]

Shaw: You hope.

[laughter in group]

Benson: Yeah, right, yeah, I hope.

Highsmith: Yeah, yeah, the act of having gotten here . .

Benson: Yeah.

MacAdams: What about the theory that you *are* here.

Carol Gallup: I mean you have to stay or go someplace else.

Benson: Yeah. I d— . . . I ju—, I would really, I mean it's like, uh, I would really like to . . . that's, I mean that's how I am now like trying to be, to get there, is to like have—to get to embracing the theory that I am there, yes. And, uh, so for me that is a problem, that . . I . . am concerned with all the time . .

Perelman: If it's a theory that you embrace it *is* a problem. If it's a *theory* that you embrace.

Benson: Yeah. Right. I mean it . . cause I don't, uh . . yeah . .

Skratz: So you should embrace the theory that you're *here*, and so the reality would be that . . you're *there*. [laughter] Right?

Benson: Yeah. Well, I mean, in effect I seem to like—

Skratz: In theory.

Benson: —sort of tr—, I seem to like to try to ho—, embrace like a whole lot of theories at once, it seems to me, or like . . I feel, I *feel* like I

equivocate, a lot, between them. And uh, and so like a lot of what *is here* is like . . you know, sort of saying well this is here and this is here and, that—but they do, they seem to represent "theres," they seem to, like, indicate other places . . and um . . like to feel *home*, I mean that has, that has like a big thing to do with it too like, to feel like, I'm home, that I'm in my place, and uh . . that I don't . . I don't quite feel like that and so what can I do to make it my place? As though maybe if I . . just put, things, there, that, I . . *loved*, would that be more like *home*. Instead of things that I, that seem to me like question marks, or you know, like, all sort of problematical.

Perelman: Well, well, do you love these things or are they problematical? I mean I don't mean to put words in your mouth in that prior question, I mean are these things that you love or are they just things of—

Sydney Murray: Couldn't they be both?

Perelman: —pref—, you said, you said before they were like *problems*, you *did* say that didn't you? They're not necessarily things you *love* . . .

Benson: Most of them *aren't*, I mean, uh . . like the Matisse I love, I would say. That, I feel very good about, and say like, the Lisa Nunez drawing, I feel that way about, but, in— yeah, okay. And uh . . and I don't love that just because it's problematical. And, . . but that seems like a very hard thing for me to find, and uh . . . I mean I bought like, I went to the university and they had all these prints on sale so I bought 3 prints that were like my favorite prints that were there, and, so, but really I don't love any of them, I think, I mean like the Constable . . is sort of like very odd and has bad color and the Pollock I wound up finally putting on its *side*, and—

Perelman: Why? Just . .

Benson: I've got, well, for a long time I—

Perelman: To knock a chip off its shoulder or something?

[laughter in group]

Benson: I had seen it regular for so long, and it was always just like an object, it was never like an all-over painting or it was never really an experience, it was too small, and it was too much, sort of, *over* there against the wall, kind of . . so . .

Phillips: —a piece of paper?

Benson: Yeah.

Phillips: How do you put a piece of paper on its side. I just, can't—

Benson: Oh, I meant like, well . . it's a horizontal composition, right? [laughter in group] So I put it up as a vertical composition.

Perelman: —sticking up from the wall . . like a shelf, you mean.

Shaw: That's a great idea.

Perelman: Well go—, and so, what about the other one? The, uh, Delac—

Benson: The Delacroix . . that, I mean, that was always just like a problem. It was like, here's this really frenzied white horse, and I sort of respected it or admired it but more just as an idea.

Watten: Do you have an overall strategy that's more uh, solid and compelling than any strategy having to do with any particular object?

Highsmith: That's like asking him what he does for a living.

[laughter in group]

Two voices: What *do* you do for a living?

Benson: I don't make a living.

Skratz: Sounds like you need a job.

Benson: Yeah, I do, I do. I mean I have a job but it doesn't make me a living. So I'm look—, I have to look for another job.

Skratz: Yeah, I'm in the same boat.

Watten: Do you feel like you equivocate in terms of other people but not in terms of your own knowledge of what you're doing? And, and how do the objects stand in relation to that?

Benson: Um . . . Well I feel like . . I equivocate to myself more than to other people. That's what I *feel* like.

Watten: But that you're telling me that see I mean maybe uh . . [laughter]

Benson: Yeah, I am, so, yeah . .

Watten: "Yeah."

Benson: I am telling you this.

Watten: Well how do the objects stand in relation to—

Benson: So wasn't that, well wasn't that, wasn't that like a *definite statement*? "I feel like I equivocate more to myself than to other people," so what, are you telling me that sounds very equivocating and that . . ?

Watten: I see! . . Well then how do the objects stand in relation to this equivocation? . . . . With other people.

Benson: Like how . . how are they—

Watten: Are you going to equivocate—

Benson: Tools of equivocating to other people?

Perelman: No, no, he *doesn't* think he equivocates with *other* people.

Watten: He *does*.

Benson: Not as much.

Perelman: He said not as much, that's where he's . .

Watten: Oh he equivocates most with himself.

Perelman: Yeah.

Benson: That's what I'm saying.

Highsmith: What he means is how close do you come to blowing cover. Blowing your cover when you're—

Watten: That's right. How close do you come to blowing your co—

[end of tape side one, BP turns tape over]

Highsmith: —there's some error in it?

Watten: There's some error.

[DH and BW laughter]

Perelman: How about this, how about this, how do you feel about— I mean, it seems, *partially*, that the, your, this display or shrine or objects, you know, that you've put up with such interesting calculation *is* very other-directed, as they say in sociology, right? And how do you, how do you feel about them, there you are, *at home*, you know, with this arrangement, for, for a couple of days so it really sinks in and you really . . have there been moments where you've really *felt* them as if you were an *other*, and then gotten some sense of who you— Do you know what I mean?

Benson: I usually feel like, uh, . . lonely, I think,—

Perelman: And they intensify it when you see—

Benson: —and *bored*, I feel like dissatisfied, —

Perelman: When you—

Benson: —with just these things, themselves, unless like there's a new one, and then, if it's *new, then* I like will identify with the other, yeah like I just did it, you know? And so, uh, *some*times that feels good, like, some of the collages in the front room. I still like identify with them as though like I'm somebody else, coming to see them, and so then that feels good.

Perelman: Do you differentiate them from your work as a writer? How about like, a new poem? Any essential difference or not?

Highsmith: How do you know he's a writer?

Perelman: I, I *know* . .

[laughter in group]

Highsmith: That hasn't been established in this discussion.

Perelman: No, not in this discussion. There are sort of s—

Benson: Usually. It's often like pretty similar. It's often pretty similar.

Perelman: I mean it really struck me that's a very apt description of a, of a, the av—, you know, a writer's relation to his or her work. It's very much . . that way. Of *tiring* of old stu—

Watten: What about, what about building so much tension and drama into your walls, you know, you never know what was the biggest thing about them but you're sort of always uh sort of like they're defining those parts of the walls to you differently every time. Have you ever thought about doing that?

Benson: Like to just be changing them all the time?

Watten: To completely *kill* the surfaces with tension until they can't take it anymore.

[laughter in group]

Harryman: [laughter] —can't take it any more.

Highsmith: Well how much tension can invisible walls stand?

Perelman: Depends on the wall.

Benson: No I haven't thought about that I mean I tend to think like—

Watten: Then why are the walls in your bedroom blank??!!

Benson: Well they ***have objects*** on them, they have a *picture*, —

Watten: Uh huh—

Benson: —they have *2* pictures, they have *3, 4* pictures, . .

Perelman: And your pants, . .

Benson: So there's like—

Watten: Sorry.

Benson: There's like a *closet*, —

Perelman: Oh, sorry.

Benson: —there's like the *calendar,* there's a *mirror*, there's a window . . I mean, I, I *don't* want to say like that you're wr—, I mean I'm *interested* in what you're saying, but it's . . but I don't . . understand it, too well, and I don't, like it's sort of, do you want me to say a certain thing?

Watten: No.

MacAdams: Do you feel more valid when you're making art for us?

[long pause]

Benson: Yeah.

[long pause]

[Unidentified]: People are asking questions.

Perelman: How do you relate the books, that's where you write, in front of those books?

Benson: Yeah.

Highsmith: [laughter] Oh no.

Perelman: How do you . . Do you relate to them as you write? What, why are they in front of you as you write?

Benson: Well, no, actually, they're more over, they're over to the side. Like they're over— [poptop] I have 2 desks, and the [poptop] one desk where Ahni's sitting is where the typewriter is, and the other desk, where Erika is sitting, is where, the books are over that. They're really over more like, the space where I *think* about what I'm going to write, or where I correct what I've written, or something. And over the space where I write, I tend to just keep like those few pictures, I'd like some sort of a triptych, so like Vermeer, —

Lazarchuk: I'm going to scram.

Benson: —Ed Moses and Grace Hartigan, and . . and I don't really understand how I relate to that. It's as though I do want some sort of um . . some sort of magical picture there, and then actually I don't trust having any *words* up there.

Hartmann: What is *Kidnapped*?

Benson: A novel by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Perelman: It's good.

Benson: It's good, I think, I haven't read it yet but, it's like, I put the books, the books that I put up there are books that I'm either reading or that I want to remind myself that I'm going to start reading. So it's like one of these, sort of like, a, it's like a display for myself, and . . it's *more* of a display for myself than for other people, that is.

Alan Bernheimer: All those books are sort of potential.

Benson: Yeah. Yeah, like, promise. Or possibility. And, like, they look good to me, that they're there . . . Say what?

Highsmith: Suggestion, uh, possibility? Um . . what is suggested as possible?

Benson: What *is* suggested?

Highsmith: Well, are you suggesting something by putting the books there?

Benson: Yeah I'm suggesting that they be read.

Highsmith: Can suggestion manufacture possibility?

[pause]

Perelman: I think so. Sure . . . Do *you* think—

Benson: That's so, that's so foreign to me . . . I mean it's like I *suggest* something, yeah, so I will like see it more vividly as possible, so I will, it will be right there, and it'll be real . . possible . . .

[footsteps through this passage]

Bernheimer: How long do you think you'll live here?

Benson: Uh . . . . . I don't know. I don't know.

Phillips: Why did you get dressed up in a suit and tie?

Benson: I guess I wanted to . . I s—, well, it was sort of, sort of like conceiving of this as . . a tour, and wanting to . . like . . be sort of at my best and to be like, to put myself in my clothes into, I sort of felt I'd be more comfortable like this. I had felt kind of ratty all day, and—

Phillips: Do you feel comfortable?

Benson: Now right now, no. I felt pretty comfortable when I walked in.

[laughter in group]

Watten: When did you feel *most* comfortable?

Benson: I mean, like, you know, sometimes I feel too big for the clothes and sometimes too small.

Watten: When was the first time you ever used the word "comfortable"?

Benson: Tonight?

Watten: No!

Perelman: I think that's a very early word, you use that at 6, your mother says, "Are you comfortable?"

[Unidentified]: Yeah . . right.

Benson: Yeah.

Perelman: It's a very— It's way back there.

Watten: Whenever I use the word now I'm aware of Steve using it, you know.

Perelman: Really?

Watten: Oh absolutely. [then to SB] That's *your word*, you know, so.

Phillips: What?

Perelman: It's Steve's word, Barry says.

Phillips: Why is it Steve's word?

Watten: Well, I just think it has Steve's name on it.

Perelman: You hear him saying it when you say it.

Watten: Yeah. "I didn't feel very comfortable."

Perelman: Or, "I felt *very* comfortable."

Watten: "I felt very comfortable."

Skratz: [laughing] Putting the past case scenario on it.

Benson: Yeah well it's, actually it's not a word that I like.

John Harryman: It's hard to say.

Benson: Yeah, I mean I don't feel, I don't like—

Perelman: You're not comfortable with it.

Benson: I'm *not*. I don't like the pronunciation.

Watten: That's it! Like it's sort of like, it's irritating, actually . .

Benson: —and I don't like the meaning . . . Yeah.

Phillips: Is that why it has Steve's name on it?

Watten: It's like a chair that sort of sags in the bottom.

Highsmith: It would seem to mean, able to comfort.

Perelman: Except, except, uh . . I mean, I don't think Steve is totally against a kind of comfort, I mean, you know, the way he, he really has a stronger sense of home, in terms of, you know, material surroundings than, certainly I do, or, or, I don't know about you, and uh, so, there is something in him that, that . . accepts that as a sort of a positive . . uh, condition, you know. To be comfortable, i.e., you don't have to waste your time . . battling irritation. Just at ease, and let your impulse have . . maximum energy.

Benson: But it doesn't seem to be like a word or a feeling that I have much confidence in, or, I mean I don't, I feel like that—

Watten: There's *another* one.

Benson: —*seems* like what you're picking up on. Confidence?

Watten: *Confidence*, yeah.

Shaw: Hey Steve, is there something that you would *like* to do, that you haven't done, to your space? That you have, like ideas about what you're *going* to do? Or *might* do at some point, if you could? . . Or are they all things that happen *at* the moment?

Benson: Um . . No, I don't, I don't have any real plans. I feel very stiff as I say that. And . . I . . [pause] I sort of, I mean what I . . [pause] So, yeah, what do I want to do? It's as though I want to please people, I guess, and, uh, it's int—, and then, I wanted to say something about pacing a lot, cause I feel like I've been pacing a lot through this space lately, and that that does have something to do with, um, my feeling about this space, that I've been walking back and forth very fast a lot, and, um, jumping up and picking up one thing and then using it over there and putting it back and, and going into another room. And um, and I feel very lost when I do that.

Hartmann: Can I ask you a personal question?

[laughing in group]

Perelman: Not a *personal* question!

Highsmith: Which person?

Hartmann: Okay, it's sort of what I came to find out, and that's

what's your view of Communist China?

[pause]

Benson: Well, what . . . mean, what mean . . what sort of compels me about Communist China is how . . I mean like the words comfortable and confidence, for instance, seem to enter into it, and as though . . people there . . are very affirmative of values like that, and . . that they . . that at least the government or the sense of what, what people do as people is uh . . it does seem very . . very much trying, trying very hard to *ground* itself in feeling like, *we are there*, we are right there, we are in like the Promised Land, we are in this definite place, and we know, uh, what we want and we are really *getting* it, and we're doing what we need to do to get it. And . . in some way like, that's, that's a very compelling thought, it's very . . frightening to me, to . . watch, or, to read about it, and I also feel like there's no way that I can *see* it, and that's . . I mean that has to do with *views*, I feel like, I don't, it's like, these things on the wall, it's like, uh, feelings sort of, uh, vision as, as being sort of largely impeded, and I can't . . . I mean I can *believe* that what happens in Communist China in some way or another is very good, I feel very, like, caught, between feeling like, well these people have always been really poor and, and like, doubtful of themselves, and now they have confidence and now they have comfort, and now they have like more um *trust* in what they're doing, and, and they have more physical satisfaction maybe, um, but it also seems sort of like, um, they're really . . It seems sort of as though they're as scared as I am, or they're as, uh, they don't know what they want as much as I do. So I mean those are . . that's what I'm thinking . . . .

Perelman: Again we are working with the children, cultivating and banking walnut trees. During our first break, some of us sit and make shadow pictures in the sunlight. Some of the girls sit together and play jacks with bright colored beanbags, and small pieces of bone painted red. Instead of bouncing a ball they throw the beanbag in the air and catch it before it hits the ground. I notice only one moment of mild disagreement, and that dissolves easily as one of the girls smiles and acquiesces. I'm working next to Liu Hua-Ming, a poised young girl. Her mother and father are doctors and they have worked in Peking and Taiyuan, the provincial capital. In her face and manners she appears to derive from a more aristocratic background than the others, but neither she nor the children with her make any discrimination. She digs into the earth and lifts a rock.

Benson: My mother and father are very, always very busy. They go all over. Sometimes my father has 3 meetings in 1 day. They are not home

much. But neither are we children. I don't get home until 7 o'clock, after my martial arts practice. It's just before dark. Sometimes my brother does the cooking. Or sometimes, when everyone is busy, I cook for my mother and father.

Perelman: What do you want to do as an adult?

[pause]

Benson: Whatever the Party needs, I will become.

Perelman: She stopped for a moment and stood motionless, and then, a radiant smile of beautiful straight white teeth.

May 19, 1977

The Bathetic

William Graves: The problem of badness in poetry is always a difficult test for any literary theory. If meaning or coherence of meaning is the criterion, then the bad poem will simply be one with no meaning—something about which we couldn't say anything at all. Or, if the criterion is the making of word patterns—somehow unconnected with either speaker or world, then what will distinguish a good word pattern from a bad one? In poetry we don't have pretty colors or harmonious sounds the way other, more "formal" arts do. Something like an oblique slice between two such extremes is what I would sketch. My method may seem troublesomely historical. But any theory needs its examples, its chief exhibits. My view is that literary problems occur not just because history produces them, but because literature has such and such problems.

II

The word *bathos* first took on its modern meaning in 1728 when Alexander Pope, writing under the influence of his friends Gay and Swift, contrived one of the neatest and nastiest tricks in the history of literary criticism. These friends had invented an author of "pompous nonsense," the critic, pedant, and poetaster, Martinus Scriblerus, whose masterpiece is *Peri Bathous* or *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*.

Peri Bathous means "of the low" or "deep" or "profound." We get the root again in a word like bathysphere. The phrase is a parody of the title of a famous essay *Peri Hupsous*, or Of the Sublime, by the otherwise unknown first century writer Longinus. *Hupsos* is a quality of "elevation" or "height," or as it was much later termed, the Sublime. Longinus' essay is a celebration of ecstasy and inspiration; it asserts in full earnestness and enthusiasm the view that Plato had half-playfully framed in his early dialogue the *Ion*, where some damaging admissions are forced about what kind of knowledge or wisdom the poet might lay claim to. The outcome there was that the poets were simply mad; that insofar as they *were* simply poets, they didn't know anything at all. Their marvelous

utterance was prompted by a somehow divinely induced, irrational afflatus.

Longinus was also preoccupied with certain technical entanglements: figures and kinds of diction and formulas for amplification, all the kind of thing made fun of in the *Peri Bathous*. But the pulsing accent is on the great and impassioned soul of the poet, his flashes and spurts of inspiration, the grandeur of his utterance, the bigness of the objects which inspire him, and the corresponding transport (ekstasis) of his poetic audience.

In the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries the Sublime became to some a god-sent escape from the pressure of rationalist thought and the traditional "imitative" premises of criticism. Since criticism was nominally still under the authority of the classics, it was a great point in favor of a literary theory to have classical countenance. *We* may think of Longinus, with his transport and his "romantic" concern for the poet, as the Trojan horse in the camp of neo-classicism. But *they* didn't see it that way. The inflational ideas of grandeur and inspiration combined with certain other, some perhaps contradictory things, for example a coarse parody of Aristotle's ideas about the tragic hero, perhaps also with the grandiose political trends of the times, and with a histrionic note of sorry feelings, the Eighteenth Century *pa*thetic (There was a woman in Mrs. Thrale's set who could weep so prettily that she was called on for parlor demonstrations) [laughter]—these all combined and served to establish heroic epic as an explicit norm for poetry. Heroic poets, said a critic of the time, are "gigantic souls"; and the heroic poem, the "chief effort of human sense."

But the mock-thesis at the beginning of Pope's treatise is that the poet need not be so concerned about the ancients:

> It hath been long the subject of my concern and surprise, that whereas numberless Poets, Critics, and Orators have compiled and digested the Art of Ancient Poesy, there hath not arisen among us one person so public-spirited, as to perform the like for the Modern. Although it is universally known that our every-way industrious Moderns, both in the Weight of their writings, and in the Velocity of their judgments, do so infinitely excel the said Ancients. [laughter]
>
> Nevertheless, too true it is, that while a plain and direct road is paved to their *hupsos*, or Sublime; no track has yet been chalked out, to arrive at our *bathos*, or Profound.

The thesis of chapter two is "that the Bathos, or Profound, is the natural taste of Man, and in particular, of the present Age."

> Let us look around among the Admirers of Poetry, we shall find those

who have a taste of the Sublime to be very few; but the Profound strikes universally, and is adapted to every capacity. 'Tis a fruitless undertaking to write for men of a nice and foppish Gusto, whom after all it is almost impossible to please; and 'tis still more chimerical to write for posterity, of whose Taste we cannot make any judgment, and whose Applause we can never enjoy. [laughter]

Scriblerus continues with his belief:

That Poetry is a natural or morbid Secretion from the Brain. [laughter] As I would not suddenly stop a cold in the head, or dry up my neighbor's Issue, I would as little hinder him from necessary writing.

Next Scriblerus proceeds to an enunciation of principles. The poet "must studiously avoid, detest, and turn his head from all ideas, ways, and workings of that pestilent Foe to Wit, and Destroyer of fine Figures, which is known by the Name of *Common Sense*."

His design ought to be like a labyrinth out of which nobody can get clear but himself... He ought therefore to render himself master of this happy and *anti-natural* way of thinking to such a degree, as to be able, on the appearance of any object, to furnish his imagination with ideas infinitely *below* it. And his eyes should be like unto the wrong end of a perspective glass, by which all objects of nature are lessened.

For example: when a true genius looks upon the Sky, he immediately catches the idea of a piece of blue lutestring, or a child's mantle.

And here begins the more than 100 examples of profound poetry that fill the treatise.

The skies, whose spreading volumes scarce have room,
Spun thin, and wove in nature's finest loom,
The newborn world in their soft lap embraced,
And all around their starry mantle cast.

If he looks upon a Tempest, he shall have an image of a tumbled bed, and describe a succeeding calm in this manner:

The Ocean, joyed to see the tempest fled,
New lays his waves, and smooths his ruffled bed.

"But to convince you," Scriblerus goes on, "that nothing is so great which a marvellous genius... is not able to lessen; hear how the most sublime of all Beings is represented in the following images:

First he is a Chemist.

Th' Almighty Chemist does his work prepare,
Pours down his waters on the thirsty plain,
Digests his lightning, and distills his rain.

Now he is a Wrestler.

Me in his griping arms th' Eternal took,
And with such mighty force my body shook,
That the strong grasp my members sorely bruised,
Broke all my bones, and all my sinews loosed.

In the following lines he is a Butler. [laughter]

He measures all the drops with wondrous skill,
Which the black clouds, his floating bottles, fill. [laughter]

And then a Baker.

God in the wilderness his table spread,
And in his airy Ovens baked their bread.

The satire, of course, is an attack. Scriblerus almost always footnotes his "gems." In another section, where he classifies "the several kinds of geniuses of the profound"—such as the Parrots who "repeat *another's* words, in such a hoarse odd voice, as makes them seem their own," or the Tortoises who "are slow and chill, and, like pastoral writers, delight much in gardens: They have for the most part a fine embroidered Shell, and underneath it, a heavy lump"—after each of these and more we are offered a set of initials assigned to each category, corresponding to those of well-known writers of the time. The outrage on the publication of the *Peri Bathous* was tremendous. In a later note Pope said that the initial letters were chosen "for the most part at random." He adds: "But such was the Number of Poets eminent in that art, that some one or other took every letter to himself."

Almost half the quotations in the essay—all of those I have quoted so far—are the work of that Homer of the modern profound, Sir Richard Blackmore. A medical doctor, and part of the rising generation of middle-class partisans of sobriety and "good sense," Blackmore in his spare time turned out huge epics on Prince Arthur, Alfred, Eliza, The Redeemer, The Creation, Job, plus dissertations on the Nature of Man, on Moral Duties, on the Gout, and a "Critical Dissertation on the Spleen." As Pope justly encrusts him in the later *Dunciad*:

All hail him Victor in both Gifts of Song,
Who sings so loudly, and who sings so long. [laughter]

III

Let me begin the first phase of my argument by noting that the steady Blackmore and his crew, though today forgotten, had a critical theory of their own behind them. Among other attacks, he had published a *Satyr Against Wit* in which, as he saw it, wit was not (as later with

Johnson) a principle of "vitality" but actually a principle of universal corruption. The gentlemanly wits were debauching not only literature but all discourse, public and private. Wit was soft, loose, degenerate, insane. And Blackmore was but one wave in an ocean of distrust and depreciation of words. Cartesian and Newtonian rationalism, combining with a Puritan spirit of economic and practical tidiness—these and more were driving toward the ideal of a plainer, more straightforward language, toward "clear and distinct ideas." The Seventeenth Century saw the end of the Ciceronian and Renaissance rhetorical culture; it was a time of decline in the prestige of words, of a soaring new prestige for seeing and diagramming, for the simplifying and classifying spirit of science. The Royal Society, in its *History* written by Bishop Thomas Sprat, gives one of the age's most unvarnished statements concerning what was conceived as the ideal relation between words and things:

> We have been rigorous in putting in execution, the only Remedy, that can be found for this *extravagance*: . . . a constant Resolution to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style; to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when *men* deliver'd so many *things*, almost in an equal number of *words*.

The implication of this kind of thinking were not lost on Pope and his friends. In the Third Book of *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, during the visit to the scientific Academy of Lagado, we hear of a scheme:

> for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever; and this was urged as a great advantage in point of health as well as brevity . . . . An expedient was therefore offered that, since words are only names for *things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such *things* as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on . . . which hath only this inconvenience attending it, that if a man's business be very great and of various kinds, he must be obliged in proportion to carry a greater bundle of *things* upon his back . . . . I have often beheld two of those sages almost sinking under the weight of their packs, like pedlars . . . ; who when they met in the street would lay down their loads, open their sacks, and hold conversation for a hour together; then put up their implements, help each other resume their burthens, and take their leave.

Gulliver had started out, in fact, as Scriblerus; originally the Travels were to have been part of the great critic's works. But Gulliver's empirical obtuseness got too big even for Scriblerus.

The effect of the rationalistic, empirical drive was momentous. It made possible bad poetry; or rather, a certain kind of bad poetry, bathetic poetry. None of Pope's examples dates from before the Seventeenth

Century. The other standard compendium of such bathos is the curious work called *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse* (after one of Wordsworth's titles) which Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee put together in 1930. They too begin with the late Seventeenth Century, with Abraham Cowley. "Cowley," they say in their introduction is "the last poet of the metaphysical school and about the first to be bad comically." Earlier bad writers because of "their general obscurity and cragginess retard the slide into the depths." [laughter] But Cowley is under the compulsion to be clear; he uses or tries to use, the same tight, far-fetched conceits that Donne, Crashaw and the other metaphysicals had used; but in acceding to the rationalistic pressure, he attempts to make them all distinct and clear. An inspection of Crashaw's and Cowley's comparison poems on hope makes clear the difference between the molten, paradoxical enthusiasm in Crashaw and Cowley's plausible illustrations and analogies, his self-explanatory details. The prose sense doesn't mix with the figures; the figures are not concrete realizations of the sense.

Here, for example, is Cowley's version of Dr. William Harvey, a member of the Royal Society and, of course, the discoverer of the circulation of the blood, chasing Nature and her secrets; [laughter]

> Coy Nature (which remain'd, though aged grown,
> A beauteous virgin still, enjoy'd by none,
> Nor seen unveil'd by any one),
> When Harvey's violent passion she did see,
> Began to tremble and to flee,
> Took sanctuary, like Daphne, in a tree:
> There Daphne's lover slept, and thought it much
> The very leaves of her to touch,
> But Harvey, our Apollo, stopt not so,
> Into the bark and root he after her did go . . .

She then jumps into a "winding stream of blood" and proceeds to the heart.

> "Here sure shall I be safe," said she;
> "None will be able sure to see
> This my retreat, but only He
> Who made both it and Me.
> The heart of men, what art can e'er reveal?
> A wall impervious between
> Divides the very parts within,
> And doth the heart of man ev'n from himself conceal."
> She spoke, but ere she was aware,
> Harvey was with her there . . . [laughter]

This is what comes of the Restoration emphasis on Clarity; it left little for the poet to do but strike a bardic posture and elevate his language. We can see why Nature is called a virgin. He tells us why; she is not "seen unveil'd by any one." We can see why she flees to a tree; sap, like blood, circulates there, and thus also why she should be compared to Ovid's Daphne, and so on.

But: "Observe that when you are perpetually diagramming the reasonableness of what you are doing, it is open to any reader who has not fallen under the spell to wonder why you should be doing it at all."

IV

It was Pope, two centuries before *The Stuffed Owl*, who discovered not only how comic such stuff could be, but something else as well. In Chapter Twelve of *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, in the discussion of correct "expression," (that is, expression "proportionately low to the Profundity of the Thought") we are told that "sometimes a single *Word* will vulgarize a poetical idea." Among the instances is this by Addison picturing a hero facing a world in ruin:

> Should the whole frame of nature round him break,
> He unconcerned would hear the mighty *Crack*. [laughter]

That final word jars with the elevated idea of the hero, just as it does with the ancient source of Addison's rendering, Horace. There is, too, the peculiar insensitivity in the word "unconcerned." But if we turn to another of Pope's works, the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (he too was a member of the Scriblerus Club), we find another rendering:

> . . . Take it for a rule
> No creature smarts so little as a fool.
> Let Peals of Laughter, *Codrus!* round thee break,
> Thou unconcerned canst hear the mighty crack. [laughter]

Pope's lines are clever—he is alluding to both Addison and Horace—and Addison's are silly, even though they are nearly the same. Pope has exercised his own taste and judgment, as he had in *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, to create a context taking advantage of Addison's lack of judgment and taste. A critic of the day might have argued that this was all a question of decorum, of course; but the decorum involved here is the precarious one of doing tastefully and cleverly exactly what others do badly.

Longinus himself long before had realized part of the problem with elevated style. One can slip. "Our defects," he said, "usually spring . . . from the same sources as our good points." But turned around, his remark

catches the essence of Pope's own satiric technique. The stupidities praised by Scriblerus are precisely the fundamental techniques of the satirist. He notes, for example, the "Alamode style," which is "fine by being new" and cites a passage by Nathaniel Lee describing the engagement of two armies:

> Yon armies are the *Cards* which both must play;
> At least come off a *saver* if you may:
> *Throw boldly* at the *sum* the odds have *set*:
> These on your side will all their fortunes *bet*.

Expand and reverse the comparison, however, and you have conceived the brilliant center of the Third Canto of *The Rape of the Lock*, the Game of Ombre, presented in the epic terms of a military engagement.

If this sounds a little like what the parodist, Dwight MacDonald, discovered in the 1950's, that to parody Dwight Eisenhower it was sufficient to quote him verbatim [laughter]; or even a little like the gestures of Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhol taking shovels and soup-cans off the shelf and calling them works of art, it is. The complexities and forgeries of Borges and modern-day Xeroxers, the literal allusiveness of much modern painting and poetry and music, especially of the 60's, and our peculiar habits of cultural connoisseurship—"the timeless elegance of art deco"—all these things are relevant to Pope's activity. Mechanized, broken down into interchangeable parts, poetry can be made like watches. Scriblerus as projector calls for the formation of a society to parcel out the literary figures: hyperbole to young men of quality, ellipsis to politicians, and so on. The "superior artist" goes to the subcontractor. The end is something like computerization, the "Rhetorical Chest of Drawers" played like a pipe organ, containing all the "matter and argument of the several kinds of writing."

Pope and the others, no more than we, could escape the rationalizing and classifying spirit of the time. They professed a strong allegiance to the standard of nature and reason, and to lofty ideas, the heroic and the sublime. Guided by this vision Pope could erect the crystal palace of *An Essay on Man*. But Pope and the others wrote their best poetry under the sanction of a "play principle." It was only on vacation from the vision and the ideal that they engaged in the serious fun that an expressionist theory would call being true to themselves: a *Rape of the Lock*, an *Arbuthnot, Gulliver's Travels* or a *Dunciad*. Even in these works, however, the rationalism, the "mechanical operation of the spirit" (as Swift called it) was apparently, but only apparently, triumphant. If Pope's poetry is a

poetry of "statement" or "reason," he had a very peculiar way of showing it. It is true he had a verbal style which was to some extent limited and determined by the apparent aim of seeming reasonable and clear, by the neat couplets ending the thoughts of neat lengths, the exact parallels and oppositions. Nevertheless, it was also a style which in virtue of the same rules and limits had special invitations and encouragements to be *un*-prosaic, *un*reasonable.

For example, we know Pope's habit of neat antithesis:

> Resolved to win, he meditates the way
> By force to ravish, or by fraud betray.

This kind of thing can then be inverted, with a curious reinforcement of interest in the rhyme:

> Whatever Nature has in worth denied,
> She gives in large recruits of needful Pride.

This tight and exact economy of parallelism is at every step on the verge of shrinking into something even tighter; a compression, producing the figure known in those days as zeugma (yoking). If A, B and X, B, then more simply A, B, and X:

> Where Nature moves, and rapture warms the *mind*.

Or:

> And now a bubble burst, and now a world.

The pressure on the focal word can become intense. No wonder if the word should begin to fray out and come apart—yielding two meanings:

> Or stain her honor, or her new brocade.
>
> Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball.

Or:

> Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey,
> Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes Tea.

Worse and Worse. We have now descended from logical parallel and ellipsis, through metaphor, and apparently into pun.

Most important of all, the logical structure of the couplet becomes the ideal frame for that most Gothic and mystical of tricks, rhyme—rhyme in the most potent sense, not just logically parallel endings (morphemes) such as the "worthynesse" and "healthynesse" that Chaucer used to rhyme, but as often as possible different parts of speech, or at least very different words:

> One speaks the glory of the British Queen
> And one describes a charming Indian screen.

It is a curious thing that "queen" should rhyme with "screen"; they are very different things. Pope seems to have found a connection in social chatter. The innuendos get complex:

> Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,
> Or some frail China jar receive a flaw.

In the first line, first the breakage, then the fragile thing; in the second, another fragile thing and then its breaking. The parallel is complicated by the rhyme. Pope is taking advantage of phonetic likeness to insinuate something. His proper-name rhymes are excellent examples. These are the kinds of things that fill *The Stuffed Owl*, for example this "Elegy on Mr. Thomas Gouge" by Isaac Watts:

> Heaven was impatient of our crimes,
> And sent his minister of death
> To scourge the bold rebellion of the time...
> There he essayed the vengeance first,
> Then took a dismal aim, and brought great Gouge to dust.

Pope dares rhyme such names. It is a little reminiscent of a certain kind of childish riddle that used to be in the *Farmer's Almanac*. Why is A like B? Because it sounds like B or something connected with B. ("Why is a dog more warmly dressed in summer than in winter? Because in winter he wears a fur coat; but in summer he wears a fur coat and pants.") Why is a certain poet a bad influence on married women? Because his name sounds like a certain verb.

> Poor Cornus sees his frantic wife elope,
> And curses Wit, and Poetry, and Pope.

Pope so far as I know had nothing to do with Cornus's wife; but the rhyme at least is a *fait accompli*. Why are the two most notable scholars of the day such dunces and pedants? Because their names show it:

> Yet ne'er one sprig of laurel graced these ribalds,
> From slashing Bently down to pidling Tibalds.

In the end the passion for exact allignment and precision made possible a whole repertory of metaphoric insinuations, covert symbols, hinted puns, sly rhymes, cheating jingles and riddles. The very things which make possible bad prose, for example—"he rested for the rest of the day" or "Air travel is still far from free from danger," where the sounds are getting in the way of the sense, these are the very things that

make possible what we may think of as distinctly "verbal" or "poetic" effects. Such a prose "fault" as "Elegant variation" ("They spend a few weeks longer in their winter home than in their summer habitat."), in the hands of Homer or the author of Beowulf may be the center of his and our delight. The tight frame of couplet logic keeps the words in their places, but in so doing forces them to exert all the more interactive energies. The couplet poetry may look like a surrender to prevailing norms. It was actually a polite evasion of all that.

V

Another aspect of the mounting empirical pressure was a new ascendency of Fact. Pope's *Dunciad*, for example, is stuffed with facts—in the poem, in the forged footnotes to the poem, in the commentaries on the footnotes, and so on. Pope had a very sure sense of how to ingurgitate these facts. The lack of this sense is obvious in the poem by Cowley I mentioned before about Dr. Harvey. The human heart is divided in halves; and the poet thinks he'd better get such information into the poem. Bishop Sprat's Gulliverian theory of language—"so many *things*, almost in an equal number of *words*"—encouraged verse to concern itself with little but facts. Dr. Johnson finally threw his hands up when he heard of John Dyer's poem *The Fleece*: "The subject, sir, cannot be made poetical. How can a man write poetically of serges and druggets!" And he asked Boswell of James Granger's *The Sugar Cane, a Poem*, "What could he make of a sugar-cane? One might as well write 'The Parsley-Bed, a Poem' or 'The Cabbage Garden, a Poem.'" Here, such a poem as Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" might be cited to define the infra-red range of illustration. Poetry, as I have said, entertains no beautiful ideas or words as such, though foolish people have tried to make up lists of such things. Its materials, unlike those of sculpture, do not have to be high class. Though the word handkerchief was banned from the French tragic stage, we know that a handkerchief as well as what it collects can be assimilated by the peculiar process of a given poem.

The way the Eighteenth Century Dunces assimilated such facts was by sticking them into some sort of counterfeit sublime. It was Grainger again who had the bad fortune of beginning a verse paragraph, "Now, Muse, let's sing of Rats." These are the kinds of works Pope's examples in *The Art of Sinking* come from. Blackmore's epics, Lee's heroic dramas, Dennis's Odes (Dennis was dubbed Sir Tremendous Longinus by Pope and Gay), Tickell's Homer, and even an outright fraud, a play called

Double Falsehood, represented by Theobald (The Tibbald mentioned earlier) as by Shakespeare. These poets make do without the geniune passion of a great soul that Longinus talked about. They merely pretend to it. As Scriblerus notes, "Our best authors have avoided throwing themselves *or* their readers into any indecent transports."

In the Postscript to his own translation of *The Odyssey*, Pope writes:

> The sublime style is more easily counterfeited than the natural; something that passes for it, or sounds like it, is common to all false writers; but nature, purity, perspicuity and simplicity never walk in the clouds.

He had learned how easily counterfeited it is, as it were, in his years of translating. Exhausted by his work on the *Iliad*, he had engaged for *The Odyssey* two assistants or "collaborators"—we should call them hacks—William Broome and Elijah Fenton. They submitted to him, apparently almost daily, magnificent specimens of the Art of Sinking in Poetry. Fenton particularly was glorious in the technique of what Scriblerus calls amplification and tautology ("with wealthy dow'r, and bridal gifts of price"). But above all it is when some humble fact has to be included that we get once again the unmistakeable sinking feeling. This is how Fenton renders a cowheel in Homer:

> That sinewy fragment...
> Where to the pastern-bone by nerves combined,
> The well-honed foot indissolubly join'd.

It may have been a little unkind, but Fenton too finds his way into the *Peri Bathous*. After all, as I have said, this was how Pope had learned the way of his comic effects, for instance, as this pouring a cup of tea:

> And China's earth receives the smoking tide.

Pope's comic way of dealing with Fact is not easy to describe. My view is that it is the way of a heightened unreality. The Eighteenth Century reverence for the fact, after all, had never been a reverence for something we call reality. It was a reverence for the atomizing of reality into facts or observable phenomena, the kind that Gulliver or B.F. Skinner interest themselves in. Or the kind of thing we get from another of Swift's personae, who says, "I saw a woman flayed today, and I cannot tell you how it altered her appearance for the worse." The reverence, too, for the old classical rules of decorum was more interesting to subvert than to keep. Scriblerus, for example, notes of the poet of the profound:

> In the very manner he will affect the Marvellous; he will draw Achilles with the Patience of Job; a Prince talking like Jack-Pudding; a Maid of Honour selling bargains; a Footman speaking like a Philosopher; and a

fine Gentleman like a Scholar.

The principle of unreality comes out even more starkly when he talks about outdoor nature. And here let me cite a curious modern parallel. In his *Dehumanization of Art*, Ortega remarks:

> Images... acquire a curious derogatory quality and, instead of ennobling and enhancing, belittle and disparage poor reality. I remember reading a book of modern poetry in which a flash of lightning was compared to a carpenter's rule and the leafless trees of winter to brooms sweeping the sky. The weapon of poetry turns against natural things and wounds or murders them.

Beside that place the passage of the *Peri Bathous* I quoted earlier about how the poet should master the "anti-natural way of thinking." Place beside it too most of the *Dunciad*, for example:

> The forests dance, the rivers upward rise,
> Whales sport in woods, and dolphins in the skies.

Or, more generally, the *Dunciad*'s whole nightmare world of whores and bards and blockheads, the excremental vision, the pissing contest in imitation of heroic games, or such a line as "And the fresh vomit run forever green." Ortega's term for this is "Infrarealism"; we might call it "Expressionism" or "Surrealism." Ortega's definition—and the sentence could scarcely sound more like a borrowing from the *Peri Bathous*—is "instead of soaring to poetical heights, art may dive beneath the level marked by the natural perspective."

VI

Thus I arrive at the concluding part of my effort—an observation about a certain kind of badness in poetry, and, particularly, the way we may notice it or even make use of it today. Clearly this is not something about which we ought to lay down the law. As I have been saying, it seems to me that no one can lay down rules about the proper uses of language in poetry that another poet cannot violate if he knows or discovers how. "Language," as Croce says, "*is* perpetual creation." Nor, let me add, do I think it any particularly important thing for a reader or critic to preoccupy himself with badness and its causes. He ought rather to latch on to what seems good to him, and, if he wants, to ask himself why it seems good. But certainly some of our mistakes are revealing; and, as is probably clear, the bathos of the now notorious "poetic diction" seems to me revealing in this way.

The "sinewy fragment" for a cow-heel, for "Shut the door," this that Scriblerus notes, "the wooden guardian of our privacy/ Quick on its

axle turn"—these are the imbecilities everyone, from Pope to Coleridge to us, deplores. Here, for example, is Pound:

> There must be no book words, nor periphrases, no inversions... There must be no cliches, set phrases... The only escape from such is precision, a result of concentrated attention to what one is writing... Objectivity and objectivity, and expression: no hindside-beforeness, no straddled adjectives (as "addled mosses dank"), no Tennysonianness of speech; nothing—nothing that you couldn't in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say.

This is a call, once again, for the "simplicity," the "Hardness" of good prose three centuries after Sprat and the other anti-rhetoricians I have mentioned.

And what is good prose? For one thing, we have often heard, it is concrete. One problem with this is that while it is possible to say what *abstract* means in the sense of "absolute" or "ideal," this is not so for the other meaning of *abstract* in the sense of "very general" or for its opposite, the "concrete" or "specific." We have only more or less specific, more or less general. What is the right word, the objective word for anything, the right degree of specification? One would gather this had to do with the context of what it is that is being written about. Nevertheless, it would appear that somewhere in the range of our generalizing a kind of line is crossed. The problem is one inherited from Aristotle, who long ago left it not quite clear in certain passages whether he was talking about *that* in virtue of which a thing is a thing, or about that in virtue of which a thing is a certain *kind* or class of thing. These two concepts, for Aristotle at least, go together. The *Iliad* was not an essence, nor was *white* or *being*. These were not first rate answers to the question: What is it? "When we say *what* it is, we do not say, 'white' or 'hot' or 'three cubits long,' but 'a man' or 'a god.'". That is to say, man and god are at a level of classification where specific and concrete are mutually implied. We may decribe this as a kind of critical or vaporizing line in the scale of generality. Above this level what is not very specific accomodates itself to what is abstract in the absolute sense (not concrete at all) so that it tends to leave concreteness behind. Below this level, on the other hand, there is too much detail. *Man* is a better name of a thing than either vertebrate or white man and a better answer to the question: What is it? Let me admit that I am not talking as a scientist or a philosopher here, but in practical and approximate terms.

We speak of calling a spade a spade—giving it its right name—something more than merely alluding to it, and less than describing it. As

it happens, one of the most famous entries in *The Stuffed Owl* is Wordsworth's apostrophe:

> Spade! with which Wilkinson has tilled his lands.

This seems to many ridiculous even though it exemplifies what I have been talking about—the minimum, concrete or specific-substantive style. Above this we might place the abstract or less than specific style; for example *implement*; and below it, the extra-concrete, the more than substantive, for example, *rusty garden spade*. The trouble with most poetic diction is that it goes above and below but leaves out the middle level: for *cowheel*, "sinewy fragment"; for *fish*, "scaly breed"; instead of *sheep*, "fleecy kind"; instead of *birds*, "feathered troop." The dunces are being too specific and too general at the same time. Their figures have a hole in them, like a doughnut. The poet of the rats I mentioned earlier tried to revise his poem when it was greeted with laughs; he substituted "whiskered vermin race." Boswell wasn't impressed. The trouble with *rats* and *spades* is that the poet has not contrived a context that is coherent with the substantive style. Poets from Homer with his "Rosy-fingered dawn" and "wine-dark sea" down at least to the imagists ("purple grackles shining and bulging under leaves") have had, I think it fair to say, a sharp tendency to work at this extra-concrete level. But I think it is also true that when poetry veers too far away from the minimum-concrete or substantive level, this is when badness and bathos can set in.

One way of criticizing poetic diction has always been that it is cliche, hackneyed, that it is unoriginal. Surprise, as Apollinaire and Stein and Eliot and so many others counsel, *is* the modern poet's art. But with the cliche, as Remy de Gourmont points out, incoherence or irrelevance play as much a part as triteness. "Do you live in New York?" "No, I like to visit, but I wouldn't live there if you gave me the place." What makes this bad? Not merely that it is a cold potato, a stereotype—any word in the dictionary is in that sense a cliche—but the fact that such an expression attempts to stand up and make a little joke, and that joke is out of place. By this logic even ingenuity and originality are no sure proofs against the cliche. When a biographer of John Barrymore tells us that Barrymore took on "the Danish assignment" or that he decided to "draw on the black tights of the Scandinavian," we may never have heard these expressions before, but we feel their affinity for the bathetic cliche. Certain instances of CB jargon—"4-wheeler" for *automobile*, "local yokel" for *city policeman*—strike me the same way. On the other hand one may rather like

"Mama Bear" for policewoman. Still talking this way is not the privilege but the achievement of poetry.

One might experiment with the idea that all language is an arsenal of cliches, some expressions like *man* or *tree* being only more ordinary than others, like *umbrageous, fleecy kind, finny tribe*. "The little words that I like so much," says George Oppen, "like 'tree,' 'hill' and so on, are I suppose just as much a taxonomy as the more elaborate words."

The truth is that a poet should be a master of cliches at all levels. I would illustrate by citing what we can call "extended cliches" such as "At the drop of a brass hat" or, even better, Ambrose Bierce's saying from *The Devil's Dictionary,* which itself sums up the principle:

> Old saws fitted with new teeth.

Finally let me say that this kind of skirting with the dismal is characteristic of much of our poetry of today. Compare, for example, this that Scriblerus quotes:

> The Lords above are angry and *Talk big,*

with this of O'Hara:

> I am assuming that everything is *all right* and very difficult.

Or instead of O'Hara's comedy, careening through life, think of the even, passive tone of Ashbery's *Three Poems*, where there is an almost continual revitalization of cliches—old proverbs and old diction—filling in of the holes, both of experience and language, however worn out either may be. The Sublime and the Bathetic there are everywhere, but evened out, naturalized, accepted.

June 2, 1977

Film Syntax

Warren Sonbert: This is a potential shot sequence for a film that I'm working on now. I'll list 5 or 6 shots, and describe them. Shot A is a priest in a tent at an ethnic Filipino festival, held in Dolores Park [S.F.] a couple of weeks ago. It's very dark in the middle of the frame; he's sitting down towards the back and he's eating. In the midground, in front of him, are a pair of hands, exchanging money, paying for food. So the hands themselves have a dehumanized feeling because they're detached from any figure we might see. And I think the components of this shot put forward the idea of the greed of organized religion, the Church bloated, stuffing itself, in very conventional cliched terms.

Shot B is a sort of neutral shot: a band of gleaming light on water, moving in contrast to the preceding still shot. It's abstract: water/light. These neutral shots, of which you saw a lot in the last film [*Divided Loyalties*] are like after-dinner sherbets, there to cleanse the palate before the next, more highly charged image.

The next shot, C. On the left foreground, a little girl is dressed as an angel; it's Halloween in New York. She's got a full set of wings, halo, silk white tape, the works. And she's blond. Her mother is bending over her to tie a bow around her neck. Then on the right back middleground is an old man, gnarled, pushing himself along in a wheelchair. Perhaps an alcoholic, certainly at the end of his rope. The girl is oblivious to his presence; she's looking in the other direction. She's very smug and content; there's a scowl on the old man's face. We have a series of contrasts here, all within the same frame: old/young; she just beginning life, in perfect health, protected by her mother, angel tending angel; he's alone, isolated. At the same time, because they're in the same frame, instead of reinforcing shot A (the bogusness of organized religion), it raises the possibility, the potentiality, the spectre of miracle happening. The idea that she may cure him. He may find himself miraculously restored to his health and good graces.

The next shot, D. Another neutral shot. Let's reinforce the idea of

serene objectivity. A burst of fireworks, let's say, a form of creation, a generative effect. Also continuing the idea of light, as opposed to the act of dissolution.

Finally in this series, let's reinforce the ambiguity, making shot E a clergyman shaking hands with some of his parishioners who are leaving church. This is again the clean image of organized religion, antiseptic, socialized, smug and efficient. Not the frenzied intention of a miracle motif. The image then can reinforce the negative qualities of shot A but at the same time strengthen the positive aspects of shot C. In other words, there's a place in religion for the mystic, impractical, unpredictable, direct, uncodified aspects. So again, the spectator takes away what he brings to it. Either complacency confirming what he feels about the drawbacks of organized religion, or an objectivity about what might be religion's hope-filled qualities. The neutral shots would reinforce this, since the figurative images have such built-in negative connotations.

Let's try another series. Shot A: a witty, urbane, solo person at an outdoor cafe sips some wine and smiles at the taste and fragrance, ambrosial, then notices something nearby, perhaps some behavior or activity at a nearby table: his expression changes to abhorrence, eventually culminating in a sneer.

Cut to B: a bridge, immense, expansive, far away. Both shots are still, but this one is very wide angle, and the other close. But all of a sudden, this bridge, several seconds in, after definitely establishing the serenity or rather placidity of the image—there's an intense explosion and the bridge wavers, crumples, disintegrates, blows up, crashes. Here we have two different images as far apart in content and construction as possible, and yet the psychological manifestation of A (displeasure, contempt) becomes the physical actuality of B (dissolution, disintegration). What can we do with C? Let's have a group activity of construction or planning. It could be some workmen building a house (definitely not tearing one down), or simply some people having a discussion, planning, exchanging ideas. So what are the qualifications at work here? One can look at it as if human activity is folly since all is dust eventually—this is the negative reaction, or that despite everything one continues rolling the rock up the hill—a more beneficent view. Or again, both—which is ideal.

The job of editing, which distinguishes film from theater or simple (minded) photography, is to balance a series of ambiguities in a tension-filled framework.

Neutral shots are usually non-figurative (4 seasons, 4 elements,

implying country, landscapes, non-urban; animals can be contained within them). As soon as a human figure with its myriad of different interpretive gestures and expressions appears the image takes on a complexity denser than any image without one.

I think the films I make are, hopefully, a series of arguments, with each image, shot, a statement to be read and digested in turn. Each work as well is about a specific topic: *Carriage Trade*, a film I made about 10 years ago, is about travel, transportation, anthropological investigation: 4 continents, 4 organized religions, customs; about time with its 6 years in the making and cast of thousands; about how the same people age and grow and even change apartments over 6 years. *Rude Awakening* is about Western civilization and its work/activity ethic and the viability of performing functions and activities. *Divided Loyalties*, the film you just saw, is more about art vs. industry and their various crossovers. And my new product, tentatively called *Noblesse Oblige*, is about journalism, reportage, news events that you might see on the 6 o'clock report, how the news is created, how it might affect our lives, and journalists' responsibilities.

The great hero is film history is Brakhage, who "liberated" film. He made the tactile qualities the major concern and showed that "mistakes," errors could have an expressive, demonic, psychological function. Images could be overexposed (too bright) and underexposed (too dark). That dirt, splice lines, flare-ins and flare-outs, the dots that end and begin a 3-minute roll of rushes, all could have a transforming purpose. He questioned the entire 19th-Century sensibility of the composed wide-angle art-gallery framework. He suggested that all budding filmmakers take an icepick to their lens to destroy Renaissance perspective. He also has this near-equivalent of Pollock—these thick overlays of impasto, almost including the paint-tube caps, with his drawing, painting, scratching on film, scraping away the emulsion, using oil, water, ink, magic marker; even, in a film called *Mothlight*, to go so far as to crush the wings and bodies of moths and other insects onto a strip of film.

He opened up the use of hand-held cameras so that the personal movement of the filmmaker would be underlined, as opposed to the commercial filmmaking industry that was superficially objective and always used tracks and grids for camera movement. He and others who followed (because, up to Brakhage, Independent New American Cinema was almost exclusively obsessed with the clinical psychodrama, an offshoot of German Expressionism and its Freudian symbols that eventually became a tiresome deadend) not only exploited the turgid, muddy images

potentially to be recorded filmically, but also opened up all sorts of patterns in the camera and editing (clipped shots, frenzied progressions in which the camera could toss, fly, spin, and whirl).

Brakhage's unique personal concern would also be involved in trying to discover the inner states of beings other than the adult human: children and babies, dogs, cats and insects, beings not yet born, or already dead. He proved that the images of the personal are of universal validity, and by their nature superior to the studio-manufactured images that with rare subversive exceptions (Hitchcock and Sirk) just coddled, patted you on the back, and reconfirmed what you already knew or wanted to hear.

Hitchcock, like Renoir, Ozu, Rossellini, and to a limited extent Cukor and Ford presented worlds in which everyone had their reasons, that guilt was to be shared and experienced by all—films that threatened, that shook up, that called into question existence and roles—all in their individual styles and personal inflections. Sirk, besides slyly commenting on consumerism, respectibility, bourgeois cul-de-sacs, status and community acceptance, also was perhaps the most avant-garde of commercial filmmakers (or even non-Hollywood; his films are much more "farout" than Buñuel, or Cocteau, or Godard, or any of the other non-commercial sacred monsters), since his primary technological obsession (through which his literary concerns would surface) was about the very two-dimensional qualities of the screen image with its interacting tensions trying to portray three-dimensional activities. Hence the purposeful flatness of his images and constant subject matter of glass, mirrors, reflective surfaces, emphasizing the formic qualities of film: his unique content considerations. Maybe it sounds simplistic, but his people and their concerns are so shallow because their medium of conveyance is so shallow: i.e. film. And he got away with it for 20 years in Hollywood, making lots of money for Universal, getting almost as much freedom as Hitchcock in his denunciations of capitalist mentality, and creating a very avant-garde body of work, with wit and humor, but, foremost, being concerned with film vocabulary and form, unlike any other commercial filmmaker.

If Brakhage and Sirk are the great heroes and pioneers of the Independent film and the Commercial flm respectively, then Eisenstein must be the great villain of both editing and even of the film image.

In Eisenstein you can spot the good guys and bad guys a mile away. Here is nothing but a knee-jerk reflex. And to think that Hollywood silent acting has been criticized for the snarling-villain-cringing-heroine school —which is nothing if not Eisensteinian. One famous example: some

known political figure (who is now on the outs in Party parlance) will be shown haughtily strutting about in gold-lacquered palatial settings, arrogant and supercilious. Cut (and out of nowhere, mind you—not even to a continuing narrative strand) to a preening peacock. There are no shades, subtleties in Eisenstein, it's all black or white. No two ways to think about anything—it does all the work for you, no gradations, no surprises. Even his supposed elongation of (film) time was set in motion way before by Griffith. But really what is most damning, besides such mob pandering juxtapositions as Cossacks with pigs, is his total shirking of working with compositional spaces. It's all up front—the meaning is all contained in the foregrounds, with receding, weak, unplayed backgrounds. Now in the entire history of the cinema, from Griffith to Brakhage, it is this shifting tension, or, hopefully, tensions among the three fields of background, midground and foreground that constitute a genuine filmic sensibility. What is going on among these various planes and the spaces in between provides commentary, reflection, qualification and placement. There is this lack of density in Eisenstein, that along with Cocteau (a totally pre-cinematic sensibility), and Buñuel (stuck in an anachronistic Dadaist groove), make them the most overrated trio in official cinema guidebook history.

Let's talk about the horizontal/vertical motion of film. Unlike poetry and art, in which it is up to the viewer, spectator, reader how much and in what way he responds to the art object (the reader can take his own time, skip ahead, dwell on words and phrases; the viewer can look at the whole painting first, or any detail), the auditor of a piece of music or the watcher of a movie is controlled by the artist. The difference is durational. In very much the same sense as one hears a series of notes, chords, or tone clusters, one sees a progression of a series of shots. The horizontal aspect in film can be looked upon as the subject matter itself (in the narrative literary context—what are these specific images: raccoons or policemen or flowers or mirrors or whatever); in the same way the horizontal dimension of literature is what happens next: events, narrative; in music the melodic line, the theme. The vertical aspect is how all this is (literally) colored, how long the shot lasts, the exposure—is it light or dark, how is the image framed, what is contained within the frame, what is left out, is the image moving or is the subject matter within the frame moving—all this corresponds in literature to the actual words that tell the story or propel the reader: the language, the grammar, the syntax; in music, to the length and dynamics and coloration (instrumentation) of the notes. This is the old saw

about Form vs. Content, which had been solved long ago: i.e., the two work together, can't have one without the other to provide the meaning(s), thrust of any work of art. Now, in music, with the 2nd Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern) for the first time in history, with the exception of very worked-out controlled Bach fugues, both the horizontal and vertical aspects were controlled by a very systematic and totally exhaustive predefined grid or overlay or blueprint. Not only did so many notes, and of a specific kind and order, all have to be played before they were allowed to come round again (Schoenberg's contribution), but even the length of the notes or chords, their instrumentation or attack would be graphed ahead of time (Webern's contribution). Very rarely has this been attempted in film, with not only the flow of the specific images, but their qualities as form taken into consideration to provide a specific framework in approach.

So really film is basically musical: any movie with a soundtrack is already a very mixed-up medium, a hybrid, a bastardization. Of course soundtracks help carry matters along, do all the work, as it were. It's hard to think of Connor or Anger without their tracks—but that is exactly the acid test: Harry Smith's *Early Abstractions* and *Late Superimpositions* can survive without their early Beatles' goading, but *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* cannot (as witnessed by the recent pulling of the at least exotic and idiomatic Janacek Mass in favor of a very undistinguished rock track). Brakhage, Mencken, Vertov have all shown that to purely watch the images is a much freer, broader experience than any track would add. The film can truly breathe this way—go many more places than it can anchored to sound. Somewhere along the line the divergent rhythms of film and sound get in each other's way—unless you're concerned with film theater which is a whole other kettle of fish. You'd have to cut an image on every note, chord, or sound effect for the rhythm to be accurate to the image and then you'd have a series of redundancies, reinforcements. To object to silent film would be akin to having to have a Scriabin sonata on in the background while one would read Bernadette Mayer, or being plugged into earphones while looking at Vermeer—being told what to look at or listening to some of the early Franco-Flemish school, Josquin or Dufay. Just as ridiculous and infantile. To have to have a sound track is not taking film seriously.

Knee-reflex reactions: I remember a show here at the Cinemateque not too long ago in which a series of minimalist or structuralist films (not exactly arrivistes: Snow, Brakhage, Frampton, Sharits, Gehr) had the

audience so incensed and threatened by lack of any identity figures that they would throw beer bottles at the screen. The viewing mentality was not quite ripe for these films and still has a long way to go.

One of the joys of independent/personal movies is the fact that, given a cultivated eye and form, everyone's approach is unique. In a hand-held field everyone has a distinct way of moving; it can be clipped or gliding, tentative or aggressive; how tall or short the person's stature; it can be a situation in which one is relaxed and knows the subject matter intimately or one in which you have to catch the material on the sly as it were; it can be reportage, home movie or documentary. You learn about your way of seeing by viewing your rushes: given a wide-angle to close-up lens (let's say a 12 to 120 mm. Zoom, though I'm not saying to use zooming in and out—one of the banes of modern film technology), one can frame all the gradations between ultra-objectivity (wide-angle) and selectivity (close-up). Of course, there is something inherently fascistic about the close-up—the doggedly insistent exclusion of various visual fields—but like any other gesture, used sparingly, appropriate for a given effect. One can show some hands performing a function in an early shot of a series, and then later clarify the mystery by placing it in a long shot. What is excluded from the visual field has just as much a voice as what is included. Very long takes with a minimum of visual activity automatically invoke leisure, repose, or a meditative state. Short, active, heavily spliced series of images conjur frenzy, generative, fiery forces. An overexposed image (too bright) tends to flatten the visual field, remove the apparent dimensionality of the image, a bleached effect. An underexposed shot (too dark) lends mystery and foreboding: murky, literally understated, even a sinister quality. Then there are the myriad varieties of movement. Is the camera still or in motion? Is the object within the frame in motion? And the camera still? Are the camera and object(s) going in complimentary or divergent directions? Again, each variation will produce a different effect on the viewer (but not to be understood divorced from the other film components). Because we are Westerners and have been trained to read from left to right any directional pull of this order will produce a progressional effect/reaction. And, oppositely, any right to left pull will register a subtle regressional attitude. Thus, one can reinforce positive or negative poles on the same level as over and under exposure. And what about the vast field of movement? Is the movement a hand-held pan in which the camera is stationary but moves on an axis in one direction or another, left to right, right to left, up to down, down to up, laterally, or in

circles? Or is it tracking, by the filmmaker's own momentum, or by a moving object? This opens up more fields. Is the track conveyed by car, boat, plane, bus, train, bike, wheelchair, roller coaster, swing, being pushed out a window, and if the background medium registers this then it will cause a specific reaction/interaction in the viewer. Then there's the matter of lap dissolves (one shot fading out and another shot fading in towards the end) and superimpositions.

Film stocks: the texture of the image, the various tactile modes. Of course, color as opposed to black and white, but some stocks have a grainier look than others. And one can use indoor film outdoors (which gives a very blue tint to the image) or outdoor film indoors (with non-natural, non-available window light) which gives an orange hue to the visuals. There is slow speed film—ASA 25—Kodachrome II—which one would use in very bright light normally: midday, on the Sahara, on water; then ASA 64, MS or tungsten, ASA 125, or Ektachrome ASA 160 (very fast film); there is even ASA 400 for color. Fuji film from Japan, Ferrania film from Italy; in black and white we have Plus X and Tri X and 4 X. ASA's from 40 to 400. One can use negative black and white as opposed to reversal, or Ektachrome commercial which has a very soft grainy almost viscous visual field; and especially fun are out-of-date stocks or film in which the emulsion (film coating) is starting to break up so the dot-like, fiery, exploding aspect of the celluloid image is constantly in motion. One can use light leaks and flares, and camera breakdowns (the film not being properly threaded and so not quite being in the gate to give the image a fluttery momentum). All these potentials are like different brush strokes to provide a change, an expressive reversal or chasm to be plunged across.

Where the camera is placed can provide punctuation to the images. If the camera is tilted up at the objects they can be invested with stature or foreboding, larger than life, looming over one. Ford used this approach invariably, giving his heroes an exuberance they might not have had with an eye-level approach. Also, by tilting up one includes more of the natural surroundings, particularly clouds and sky (and Ford had the most poetic clouds in film history—they are almost an instrumental voice), thus emphasizing man's benign interaction with the elements and very much stressing a positive attitude towards progress, civilization, a hopeful attitude. But this is not a strict rule. When Janet Leigh goes into the car dealer's bathroom to count her recently stolen money in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the camera is tilted up and the background stalls evoke a sinister, something-could-swoop-down or burst-out nagging possibility.

Tilted down, the impression usually conveyed is one of Olympian detachment, eye-of-God attitude, it is all unfolding for us, this is just one cog of many, there are millions of other events like this happening all over all the time. The importance of such-and-such an activity is placed, dwarfed, commented on. This is the usual viewpoint for an establishing shot in a conventional narrative film. There is a danger in overusing a these-are-all-worms-underneath-the-rock attitude, and it is hard to think of a filmmaker who would consistently approach his subject matter this way.

Then there is straight eye-level, which would be the standard—Hawks hardly ever strayed from this framing. There is the whole German Expressionism school, which, as has been increasingly pointed out, was not just limited to Prussia in the 20's, but overwhelmingly influenced all of Hollywood when, because of the war, and even before, many German directors (Lang, Murnau, Preminger, Siodmak, Wilder, Lubitsch, Ulmer, Zimmerman, etc.) came over here. It was the hallmark of Welles and, to a more limited extent, Cukor and Hitchcock, and even the early psycho-dramas of Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Brakhage.

A good film to check out would be Carol Reed's *The Third Man*, in which one is hard put to find a straight-on shot—every image seems askew, awry, tilted right to left, left to right, up to down, down to up, so as almost to induce nausea. Usually this is meant to invoke an all's-not-quite-right-with-the-world attitude, as well as states of psychological disarray, frenzy, upheaval—all underlined without having to move the camera. Or one can start out in a flipped position and move the camera either 180° or 360° to complete a circle.

Two classic examples spring to mind: 1) in Hitchcock's *Suspicion*, when Grant brings Fontaine the last poisoned glass of milk (she thinks), with a lightbulb put in the glass to really give it a luminous, highlighted quality, we see him enter from her point of view as she's in bed, and then the camera comes half circle round as he strides across the room to place the milk at her bedside. 2) Then there's a very similar take 14 years later in Nick Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause*, again from a character's point of view, this time James Dean's, as he's stretched out, hung over, very confused about his relation to his parents, friends, the world; his father enters, dressed in a very frilly apron, to talk to him, again a 360° turnaround. Both instances show very subjectively a state of anxiety or confusion or helplessness, both unthinkable without German Expressionism, even though Ray was American, and Hitchcock British.

Now point of view usually means that we are seeing images unfold distinctly through the eyes of a character (in narrative film context). Hitchcock is the arch exponent of this; he built a whole film around it, namely *Rear Window*, though all his works partake of it. One goes back and forth between seeing images objectively (the theater's fourth wall, as it were), and subjectively (a character's reactions to what is going on in his or her situation). It is very seductive and allows for very quick identification on the viewer's part; it is one of the hallmarks of manipulative cinema and really why film is the true 20th Century extension of Greek cathartic theater—we are made to experience very directly the upheavals that occur to the character. Of course independent, personal films, expecially if they are of the lyrical, diaristic variety, can be looked on as totally point of view: what the filmmaker sees of the world and experience; or the opposite: totally non-point of view, with every image having a detached, observational quality: one is there to record without investment and not to put the audience through base paces.

In any case there is no such thing as a correct shot—breaking rules has proved effective; the grammar exists to be undermined. So film has evolved its special language. On the lens the filmmaker has a series of f-stops which either let in or shut out light. These are like organ stops or pedals that provide tone and coloration. And there is no correct reading that one gets with a light meter—there is only the standard mean and it is up to the filmmaker to decide what will be appropriate. Of course, all this is dependent on development, what one's lab will do to it. You never know how it's going to look until it comes back from the lab. But there is a certain amount of insurance you can provide (albeit of the fairly expensive kind), which is to overshoot, or make a series of takes where each time you film the same object you vary the exposure, one or two stops up or down. And one can extend this even further by also varying still shots with moving shots, going left to right and right to left, tilting up or down and so on: then, while editing you decide what you'll need.

A few words about the length of images. One of the banes of TV is that people can superficially "read" the content of images fairly quickly; the information can fly by pretty rapidly so that the viewer is able to get the selling point on immediate contact. Slow films (Ozu) drive people up the wall. Now, given a certain standard mean of what is long and what is short, one can modulate series of shots of varying length that, as a group, might all be deemed fast. But there is a world of possibilities between shots that last as long as 20 seconds, those as short as ¼ of a second, and

all the gradations between. People are a lot more sophisticated than 50 years ago as far as what they can take in. Now the question indeed arises as to how much one can take in when an image goes by fairly rapidly: the figurative characters within the frame and their possible interactions both in and out of the frame; the taking into account of the off-screen space; their reactions, gestures, expressions, clothes, make-up, class, sensitivity; what are the byplays between characters and filmmaker: are they strangers, friends; are they aware they are being filmed or taken by surprise; is it day or night, city or country; what is the active focal length: close up, midshot, wide-angle; is the camera moving, which way; is the object in motion; what is the exposure like, or camera angle; which element takes precedence, both in reading a shot and making the leap to the next image; how do we both tie them together or be made aware of their differences. Is the point similarity or variety? And one can latch onto a key or grid, but that may dissolve, be upset.

Some people are disturbed by the brevity of some of my images—particularly those that one might label "beautiful" or "ecstatic." They are over before one has a chance to barely luxuriate in them, they are taken away before one can nestle and coo and cuddle in the velveteen sheen of it all, so that feelings of deprivation, expectations dissolved, even sado-masochism arise. Very often a cut occurs before an action is complete. This becomes both metaphor of frustration, hopes dashed, and yet of serenity if you like—that perhaps all of this activity has been going on, is going on, will be going on, and even all at the same time. That we are privileged viewers of many sectors of humanity, none taking precedence over the other.

I believe that the nature of film lends itself to density: one can't pack in too much, albeit with rests, breathing spaces. It isn't necessary to have the totality of resonances immediately graspable, one should be able to return. The works I've made have met with two seemingly contradictory reactions: either people regard them as very enjoyable, light, airy, pleasurable, everything being very giddy and beautiful; while others regard them as dark, sinister, hopeless, claustrophobic, negative, minor key. (And I indeed regard the works in a Mozartian key scheme: *Carriage Trade* being in E-flat Major, broad, epic, leisurely, maestoso; *Rude Awakening* in D minor, brooding, cynical, fatalistic, dancing on the precipice; *Divided Loyalties* in C Major, agile, dynamic, spry, with a hint of turbulence [and even this scheme of keys can be seen as a classical instrumental concerto: first movement setting the scene and the longest in time and

investigation; the second movement a dark melancholy adagio; the third a breezy rondo to clear if not quite dispel the heavy air, gracious, with a let's-get-on-with-life feeling, a caper and a capper to what has gone before.]).

So again, the ambition might be seen as an attempt to hold finely balanced series of tensions in which one can read images a variety of ways, sometimes in contradictory stances so that there are many possibilities of interaction. Not that any interpretation will do, or that it doesn't really matter what particular order presents itself—the works are definitely about specifics, each image a statement in series of axioms and postulates to produce an argument of a flexible non-didactic kind. A plus B will produce a feeling of C, whether it is anxiety, or pleasure, or commentary, or awareness, or whatever. Usually works are mirrors of what is contained already in the viewer, and it is the role of the creator to "place" or qualify these reactions. Lead the viewer down one road only to diverge onto another, upset inbred expectations at the same time as exploiting those very cliches.

Let's take a shot analysis of some images you've just seen [in *Divided Loyalties*]: after a series of very short images, all bursting with motion and activity, the height of frenzy, so that the eye is both very involved, glued to the screen, and at the same time lingering to focus on something concrete and steady (these have almost all been nature materials and the camera or objects are in a variety of motions), the climax of which is a Coney Island Tilt-A-Whirl shot, a burst of revolving motion—metaphors of going in circles, going nowhere, aborted energy conflicting with spasms of life forces in play—the eye is highly geared now—This is followed by the first still image in some time, and the first figurative image as well—the viewer is held now, forced and even anxious to have an anchor—so you show them something both appealing and shocking: specifically, a line-up of very handsome homosexual bodies all with shirts off, having a good time, gingerly moving even in the same right to left motion as the Tilt-A-Whirl shot; so that the shock is both on a narrative and visceral level.

This is followed by a moving shot (as opposed to the still shot of albeit moving bodies) of a cemetery with the gravestones carrying over the same horizontal blocks as those preening bodies. So we get an overly obvious cliched reaction of dust unto dust, all is vanity, almost of a biblical oppression, and lest anyone think this is rabidly anti-gay (which it is), this is followed by an affluent heterosexual couple at a luxurious

breakfast table, very uncommunicative, obviously at loggerheads, fed up with each other and themselves, a *Citizen Kane* quote, the pettiness of their supposed just-completed argument qualified by the gravestones image (why squabble when death is just around the corner); this specific duo contrasts with the anonymous group of gay guys, as well as the fact that they are indoors in a domestic setting, as opposed to a public outdoor gathering-hole. So both the straights and gays come into criticism and are linked to death and dissolution: though one would never cut from one to the other, it is clear enough they are linked by the more neutral yet charged image of the cemetery.

The couple at table is followed by an image (movement left to right) of a series of train pans of rather bleak apartment building exteriors (though bathed in glorious late-afternoon sun), evoking the feeling of well-what-is-going-on-behind-all-these-windows—perhaps similar scenes of alienation and estrangement (and in contrary motion to the movement strand in between the previous figurative images).

This is capped by a very short figurative image of a bocci ball game in Paris, the only part that we see is the player hitting the target, brief enough only to communicate that fact, no intro or after effect.

The camera angle, by the way, moves down continually throughout this series: the group of guys is shot from a second story window; the couple at table, at eye level, intimately, staged (though the characters are told not be aware of the camera); and, finally, the ball player is shot with the camera looking up. Also, the emphasis of figures moves from group to couple to individual. All of this keyed for both contrast and continuance. The brevity of the player has a playfulness and acts as punctuation almost like a period.

This is followed by an almost equally brief shot of two sailboats passing each other—upside down, which conveys the obvious tinge of all's-not-quite-right, an upsetting of the normal visual stance, yet echoing the couple at table because of the two-figure emphasis (yet a contrast as well, because this set is only objects), but emphasizing the visual pun of "two ships passing in the night," unaware perhaps of the needs, desires, frustrations of one another. One fairly narrative shot, one that is specifically staged like the couple at table, can carry endlessly a narrative guideline in which to judge many of the images around it. And there is a narrative element to these works, glimpses it is true, but on an equal footing with the documentary/diaristic images.

Another set: A young man is seen in close-up, though unaware of the

camera's presence, sitting cross-legged in yoga position, very happy, dumb stoned smile, watching something.

Direct cut to his field of vision, which is a band of rock performers. We go from single to group, from male to female (since the act is predominantly made up of women). And, again, the man is shot straight on, whereas the women are shot from the right. They are out there to please, and apparently they are doing so, judging from the all-embracing approval given them by the onlooker. Now, as a visual icon, a viewer carries with it a proxy of the viewing audience—looking at itself as in a mirror, although how much this resonates depends on the actual self-reflective qualities of the cinema viewer.

From the group of women performers we cut back to the solitary young man, eyes now closed in what seems to be ecstatic reveries, underlining a particularly non-reflective state, perhaps an avoidance of reality as his stoned demeanor might indicate.

Then a cut to a very castles-in-Spain image, specifically, a sailboat on a very smooth, reflective lake, with a tower-castle on the right very much in balance with the sailboat on the left, though the figures are contrasted, one moving, the other anchored. Since we have cut from a person with eyes closed, to this castles-in-the-sky image, we underline the element of wish-fulfillment; this is the removed from reality image the young man would seemingly like to conjur up, which is, of course, the primary base emotion of the typical cinema audience trying to step outside reality, to have dreams bestowed on them.

So how can we provoke guilt, recrimination for this shirking of responsibility. The lake-castle-sailboat image is followed by a shot of another young man, standing as opposed to sitting, who is bleeding profusely from the head, dazed, not by drugs but from some dire car accident (as will be confirmed later on by a doctor running to attend him). So perhaps that removed-from-reality image is present in both their consciousnesses, but from very different circumstances. This not only qualifies the young man's fleeing from reality, stuffing himself on pleasure, but it also qualifies and upsets the cinema audience's demand for a good time from movies; there is somehow a link, a chain, by the very act of editing, of putting shots/images next to one another, that says our pleasure is somehow at the expense of another's suffering.

This is emphasized by the next image after the dazed, bleeding man—which is a close-up of a Cezanne painting being cleaned. The image of art naturally refers back to the artist-filmmaker, saying that art is both

objective and merciless, the filmmaker being both callous and opportunistic, sharing in the guilt, taking advantage just as much as the audience of other people's misfortune to build his argument. There is a coolness, an objectivity that seems almost cruel and ruthless, to follow this image of human suffering by an image of, very specifically, art going about its own business, as oblivious as the drugged young man and the audience wanting to be entertained. Engaged in an activity of casual everyday banality, though the response might be different if one recognizes that this work is not being painted, only cleaned, the dirt being stripped away. The metaphor would then allude (without lessening the guilt shared among the drugged young man, the cinema audience, and the artsy filmmaker) to the young man's closed eyes, but would focus on the process of reopening, of lifting the veils of obscurence. Here again we can have our cake and eat it... Yes the artist is cool and detached, but the reason is to shake up and disturb. So the argument is not so much an original work of art being composed, but the fact that art is being revealed, in the causal link of images.

This is followed by a shot of a photographer (again, a stand-in for the filmmaker) in a crowd, New York Easter Sunday, with about 40 different still cameras around his neck, desperately turning around and around looking for something to film, shoot, contain within the lying objectivity of still photography in which just an instant is recorded. This image is a criticism of a whole art form, the fact that nothing has a valid reality outside of the whole chain of images, which is what cinema is; so this image of non-artist (funny enough in itself) becomes just another underlining of the responsibility of the artist and viewer.

* * *

Sonbert: Criticisms, or questions?

Barrett Watten: One of the things you left out about Eisenstein, is the social context in which the artist operates. To really simplify matters: Eisenstein was addressing a largely non-discriminate and mainly illiterate mass of people, and so the obviousness of his use of film as an educational medium has to be taken into account. And so if he's using a fairly stock set of images to demonstrate a political point, that's operating across a much bigger gap than the kind of film you're proposing, which, in fact, works off an incredible sophistication and the work of the film industry over the last 50 years. Your entire vocabulary presupposes a real intimacy with

what American Hollywood film and personal film have been. And that leaves the question of what language is and the assignation of values within the film as exterior to the film, in a way.

One thing that just came up was the woman cleaning the Cezanne, okay? And then there's a great take on what art is, etcetera. Now it wasn't clear to me what she was doing, although I did get the sense of coldness, the art industry, and what she looked like, and what this thing was, how it was mounted and so forth. Now there's an articulation from your viewpoint that goes even further than what I can see in the frame. It has to do with reading into the act of making this work of art that is correlated with a tremendous amount of other art. And that's what Eisenstein didn't have available to him. What he did have, basically, was Cubism, a kind of simultaneity which he could then extend into a medium he was more or less creating as he went along.

Sonbert: In the same time that Eisenstein was making those propagandistic narrative films, Vertov was making a whole other body of work, also directing himself to the masses, also under the control of Soviet party policy. And he opened up an incredible amount of poetry and ambiguity in his images. If you compare *Man With A Movie Camera* to any of Eisenstein's films of the 20's, it's much broader, looser, air is constantly being let in to his images. And they're not shoving you into thinking one way or another. I think Eisenstein suffered because he was dealing in narrative, with characters, how to present them as being good or bad. And Vertov was more in a documentary frame, so that automatically everyone was given a certain stature, which Eisenstein could not do, because he was anchored to narrative.

Watten: I don't think you can just throw out Eisenstein without considering whether he was completely in control of the irony of his reduction of signification in film—in other words, does he know what he is doing? Does he show us what there is to see? The condition of history that Eisenstein was dealing with was one that was inescapable, while Vertov's position was one of ambiguity and distance, and may not be the way one might want to look at a period like that.

Eisenstein's literalism is highly ironic. Like that figure of the kid on the throne in the Winter Palace seems to me a figure for the ability of the filmmaker to do whatever he wants. This is an incredibly libidinal image, you've got this sexuality which just cannot be gotten away from. The image of the 14-year-old with the shaved head sitting on the Emperor's chair—that's like Eisenstein's ability to do something to you. As an artist

he was completely aware of his activity. He was working within a state structure. You're not talking about extrinsic and intrinsic ideas when you're talking about Eisenstein and Vertov.

Sonbert: Eisenstein almost invariably had the camera down, tilted up, full face, full in the frame, with very diffuse backgrounds. They all seem to melt away. Whereas Vertov placed his people within specific contexts; you get an idea of environment, of spaciousness in his very images that you don't get in Eisenstein's, which are much more controlled, but more claustrophobic, to me. I'm not making Eisenstein out to be, like, a total non-talent. [laughter]

Watten: Eisenstein identified with power, and so his irony is of a different order than that of somebody who's bucking power.

Sonbert: Okay, it's great that he identified with power, but I don't have to identify with him because of that.

Ron Silliman: I kept getting the impression from your talk about your work of an assumption of a standard of literacy. Like, this shot will create these responses. And I find that when I see your work I go through a process of needing to identify the image before I can read it. And that varies. If I recognize Anne Waldman in the backseat of a car, then I have to recognize her before I can then proceed to look at it. If it's just a woman in the backseat of a car I can begin to read that image a lot quicker. I'm not always sure at what level I'm immediately expected on your part, for example, to recognize Anne Waldman, recognize Nick and Jerry (who I assume a larger number of people might not recognize), and there was one scene where people were hitting one another with sacks, where one of the people was somebody I knew from my *job*, who I assume *you* might not even recognize. [laughter] So how does that impact with what the shot is going to be? You're assuming a fairly high and consistent standard of literacy, which is a little like defining your audience in advance.

Sonbert: No, I don't feel that. If you get the added embellishments, the overlays, that's fine, they can add to it, maybe change inflections. But usually it's pretty low base level standard of what information one can grasp. It's not necessary to recognize that's Anne Waldman, flanked by Douglas Dunn and Larry Fagin, as it turns out. It's enough that three people, grumpy, hung-over from the night before, not really talking to one another, are in the back seat.

[Unidentified]: Watching your film and hearing you talk about it, I think there are like two different processes maybe dealing with the two hemispheres of the brain. When you're watching the film you're only

dealing with the sensual qualities of the film. You don't really have the time to think about the narrative in the way that you talked about it. It seems like the narrative is very important to you because you spent a lot of time talking about it, rather than color or form. But is it humanly possible for us to deal with the narrative and the sensual qualities at the same time?

Sonbert: There are certain things you feel, react to, register right off. Even here today, there was a huge amount of audience response, laughter, to an image which generally has not gotten that much reaction. Specifically, the man holding this trophy, which somehow falls out of his hands. This is contained within a very specific series of shots. Which is that a woman comes out of what looks like a theater, she's taking bows. So we get the feeling of applause, fame, acknowledgement, celebrity. This is followed by a shot of this bridge being raised. A sort of physical manifestation of bestowing honor. Then we see a shot of a rainbow. Again, the visual pun: the pot of gold at the end of the silver lining of the rainbow, which we've just seen, which drops away.

Now, I don't know if people got all these lines, but I think they had a sort of intuition. I'm not forcing—I would never show—Kubelka has this policy when he makes films of always showing them twice. I'm not that didactic. If you want to come back to it again, that's fine. And I think that when you do, more things open up. More connections, lines, reactions. But hopefully, the works can function on many levels. And sometimes people just feel this thrill about going along, being shoved along every moment. That's basic one level. Then maybe later they can come back and have more happen for them.

[Unidentified]: The question that I have is: does what you call the intuitive response to the narrative come from the information within the frame or the relationship between frames?

Sonbert: It's both.

[Unidentified]: My feeling is that, in seeing it, it's more the information within the frame than the relationship, right now, on the first viewing.

Melissa Riley: Can you talk about how you compose, when you go out with your camera?

Sonbert: Right...

Lyn Hejinian: That leads back to the question of literacy, too. In other words, are you reading, in the editing room? Do you have an initial, naive possibility? [laughs] Or do you go out and look for someone to drop a trophy? [laughter]

Sonbert: There are a few images where I went out, almost after it was

set, because I felt I needed more dark, turbulent, sinister images. Specifically the woman floating at night in the swimming pool. I almost wanted to have a death, murder, evoke that. Usually I'll go out and shoot what interests me, attracts me. Usually it's public display, festivals, energy, activity, people concerned with precision and control.

When I get back rushes, I'll see a series of images and I think, that's the one that's really working for me. But I won't as yet—until I gather so many rolls of film over so many years. Like, this was three years. Then I'll think, okay, I've got enough. Then I'll start to build these art works.

Kathleen Frumkin: That opera sequence, that first woman dressed in black, bowing she stumbles, and there's a pun on the trophy dropping. But I began to recognize the costumes from *Aida*. And then further on there's a shot of neon from the Aida Cafe. So what interested me in that was how much you carry around via memory. Or actually that the world speaks to you in its chronic images. I don't mean chronic in a bad way, but something that is consciously on your mind. So that seems to be a very literal thing, and not necessarily narrative.

Bob Perelman: What happens is, as you see the film more, your time sense dilates. You know what's going to happen, so you don't have this initial moment of worry and you can read the finer points. The film really seems to get longer. The first time it whooshes by.

Something like that happens in poetry. I was over at Intersection when Ron read part of *Tjanting*, which I find extremely easy to listen to. It seems like he's being very deliberate, and not demanding pyrotechnics from the audience to keep up. But then I heard somebody behind me say, Yeah, I didn't get much of that, I just closed my eyes and got some images.

So, the language that you have in common with the viewer is under dispute at every point. And, finally, the only thing you can do is to go on your own familiarity. You've seen this stuff for three years in making it. So you'll just have to take a stand: Yes, this guy is hung-over; Anne Waldman is in the backseat and not talking, and that's what it is. The question of resolving the language, the time scale and the fineness of the language, finally has to end up in the artist and then: here it is for people to see as many times as they want.

July 8, 1979

Tenses

Douglas Woolf: This evening is dedicated to Alfred Lunt, who died I think yesterday, maybe the day before—may be the day be before . . .

Tenses,

like automobile gears, are restricted, have been somewhat arbitrarily chosen—past, past perfect, past imperfect, past definite, past indefinite, imperative, interrogative, conditional, subjunctive, future, future perfect, future imperfect, future subjunctive. I love them all. First gear, second, third, sometimes fourth. Reverse, low, high, overdrive. In a real big rig you can get up toward twenty. When they're really meshing, you can seem to be in automatic . . .

I had actually intended to say that I could be here if you might allow me, but then it occurred to me that you had probably already asked another, who would be somehow traumatized by displacement. Thus I shall not allow myself to run on forever, in case he's out there . . . or the ghost of his wishing to be up here is whispering in the wings of this room, which themselves have been waiting, waiting, to move into this center, where I am now standing and glancing at them, hardly knowing them, for they from their viewpoint have been here forever, while I this room do not know, but am, God help us, presuming to take it over, take this center of this corner of this city of this state of anguish, over, through the invitation of one Bob Perelman—or perhaps two Bob Perelmans—no more certainly, not tonight, not with all these other possible people, who themselves are hiding, briefly, this evening, from the rest of the city, the rest of the state, which even now is writhing in anguish, dipping its own frayed wings in the ocean, hoping thereby to cool its mountains which are burning, consuming its foliage, its animals, sending down great clouds of smoke to choke those in its valleys, including the insects and allied species, the flies, the butterflies, the mosquitoes, even the spiders, who are now dead, only their webs left living, still catching meals which shall never be eaten —unless one of us thinks to—shall, will otherwise hang there in those

wings in those corners like marshmallows forever forgotten, while I, I, presume to stand center holding *briefly* this among the myriad attentions—that girl over there is scratching her armpit!—*beauty*, beauty, takes in our eyes and our ears and our noses, our mouths, our fingertips, our toetips, our elbow angles, our chin angles, our neck angles, our waist angles, our knee angles, our ankle ankles, our big toes ankles, our middle toes ankles, our...other things not necessary to mention—those boards there, inside that ceiling, are *worrying*—that one there, *warped, warped* since the day he was nailed to that joist, next to that other, straight, true, unwarped, perhaps forever—this sentence itself is straining, briefly, *briefly*, to escape its boundaries, for it has seen the marshmallow, tense in the rigors of death, so finely, so airily, so stylishly borne by the web of the past perfect—through the doors, the doors, the misused doors, the unused doors, abused, left open, for all to pass through, while they had intended only ghosts and spiders—that board is yet *warped*, smoke is yet *invading* this valley, we are fighting it with our own natural gasses, the speaker is *speaking* into the smokey air with our own air, others into the warped chairs—the answers are there, not in the wings, not in the corners, not in the spiders, who are now dead and recovering, listening to the strings of their past and our future playing the grand old tunes of the past, like 'My Leg Itches—Scratch It,' 'Eighth Heaven,' 'Mosquito Night Blues,' 'Marshmallow High,' 'Spider State University,' 'Smoke Gets In You Dies,' but with certain reverence too for the future, which recovers faster than we do—it too, heedlessly it seems to us sometimes, facing its problems, for they are now happening, all around us—the future participates and we are nailed to them... in our old chairs, waiting, waiting, for the fun to begin, for that web does come down, does reach toward, does leave its corner, on wing, dropping its marshmallow, comforting on the way down that warped board, passing, ignoring the other, comes down, over to me, asks, ''Doug, will you read us, a story?''

Past prehensile. Past provocative. Pluprufrock. Electronicosmic. Pleistocene imaginative. Probable potpourri. Preclusive barbiturate. Unmonitored present. Barbidoll prettyperfect. Mammalian intensive. Present amok. Always delirious. Masticated maybe. Predeterminate bureaucredential. Future implausible.

Let me read you a story.

It was a good job. He had made it of clover grass, interlaced with violet, a formula of his own. He had lined it well with down. No string. She had helped of course. Had. Over the years they had developed a way of aerating the down which he had not seen used before, though no doubt by now some others were copying. It was accomplished by collecting the down in a leeward place, fluttering it with the wings. Then they hung it on a rosebush for several days. They transferred it to the tree house on a sunny afternoon, piece by piece. Had, all had. He had always thought to show the children exactly how it was done, so that the way would not be lost or misconstrued, but the children were always gone so soon. He was shivering.

He had built the house, as always, in a position to receive the early sun, when it was free. It was not today. It would have shown directly on him, where he was now; he knew that by years of memory, and confirmed it by comparing the viewpoint of the house with the viewpoint of his nook. This was mere pastime, for the sun was busy reading cloud today. Sun read backwards; otherwise cloud would have moved east to west. Hm, down south it often did. That meant sun could read frontwards and backwards too. Come to think of it, so could he. It only depended on where he was. It was going to rain.

He had not regained strength enough yet to fly. Oh, he could flap a little, like some poor chicken, but he still had his shivering pride. He preferred not to try the air unless he could dive and skim and wheel and glide. Besides, it hurt. Thus he was not eating well. How she would have been after him! Guiltily he stretched his neck to look about his nook. This was an important outpost for ants, quite luckily, though he favored a winged fare. Occasionally a careless one did present itself to him. Yesterday there had been a wasp: his twittering stomach remembered that. Surely he had not fed it so many seeds since his first year. His childhood had been an unusual one. His parents had died young, in a cat—he'd been ''brought up'' by a daffodil. He still went back to visit now and then, in season. Not this year, not this year.

Usually he built within view of one. How to account for this year's oversight? Ah, now he remembered, last year there had been three of them, right over there. The people in the people house had scraped that earth, a great swathe of it, and now they were watering it, in the rain. He could see the first big cloud drops bouncing off those noisy, spitting ones. He could see the laughing, flashing parts of them as they broke, splashing earth. He was thirsty. Well, he could hop. Hopping he tried to catch a cloud drop, on the fly, but missed. Thirstily he pecked one of the spitted ones, from a tulip leaf. Thank you, little drop.

What a commotion he must have caused in *that* universe! He

looked around at the many others before he chose. Some were larger than our own, he guessed, others not, but all quite large enough. Not everyone understood. It was a matter of perspective mainly, and dimension. Down and up are separate dimensions, in balance: up too big for down to see, down too big for up. The beings in those other universes were, from their perspective, as large as we. Some of them were probably even of people size, and elephant. Hell, 83' wouldn't surprise him much. From their viewpoint they had almost infinite space, though like us they probably tended to crowd some parts of it. Was there, in that one, say, a world as beautiful as ours? Had been. Well, yes, perhaps, to them. On the other hand, quite possibly we had been given the most beautiful one. He always thought to point this out to the children when they grew up. *Had.*

He pecked a few more before he hopped back. Now he was shivering totally. Around the edges of his blinking eyes he could see his feathers dance. It was not only the cold and wet. That one had come back again. It sat hunched on a branch above *his* house, jabbering with that wife. One would think it owned the place. Ah, a person from the house had noticed too. He had come out to douse his water. He could not reach the tree house, but he tossed a stick toward it. Cursing, that one took off, leaving that wife gleaming evily down on them. These people had good hearts, even if they weren't around when you needed them. That had been very early, of course, even he had scarcely begun his bout with morning. They had shown up, finally, in time to give them a proper burial. Had. Most of them. Here one came now with her fingersful of seed again. That was nice. He made a show of pecking a few for her. Didn't they know about wasps? Perhaps they were vegetarians, like the finch. Or, he had heard the robin complain that they were digging up his worms. He would have to remember to ask the chickens about that. They knew them best.

When she had gone, he ate an ant. Now his shivers turned into a coughing fit. In his house he would have been all right. Violet is for the chest, and he had always had a touch of weakness there. It also calmed the nerves, and sharpened the wit. White clover is for Promise. Had, had. With that one scared off awhile, he took this opportunity to explore the battlefield. It was better than just sitting around all day with shivers and coughs. He set them hopping toward the tree, under that wife's steely glint. It did not take him long to find whom he was looking for, in a clump of grass people were too high and straight to see beneath. Although this was one of the unwounded ones, he was already beginning to disappear. His bare skin was grey and sere. The hardest part was, he could hear him cheeping still. He was too young to understand. He wanted to come back and eat. It's all right, you can go now, he called to it, you can go now... No, he could not understand.

Nor in truth could he, on his side. Had it been a squirrel to blame, it would have been easier. Or a cat. Yes, even a cat. Cats were an inherited evil, in him at least. Squirrels were squirrels. Sometimes he could almost smile to see them frisk. But these other monstrosities, he had heard of their happening, of course, and seen, but somehow he had always relegated them to nightmare that one could awaken from. *Had.* He shivered slowly back toward his nook, beyond sound of cheeps.

En route he spied a daffodil. Two or three of them. Perhaps now he remembered seeing them there, before. The people had moved them to the other side of their house. It was a thing they liked to do. They wished to offer the daffodil a better view? In that case, all those trees they felled were intended to improve the view of those left standing? They cut them up into naked strips in order to give those others a lesson in anatomy? Not very likely. No, they used the flowers and trees, just as he used the grasses and wasps. The important variance was in the realm of quantity.

These were lovely wilting ones, like his "old man." He had seldom seen them young, even though he was an early bird. Had been. Too early for once. Had he been a little later, that one and wife might have chosen another house. He remembered after he had repelled their first attack they had checked out the older housing, but they had returned when they found that everyplace else was in need of work. There was no such thing as patent anymore: they steal it out from under you while it's pending. No more property rights. Ask any daffodil.

They did in fact have a lovely view, of sky, and hill, and "his" tree house. He found it comforting to sit with them awhile. He seemed to shiver less. Perhaps it was all the arms they had that steadied him. Daffodils seemed so certain of themselves, as though even in the rain they were reflecting sun. Perhaps they were directly related to the sun, perhaps only in the way that he himself was related to them. Finally he had to admit that he was getting soaking wet. The old feathers weren't as warm as they once had been. He felt a ball of coldness in his chest, only his head was warm, or fever hot. I hope you don't mind if I head back to the nook, he said. They smiled, and he hopped back.

It wasn't until he had returned that he understood what they had said. The world is a subdivision of the sun. It was their job to keep an eye on things in springtime, when so much was happening. Once everything was well along, they could sleep. That was their view at least. Meanwhile that one was back. He had brought some crazyseed with him, was sharing it with that wife. He could tell by the heightened pitch of their gibberish. Meanwhile the blood was pounding in his head. His head rolled in such dizzy waves that he could scarcely keep his feet. He steadied himself by concentrating on the seeds the person had given him. If that was down, then this was up. Everything else was

poppling. Soon he had himself well enough under control that he could pick up a seed without pecking his feet. The eating helped. Had the person known barley was good for dizziness? Now his gently weaving head could concentrate on a fly nearby. Fly, come in out of the rain in me. This fly was a friendly one, and wet. Tasty too, though hardly wasp.

He had dropped in just in time. The rain was letting up, or rather the sun was letting the rain stay up. Poking for an ant, he came upon an unusual thing, to him. It had one straight, sharp leg, and a tiny head. Probably a people thing, a smaller model of that spike they used to hang the finch house up. He placed it on a little ledge he had. Now nook was house. Those others were having a brawl in that other one. Something about "family" life. Now that one took off, probably in quest of more crazyseed. It did not dive nor wheel nor glide, but shot. A winged ass hole was what it was. What colored wings? Glint? The dark feathers became only a glint of the real light, nothing was their own. Bleck. The black, the white, the blue, the yellow, yes, the black and white and blue and green and violet, like himself, but not the bleck.

A person came out to turn that water on again. Now he could watch the last cloud drops break up on it, as he had the first. The person did not have to toss a stick, but she did come back with fingersful for him again. He had scarcely made a dent in her earlier heap. He pecked but once. Maybe she would get the idea to save some of her seeds for a later month. She had nice toe nails, shiny pink. Could sing well too, her red lips pursed up, sing better than that other one. That one quawked. Not now at least. The sun came out.

When she had gone, he hopped into its light, to feel its warmth. He tried to fluff his drooping feathers out, and turned his wounded wing to warm. It really hurt. The sun felt love. Did it feel love for that one, who could stab a lovely lady in the breast, then eat her eyes? Could murder six helpless babies, feed half of them to that wife? Then proudly quawk! He had *done* his best. He really had. Even flopping like a chicken on one wing he had fought and fought, had fought until the people came out to throw their sticks. Then he had reeled to his wife beneath the tree, had done what he could to comfort her while he watched their burial. *Had.*

He was reeling now, in the sun. He tried to tell himself that he had slipped. Not good signs, in either case. How she would have scolded him! The next morning he had watched her burial from his nook, with no one to comfort now. No one ever again. All had. Now there was only he and the sun. His feathers drank of it, while they could, for it was hurrying on its way. It had work to do, clouds to read on the other side. It had family everywhere. A chill wind moved in to take up the space left behind by sun's departing warmth. Wind fanned his fevered head

deliciously, fanned too the ball of cold he carried in his chest, increasing it. It was that ball that he reeled around. He "hopped" back to his nook.

That one was back, and he and that wife were having fits. Grass is one thing, poppy quite another. He could not make their raving gibberish out, except that it was foul. He called the people, just for the hell of it. They always came out promptly in the afternoon. This time they both threw sticks, and one of them hit that wife on the glinty head, right on the lethal yellow beak. He knew it did not hurt her—those ones were made of steel, or snake—but did she quawk! That one too! Together they flew raving, quawking off.

Sweet silence replaced their quawks. The people stood for a minute drinking it too. Then they spoke comfortingly to him and turned their water off. When they had gone inside, he felt quite refreshed. A wild impulse had come to him. He tested his wounded wing. It did flap, askew. Wouldn't she have been angry with him! He flapped both wings and they lifted him. Flopping back to his nook, he prepared himself for a running start. He was off like a fart. He had never imagined air could hurt so much. He seemed to be tearing his way through it, inch by inch. It was like clawing his way through a net, but he did. With one last flapping, flopping lunge he was seated on the edge of "his" house.

He had done a good job of it, now befouled. After catching his breath he tried to brush some of the garbage out, with little success. She had six eggs. He did not touch them, but drove the little spike in among them, head end first. Turning around, he dove, tumbled, back to his nook.

He was *reeling* now, and bleeding. Was he having a fit, himself? His shivers were having a fit. Dark was falling. The first stars were out, and reeling too. His head revolved with them. He took one last peck of seed, while he could see. Soon he would be pecking star seeds... "One world at a time." Suicide is pointless—time cares for itself. Let's see what comes next. What may be, what *might* have been—the past tense now is almost lost. It was time to get a fix on the universe. The suns were surrogates. God stationed them out there to look after us. He couldn't be everywhere at one. Have you any idea how many universes there are out here! He did check his suns out from time to time, made sure they were doing the job. If one slipped up he was retired at once. Watch it there, old Sun-daddy! His spinning head could picture them huddled around the fireplace in the Old Suns Home. He had to smile. Above, in the spinning dark, a clean star smiled too. He knew, he knew. Now closer to home there was a piercing quawk. That wife had reached the end of her quawking patience; she cursed that one most vilely. He had to laugh. Above, that star laughed too. He knew. What

was a little space between friends? (Save The Ozone, It's Your Roadside) He was shivering convulsively. The worlds are ends. Lovely roads. This one had been so. He had really enjoyed the view. Now let me out

August 8, 1977

The First Person

Bob Perelman: The issues I want to bring up are the basic ones of person and language, writer and writing, who or what is present when the word I is present, who's writing it, who's reading it. And this really can't help but involve me with my work, so I'll be talking about that near the end.

First I want to bring in Saussure's concepts of *langue* and *parole*, in English roughly equivalent to language and speaking. Or as Barry put it in his talk, hearing and speaking. This is very simple and basic. I hope it doesn't seem too simple, because the consequences are endless. Saussure says:

> . . . language is not complete in any speaker; it exists only perfectly within a collectivity. . . . Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual. . . Speaking, on the contrary, is an individual act. It is willful and intellectual.

So there's always active and passive, identity and trans-identity, willful speech and automatic hearing. In looking for language, all you see are individuals speaking, and what they're saying is trans-personal: language.

Another Saussure term is sound-image, which is distinct from the sound of a word. Say I say, "mispronounce." Then say I say, "mispronoonce." You know that's wrong. Then say I say, "miss pronouns." You know that's something else. The point is: separately from the physical fact of hearing, there are images in all our heads of the way words sound.

Saussure says that for language to exist you have to have two people, a circuit. But you don't. You can talk to yourself. And, to some extent, writing is that: producing words with nobody else there at the time. But the point is that even when you're talking to yourself there are indications of a circuit going on. First, if you speak out loud when you're alone, most of you will find it impossible to fully speak and listen at the same time. That's a minor point. What basically proves the existence of the circuit is the fact of intelligibility. The way words mean and sound in our heads already is indication of the existence of something outside ourselves. We are perfect-

ly at liberty to say what we like; but we are absolutely not at liberty to change the language. So, in some sense, the first person is actually the last person, the latest person to use the words.

This can feel like a problem. Here Williams, from *The Great American Novel*:

> If there is progress then there is a novel. Without progress there is nothing. Everything exists in the beginning. I existed in the beginning. I was a slobbering infant. Today I saw nameless grasses—I tapped the earth with my knuckle....
>
> One must begin with words if one is to write. But what then of smell? What then of the hair on the trees or the golden brown cherries under the black cliffs? What of the weakness of smiles that leaves dimples as much as to say: forgive me—I am slipping, slipping, slipping into nothing at all. Now I am not what I was when the word was forming to say what I am...
>
> ...Words are words. Fog of words. The car runs through it. The words take up the smell of the car. Petrol. Face powder, arm pits, food-grease in the hair, foul breath, clean musk. Words. Words cannot progress. There cannot be a novel. Break the words. Words are indivisible crystals. One cannot break them—Awu tsst grang splth gra pragh og bm—Yes one can break them. One can make words. Progress? If I make a word then I make myself into a big splurging word... I begin at the beginning and make one big—Bah....
>
> ...pyramids of words, tombs. Their warm breasts heave up and down calling for a head to progress toward them, to fly onward, upon a word that was a pumpkin, now a fairy chariot, and all the time the thing was rolling backward to the time when one believed. Hans Anderson didn't believe. He had to pretend to believe. It is a conspiracy against childhood. It runs backwards. Words are the reverse motion. Words are the flesh of yesterday.

This speaks for itself. Words are already created and so they've usurped Williams' function as a creator. Their meanings are already there ahead of his impulse to write them down. He can't get out of this impasse; he can't break the words and stay interested, and he can only identity with them mockingly.

The person doesn't have the stability of words. First he's eternal, "I existed in the beginning"; on second thought, he's mutable, "I was a slobbering infant"; in fact, he's gone, "slipping away into nothing at all." The progress that he calls for applies to people or their surrogates, cars, only ironically. People age, cars rush forward, but can't get ahead of the words.

He's further removed from words by his experience of them in time. "It runs backwards. Words are the reverse motion." This refers to the way words are read, the motion of meaning always going back to the beginning of the sentence. "Now I am not what I was when the word was forming to say what I am" has a double motion. "Now I am not" starts in the present, "what I was" moves to the past, "when the word was forming" stays there but finally moves back to the present "to say what I am." All the time, of course, the individual words have been ticking forward. So, for the physical person reading, "Now" at the beginning of the sentence is out of date by the end. The sentence alludes to this idea, but the fact that it is a sentence contradicts it. In any sentence, there is only one present. Grammatically speaking, "Now" and "I" are synchronous. A sentence creates a timeless field which suspends words from their physical manifestations.

Words are half physical in a number of ways. Another of Saussure's concepts is that a word is made of a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the sound-image, which is only half physical, and the signified is the meaning, which isn't physical, but does refer to the world. Again, this can feel like a problem. Here is Burroughs, from *The Third Mind*:

> All right, let's put it apple pie simple with a picture of a wedge of apple pie there, containing 53 grams of carbohydrates. See the low calorie diet. Well now, if you don't know the word for apple pie where you happen to be and you want it, you can point to it or you can draw it. So... when and why do you need to say I want apple pie, if you just don't care how fat you get. You need to say it when it isn't there to point to and you don't have your drawing tools handy. In short, words become necessary when the object they refer to is not there.... What keeps you from seeing what is in front of you? Words for what is in front of you. Which are *not* what is there. As Korzybsky pointed out, whatever a chair might be, it is not a chair. That is, it is not the label "chair."

This sounds pretty obvious. Clearly, with "chair," you can point to the missing object. But in the sentence he uses to make his complaint against words, what about "there"? There's no such easily demonstrable split. "There" is, by definition, there, if you can hear the pun. The manifestation of the word is more nearly what the word refers to. It's tricky, and you can think about it for a number of years without progress. And I seems completely problematic and exactly in the middle of the two cases, chair and there.

In speaking, of course, the I... I am speaking. But in writing, it's

more like taking the tape back to where I just said, "I am speaking," (Did I say "I am" or "I is speaking"? Either one) and transcribing. And that I there is borrowing the present tense, the time that I existed in when I said that, and it's blithely assuming that it's speaking, that I, back there on the tape, if you see what I mean. It's saying it's speaking. And that's the position any writer is in, using I. Creeley's work is a total investigation of this, and of pronouns in general. Almost any poem in *Selected Poems*, I almost said *Selected Pronouns*, is a dance of pronouns. Here's the first half of "The Pattern":

As soon as
I speak, I
speaks. It

wants to
be free but
impassive lies

in the direction
of its
words. Let

x equal x, x
also
equals x. I

speak to
hear myself
speak?

I remember first reading that and not understanding what he was saying with x. But now it seems like: "Let x equal x" and "Let I equal I." For anybody, I equals I. The separate instances of the word are what make it so problematic. In this poem, *langue* and *parole*, speaking and hearing, are at odds. He starts out speaking, but instantly falls into hearing and out of identity. The progression is: I speak; the pronoun I speaks; it wants to be free; and finally, completely unknown, x. But, of course, he's been speaking the whole time. I speak to hear myself speak?

Speaking of identity, let me read a little from Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*:

> A speaker is not consciously aware of the phonological system of his language, but this unconscious knowledge must be postulated if we are to account for the fact that he takes two acoustically different sequences as instances of the same word and distinguishes between sequences which are acoustically very similar but represent different words.

"Mispronounce" and "miss pronouns." But, on the other hand, Creeley's conscious knowledge allows him to split I into two words: I speak and I speaks. Culler goes on:

> The self can no longer be identified with consciousness. It is "dissolved" as its functions are taken up by a variety of interpersonal systems that operate through it... And as it is displaced from its function as centre or source, the self comes to appear more and more as a construct, the result of systems of convention. The discourse of a culture sets limits to the self; the idea of personal identity appears in social contexts; the "I" is not given but comes to exist, in a mirror stage which starts in infancy, as that which is seen and addressed by others.

I speak to hear myself speak?, or, to illustrate the point more exactly:

There was a little woman as I have heard tell,
She went to the market her eggs for to sell;
She went to the market all on a market day
And she fell asleep on the king's highway.

There came a pedlar, his name was Stout,
He cut her petticoats all round about;
He cut her petticoats up to her knees;
Which made the little woman to shiver and sneeze.

When this little woman began to awake,
She began to shiver, and she began to shake;
She began to shake, and she began to cry,
Lawk a mercy on me, this is none of I!

But if this be I, as I do hope it be,
I have a little dog at home and he knows me;
If it be I, he'll wag his little tail,
And if it be not I he'll loudly bark and wail!

Home went the little woman all in the dark,
Up starts the little dog, and he began to bark;
He began to bark, and she began to cry,
Lawk a mercy on me, this is none of I!

This is from Stein's *Geographical History of America*:

The question of identity

A Play

I am I because my little dog knows me.
Which is he.
No which is he.
Say it with tears, no which is he.

I am I why.
So there.
I am I where.

Play I Act I

How are you what you are.
This has to do with human nature.
Chorus. But human nature is neglected.
Yes of course human nature is neglected as neglected as any one.
Chorus And the human mind.
Chorus And the human mind.
Nobody is told to close.
Nobody is told to close about what the human mind is.
And so finally so.
Chorus There is no right or left without remembering.
And remembering.
They say there is no right or left without remembering.
Chorus But there is no remembering in the human mind.

Human nature is what we remember of ourselves, our feelings, our narrative situations. Human nature remembers what it all means. Whereas the human mind doesn't remember, it *knows* what the words mean. It is the place or instant intelligibility exists. There is no *re*cognition, only cognition. The human mind meets each word, each time. So it can't read the same word twice.

But there's a funny dualism in her work. She's trying to write language, to address the human mind. That's why she writes at such length. Any particular bit of writing tends to register as utterance, as *parole*, as Gertrude Stein saying, "Nobody is told to close." The way out for her is endlessness, aiming for all of languge. But her insistence on the present keeps driving her work back towards utterance. And she does back her work with a lot of ego. The *Geographical History* begins, "In the month of February were born George Washington Abraham Lincoln and I." She's certainly not calling that I into question.

Now I want to look at poems which posit or contain character, seem to be a self speaking. This is Catullus (my translation):

Lesbia, let's live and love each other.
The sour frowns of the ancient citizens
Aren't worth one cent.
The sun sets and can rise
Again, but for us, the light's
Night so soon, and we don't

Wake out of that dark.
So give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,
Another thousand, and another hundred,
A thousand again, and another hundred,
Swirl them together so we'll lose count
And no one will destroy us with
The evil eye, numbering our kisses.

And rhyming with this, where the I passionately addresses the you and there's the *baleful* third person on the outside, Mr. Objectivity who will destroy the communion, here's the beginning and end of Creeley's "Distance." Here the third person does hex the I by the end:

Hadn't I been
aching, for you,
seeing the

light there, such
shape as
it makes.

The bodies
fall, have
fallen, open.

Isn't it such
a form one
wants, the warmth

as sun
light on you....

What have *they*
done to me, who
are they coming

to me on such
informed feet, with
such substance of forms,

pushing
the flesh aside,
step in-

to my own,
my longing
for them.

Here's "To John Ashbery," by O'Hara:

I can't believe there's not
another world where we will sit
and read new poems to each other
high on a mountain in the wind.
You can be Tu Fu, I'll be Po Chu-i
and the Monkey Lady'll be in the moon,
smiling at our ill-fitting heads
as we watch snow settle on a twig.
Or shall we really be gone? this
is not the grass I saw in my youth!
and if the moon, when it rises
tonight is empty—a bad sign,
meaning, "You go, like the blossoms."

O'Hara definitely inhabits language. But, like he says in "Personism": "It's all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy." Personal details and tone are usually there to allow for a safe approach to Great Art. Here, he almost brings the convention of the T'ang poet mourning his youth into focus, but little touches make sure it's fake: the rhythm's wrong, "the Monkey Lady'll"; the diction's wrong, "Ill-fitting heads"; "twig" seems too slight. "This is not the grass I saw in my youth!" is like a bad translation, hints, slightly, that O'Hara is stoned; but also, he means it. It's the unhappy cry of the aging poet (who was 28 when he wrote this).

In his essay on Pasternak, O'Hara quotes Zhivago: "You in others—this is your soul. This is what you are." It's true for O'Hara. What's personal in his poems doesn't come from a pre-existing Frank O'Hara. He never "found his voice." It's not a recording of the self, the self is *listening*.

You could almost call his I a persona. Let me read you some work where there definitely is a persona, and it's used, I think, to less advantage. This is from the second Canto. And you can see Pound being very impressed with Browning's dramatic monologues:

And by the beach-run, Tyro,
Twisted arms of the sea-god,
Lithe sinews of water, gripping her, cross-hold,
And the blue-gray glass of the wave tents them,
Glare azure of water, cold-welter, close cover.
Quiet sun-tawny sand-stretch,
The gulls broad out their wings,
nipping between the splay feathers...

Then, skipping a little:

God-sleight then, god-sleight:
Ship stock fast in sea-swirl,
Ivy upon the oars, King Pentheus,
grapes with no seed but sea-foam,
Ivy in the scupper-hole.
Aye, I, Acoetes, stood there,
and the god stood by me,
Water cutting under the keel.

My take on this is that the really fantastic writing occurs when Pound is on his subject, which is the sexual divinity of the sea. But then, he puts in this character. I think that's a terrible line, "Aye, I, Acoetes, stood there." It's incredibly clunky. It makes that whole last part sound phony, made up. After the early Cantos, he drops personas, and then I is always a historical person. It's almost never Pound himself. He's backstage.

He was trying to manipulate language, to have it act. Either it did that, or it was nothing. But finally, *The Cantos* acted on him. What I finally get from them is Pound, his good guys, villains, laments. It was going to be the signpost toward a new culture, but instead it's material for the Pound industry.

He wanted culture, not language. Paradise exists in nature, or in some past cultures, but the present is always a drag, barbarism. Paradise is always outside what he can say now. Like at the end: "Be still/Let the wind speak/That is paradise."

The fact that words are circuits defeats him. "I cannot make it cohere." He can never get to paradise. Near the end, he says, "The production IS the beloved," but later he says:

Shall two know the same in their knowing?
You who dare Persephone's threshold,
Beloved, do not fall apart in my hands.

That last line is frightening, and thinking of Pound as a tragic hero only masks it.

Looking at Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, in terms of persona is interesting. The beginning is the same story as with Pound: when Olson is trying hard to create a persona, the writing falls off. Especially the first poem, which is the weakest of the series by a long shot:

Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood
jewels & miracles, I, Maximus
a metal hot from boiling water, tell you

what is a lance, who obeys the figures of
the present dance

I just don't believe that at all.

The nest, I say, to you, I Maximus, say
under the hand, as I see it, over the waters
from this place where I am, where I hear...

It's just rhetorical frosting. If he wants to say where he is, he does it in the other poems, very beautifully quite often.

Compare that persona with the end, which is:

my wife my car my color and myself

There's no way you can say that's Maximus. That's Charles Olson: his wife is dead, his car is gone, and in fact, he's just about dead. My color—he's dying of cancer—and myself. Even the verb or verbs are gone.

Just to nail this down a little further than it needs, I want to read part of a poem by William Stafford, which I think is all persona in the worst sense. It's the persona of the real life self speaking normally:

TRAVELLING THROUGH THE DARK

Travelling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead....

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

So, this is a "voice" poem. William Stafford has "found his voice." It's all realistic, but all it leads up to is the pathetic fallacy of "I could hear the wilderness listen." A typical neo-academic dirge for nature. The poet is firmly in the driver's seat, "*I* could hear the wilderness," and firmly in control of all the meaning, "*I* thought hard for us all." All the other work I've read insists on the reader participating, which is reasonable, seeing that language is as much in the reader's head as the writer's. But here, the I is in a privileged position, unaffected by the words.

The sense I finally want to get to with all of this is of the I defining itself by writing, by the words, strictly locally, almost within the boundaries of its pronunciation. You could call it autobiography, if you derive it from the roots: auto being self, bio being life, and graph being writing. Self-life-writing, a self defining itself by writing. Let me read a couple more poems. Here's "Method Action," by Ted Berrigan:

The frog sees the dog. log?

See the lamp?

It is out.

"Do you think I became
a dance-hall girl
because
I was *bad*?

It ain't gonna work.

Because by morning,
it'll be gone.

The medicine I took
to change
the way I was.

*

And I'm the man who killed him.

The I here is a local phenomenon. Each I is a different person. In fact, the last I kills the previous one. The poem is also very autobiographical in the traditional sense. First, there's the way it refers to the rest of Berrigan's writing. His lines are often variations on other lines of his. The poems talk to each other. "The frog sees the dog" is a spinoff from another poem in *Nothing For You*, which begins: "You stay in the mental institute of your life/God sees dog in the mirror." And then, of course, there's getting high to write, "The medicine I took to change the way I was."

Here's a section from an untitled poem of Joanne Kyger's. It's in *All This Every Day*. What I want to get at here is a slight shift from the I being local. If the I is embodied when it's pronounced or written, then it's not a big jump to hearing the writing as a self. Not necessarily an I, but a self:

During the beat of this story you may find other beats. I mean
a beat, I mean Cantus, I mean Firm us, I mean paper, I mean in
the Kingdom which is coming, which is here in discovery.

It is also Om Shri Maitreya, you don't go across my vibes,
but with them, loosing the pronoun. It is Thy, it is Thee,
it is I, it is me.

Machines are *metal*, they serve us, we take care of them. This is to me, and this is to you. You say you to me, and I say you to you. Some machines are very delicate, they are precise, they are not big metal stampers. She made enough poetry to keep her company.

That last line is really what I'm trying to get at.

And to expand that sense, here's the first and last stanza from one of the poems in the *Vita Nuova*:

Ladies who know by insight what love is,
With you about my Lady I would treat,
Not that I think her praises I'll complete,
But seeking by my words to ease my mind.
When I consider all her qualities
I say that Love steals over me so sweet
That if my courage then did not retreat
By speaking I'd enamour all mankind.
Yet words not too exalted I would find,
Lest base timidity my mind possess;
But lightly touch upon her graciousness,
Leaving her worth by this to be divined,
With you, ladies and maidens who know love.
To others it may not be spoken of...

My song, you will go parleying, I know,
With many ladies, when I give consent.
Since I have raised you without ornament
As Love's young daughter, hear now what I say.
Of those around you, beg assistance, so:
'Tell me which way to take, for I am sent
To her whose praise is my embellishment.'
If you would journey there without delay
Among the base and vulgar do not stay.
Contrive to show your meaning, if you can,
Only to ladies or a courteous man.
They will conduct you by the quickest way.
You will find Love abiding with her beauty.
Commend me to my Lord, as is your duty.
[translated by Barbara Reynolds]

Okay. Please disregard the slightly stilted translation and the usages of courtly love, base and vulgar. The point is: there's the writer and this person he wants to speak to, to speak of. His perception of her is so exalted that he himself can't in fact talk to her. He has to do it through mediation,

which is song. In real life, Dante saw Beatrice three times in his life. She once said hello to him and he *swooned* for three days. She died soon after.

Here, language is commonsense and transcendental at the same time. On the commonsense side, words are an overflow mechanism, "seeking by my words to ease my mind." They're also a means of communication. They don't create what they're talking about, they only point. If the person hasn't noticed the presence they speak of, they won't register. That's how I take what could sound like elitism, "Among the base and vulgar do not stay, etc." But there is something to that, in that a poem finally does have to go where it will register. The words won't convey the intensity of love he's speaking of unless the circuit is completed in the other person's mind. And so, "Ladies who know by insight what love is," if you extend that appropriately, have to be the ones to listen to the poem.

But there's the transcendent side, also, and I find it completely fascinating. The last stanza, "My song, you will go parleying, I know, With many ladies, when I give consent." It's Dante speaking, and it's also, by its own definition, the song speaking. It *is* the song. So the poem becomes a being in itself. The words listen to Dante, and speak for him; they speak to others, and they can stand in Beatrice's presence.

So this gets to what I wanted to say. That words are circuits. They involve the person in the transpersonal. So, in writing, "self" and "language" don't exist as indissolvable entities. There's only reciprocal circuitry, between writer and reader, and between writer and the words. The self speaks and hears language.

As a coda, here's something of how this impinges on my work. This poem is called "God":

Ay chinga!
Bright sun shines.
God appears.
"Down in front!"

I want to put
This word here.
The mind at
Its shuffle.

I want to
Hear this word.
Dull person,
Fish fish, water.

What I want to emphasize here is the competition between speaking

and hearing, wanting to say something and wanting to hear it said. "I want to/Hear this word." By the time I tell myself to do that, the words are gone.

I'll close with four paragraphs from *a.k.a.* All I want to say about them beforehand is that the writing takes places in a personal situation, which is both objective and subjective, so there's both "I" and "he." Finally, though, the writing has to speak for itself:

> Backlog of outtakes, smiles, folding matchbooks. Two thousand year old empire in eight year old brain. No beginning. A logging road, I was there, it was gone. Daylight washes sentiment out onto the road. It says what it is. He meant to say, or dreamt to blend, bend. Vibrations breaking colors buzz away. The earth grows more literal each year...
>
> He heard the music and stood up. Played at appropriate speed, incurable motion out the window. The names are maintained to prevent the accumulations of self-esteem from crashing too harmlessly into private abysses. As if hearing were a perfection of air perpetrated among rivals, sets of teeth, synonyms, sentence structure, ruptured blood vessels. Night fell, and I lived through that, too, expressing the expressable in terms of the expressed. On good terms with neighbors, dependable, daily, there, smiles, and is currently writing and reading this sentence....
>
> Carved space behind the letters, depth behind the sounds. Matter makes up for the vanished past. If you read it, it burns in. Making decisions in time, stuck by them from then on back to the beginning. The pronouns can't get in later, I know...
>
> He sneezed and found himself in a single life. The lenses of his eyes solved the problem of objectivity. The way the bark twisted up the trunks, I was in a foreign country. The act of speaking was a delicious mockery. When asked for ID, I walked erect, opposed thumbs, spoke, and seeing a sudden rush of rain, vanished, even to myself. Thus solving the problem of subjectivity.

* * *

Larry Eigner: I imaginary infinity.

Perelman: That's right. And it's in finite location. I hope I made that clear, that you can't separate out the I.

Robert Grenier: I don't think it's fair to dump on the emotional self as commodity. What is there of interest that draws people to that poem?

Perelman: The Stafford poem? I don't know. It's a question of how people read and the circuits that have been opened in reader's minds. The way poetry is being taught now there's less sense of possibility and the

mass of people who do read poetry, which isn't very big, have read poems like this, and it's a reassuring, soothing sense of self.

Grenier: That you don't often have in your daily life.

Perelman: Yes.

Grenier: And that you can project yourself onto and identify with as a kind of locus of sensibility that you'd like to be possessed of, at least while reading the page, to give the world a center of feeling it might not have in the flux of shifting phenomena.

Perelman: Well, actually, yes.

I'd like to turn that around, and see why there is this sense of difficulty with much of the work that doesn't take that self for granted. Why is that so difficult? Why can't we explain what we're doing more clearly?

Barrett Watten: It seems to me that the question is really stated as a problem. You're saying that the I is a problem. It's not going to be a vehicle for saying what *I* think, or what *we* want *you* to say we think. So, given that you're not going to do that for various reasons, like, we don't like it when people do that to us. I don't like it when people speak for me. So it makes me not want to speak for myself, almost.

Perelman: Well, I *am* trying to speak for myself, actually. I identify quite a lot with Williams, especially the early Williams and his growls and anger at the amount of prerecording in his head. Let me quote myself. I don't remember hearing this, but Rae Armantrout [laughter] quoted me in a review as saying, "I don't want to be an automaton." I said this in a bar. I don't remember saying it. But I definitely feel that way.

Ron Silliman: You were talking about Shakespeare. I remember that.

Perelman: There's the sense of language being prerecorded and language acts as being spontaneous. And that *is*, to me, a real crux. Until we come up with a social form that is satisfactory and not a reduction of our language sense. I've been looking at Shakespeare on tv, and Shakespeare is great, let me tell you, if you don't believe me. [laughter] One of the things he had going for him was an absolute social form in which he could—it's not just that he could say anything, it's beyond that. If you can say anything, so what.

Allan Tinker: I want to say something about your O'Hara subject. I agree that Stafford's I is an assumption, and assumes the empirical unity of the self which is appealing to an audience because it's the predominant ideology of not only capitalist and bourgeois society, but from the Greek on. And what O'Hara does is literally in the poem to say, I'll be Tu Fu,

you'll be so and so. The I is constructed and the masks are interchangeable, so that the I is not a fixed interpretation. The pronoun is used but what it refers to is not a myth of a fixed unity.

Tom Mandel: Not to disagree with that, but to supplement it, Allan, that poem, if you want to talk about a completed social form, that poem is it. Everything in it is convention. The address is convention, the third person is convention, the afterlife is convention.

Perelman: That's what I tried to say. What raises that poem above other conventional poems like it, is the knowledge of the conventional nature of what it's saying. You can demonstrate it in the actual rhythm, how it flirts with chinoiserie.

Mandel: Wit.

Watten: One thing you get with O'Hara is a clear conflict between literature as learned in school and the interpretation of these conventions in the actual I, his actual I. O'Hara reinterprets literary forms in terms of the subjective I. But he doesn't propose that subjective I as the final result. There's a conflict all the way through that makes his I active. I think we owe a lot to that.

Silliman: O'Hara's work so often is calling attention to its devices, constantly defusing what Allan calls the myth of unity.

Perelman: Except that he means it, too.

Silliman: But, in the Stafford poem, all the language is subservient to this umbrella structure, which only surfaces in the poem at the word I. What makes the poem work is that same sense of agreement you get in bad didactic writing, whether it's talking about the individualized subjective I or the People or Logos. We've seen a lot of umbrella terms used badly in poetry. And Stafford simply represents one form of that, where all the language dissolves as you're reading it. When you hear language being used "poetically," like the car purring, it comes across in a really smarmy way.

Jeanne Lance: I'm not sure whether the Stafford poem works because of the I or not. I didn't feel that. I felt the I was a convention, and not particularly apt. But the clarity and simplicity of the poem are why people like it. It doesn't have much to do with I.

Perelman: It seems to me the climax of the poem is "I thought hard for us all."

Lance: But that's the line, the whole line. It's not the use of the I.

Perelman: But the focus of the line is on the I thinking, isn't it?

Mandel: He pushes the deer for all of us. It's not bad enough that he

does it. We have to do it, too. People like that poem because it makes them feel shitty. [laughter]

Tinker: In the structuralist book, you referred to the mirror stage. I don't know if you're familiar with Lacan's mirror phase theories . . .

Perelman: I'm not.

Tinker: There's this stage between six months and two years. The infant is first coming into the world with no sense of an individual ego, no separation from the mother's body, and so forth, but then, at one point, it'll see a mirror, it can be a mother, or any individual . . .

Perelman: Something that responds to it while it's acting.

Tinker: And it has a realization: oh that's me. Then the I is always in a physical structure located there, not here. The there is where the I is located. Then the symbolic I is an overlay. And apparently that I has to be broken, the mirror has to be shattered, and the I, rather than a unified identity with the other, has to be a fluidity of many myths.

And the only other thing I can contribute about the I is Derrida suggests a correction of Freud's being trapped in a phallocentric ego. First the child is identified as the phallus of the mother, that is an extension, only an extension—Okay, you're thinking penis. This is symbolic, it's only used in terms of a symbolic structure. That there's no recognition in the infant of any separation between itself and the mother. This is the family romance, the Oedipus complex redefined outside of the reductive symbology of American Freudianists. It recognizes the father, who introduces distance, because there's an other, and sexual difference. And then the male child, this is what Freud claims is normal, identifies with the father who possesses the phallus which becomes the symbol of consciousness. One of Derrida's suggestions for a way out of this phallocentrism, which he tries to do through a rereading of Nietzsche, in which the masks of masculine and feminine are constantly being interchanged. It's an attempt to arrest this identification of consciousness with the masculine and patriarchal figure.

Perelman: Well, yeah. But it's all so topheavy. I just want to get to the place where I am—is this contradictory?—to want to be past convention, and yet not outside of language.

Watten: Well, you're talking about writing and psychology. And Allan is saying maybe your thesis has something to do with a change in the value of the I that is more general and cultural. Or, do you contend that what you're talking about is more a problem of writing and the meaning of writing.

Perelman: I was trying to have it be the meaning of writing. To my mind, this wasn't psychology.

Watten: Well, you were talking about identity.

Perelman: Identity is not psychology. Identity is the physical position of the person who puts the words down on paper, or who reads the words.

Grenier: So what do you mean by I in the sense that you're interested in it? Is it an operative principle in writing, or what is it?

Perelman: I finally have to say, it is me and the decisions I make, given my relation to the rest of language and the rest of writing. And that is the I I'm interested in in writing. Yes.

Grenier: So it's like a characteristic transaction.

Perelman: No, it's trying not to be characteristic. I share with Stein and others that to be characteristic is to be a little bit automatic.

Watten: So you're looking for an I that behaves the way you would like to behave.

Perelman: Not even *like* to behave.

Watten: You're looking for an I that is you. You're looking for an identity . . .

Perelman: In writing.

Watten: In writing. You want a world in which you live. In other words, you want to extend the borders of your world through the pronoun into the texts that are available to you. You want extention through the text and the main point of extention is through the pronoun.

Perelman: It's not that I has to appear in writing, but that I'm a writer.

Watten: Do you think there's a difference between I as an adult and I as a child?

Perelman: There are all sorts of elaborations and delicacies available to the adult that are built out of the experience of the infant. Sure. But, as a writer, you're a better writer now than you were at eighteen.

David Bromige: What's behind your question, Barry?

Watten: That the child wants everything to be it.

Perelman: I hope I wasn't saying that.

Watten: A child basically assumes no border, so that anything that happens is pretty much happening to it. Whereas in adolescence you have the problem of the other. And then you get beyond that hopefully and you have to admit to the other. So there's a real difference between the I of a child and the I of an adult. And, somewhat, I think the I that you're proposing is one that identifies itself as active in what it can see. And that's

very much like the child I seeing what's out there. It sees something and that's it.

Perelman: I don't think I identify with all those texts, totally. But I identify, I identify. What I was trying to do here, and it can't be done, is to identify—and any writer tries to do this—is to identify with the language in your head, which you can't do, because it's not an identity. That's what I want to say, finally. There has to be some element of identification with the words or it's boring, right? That's true. Yet, identifying with words can never be completed. That's what I want to say.

April 1, 1979

The Prose of Fact

Michael Davidson: I thought I'd begin with an epigram from Francis Ponge: "Taking the side of things equals taking account of words." I want to take account of the problem of things and the way they are infected by language. And I want to do it in terms of a history of prose, a very personal history of prose. Because I'm talking here about a kind of prose I write myself, and many people in this room. The problem of talking *about* it is the implication that it has some discrete boundaries which I will mark in some way. I'd rather not do that. I'd like the "prose of fact" to be a point of conjecture around which I am constantly writing and thinking about things.

I have a kind of naive idea of what a fact is. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, it's a point of departure for further investigation. I think it began with my interest with lists. At one point the idea of a list was a sort of ultimate autistic construct, because it would create the illusion of a random series that would relate immediately to my life. I would be able to go through my day and check off items on the list. They were words after all, but the syntax of the list was my activity. In that sense, it was a hermeneutic of reading a list. And then I began to realize that I wanted to tell stories; I wanted to describe events. And the problem, of course, occurred in the first few words: as I began to describe the event I was faced with my own language staring me back in the face. I simply couldn't describe. I found myself involved in the forms of mediation that were constantly coming up in front of me.

By using this term "fact," I'm using a loaded term that's as old as the discussion of prose itself, as we'll find out. There are some salient features to the prose of fact, and I thought I'd itemize some of these areas that seem important in my conception of writing.

The first being the recognition of the forms of mediation. Being able to incorporate one's own thoughts on the functions of language as one attempts to get to this ineffable fact, this event. And being able to talk

within the prose of the activity of mediating. It's nothing new. After all, Mallarmé talked endlessly about his own activity while he was working. And you could say that *Don Quixote* is an early prose of fact.

Secondly, it has its inception in the desire to tell a story, or answer the question: What is a fact. Many of my pieces tend to begin with a rather simplistic gesture: "I went to the store," or: "I really want to tell you about this, it's very important to me." But they incur interruption, rupture, my own distractions. I want the work to be, as I called an earlier book, "foul," as in "The Foul Papers," because cluttered with unexpected materials. And I find that there's a constant interrogation of ideas of adequacy, of certainty, of verification of the world outside, which the writing tries to investigate.

I suppose its primary activity involves forms of decontextualization. The term decontextualization is bandied about to refer to the entire poetic function. Russian Formalism made it into a theology. I'm talking here primarily about this quality of seeing what would happen if the word anticipated occurring in a particular place, or a phrase, didn't occur and you get something else, or you don't finish the sentence, or the punctuation's wrong, or the tense is wrong, something like that.

I don't feel as close to operational factors. Although I think that, for many people present, being able to organize the writing ahead of time and allow for certain fixed things to occur to allow for other random possibilities is interesting. For me, the way operational factors occur is through variations on texts, word lists, some kinds of games. And, more recently, I've been very interested in pronoun shifting of one kind or another, or any kind of locational experience in language in which you are signalling that it's yourself, but it's not yourself, or you're projecting a he or a she which is potentially you, or perhaps the other person, hiding behind masks, using the possibilities of pronouns, adverbial clauses, "shifters," as Jakobson calls them. Which is not, by the way, the rhetorical device of persona, in which you actually create a character to speak *for* you. I know that I'm inhabiting these various pronouns myself. But I'm interested in what happens in this process of distancing.

I've been interested—these are all numbered, so I feel I should be calling out numbers. Ninth: "qualities of prose styles by others." Now in this category falls [laughter] something that is really exciting to me. This is what happens when any of us, I think, read new work and become infected by Henry James, or Jane Austen, and feel that somehow we want to inhabit

that world. I was completely obsessed, at one point, by reading the letters of John Clare. Not his poetry, but his letters when he was in the nut house, and he was really writing amazing prose, because there was no sense of termination; he didn't have to close the letter, so the sentence went on forever.

The problems of syntax are of great interest. Particularly where the syntax falls apart. The place where the syntax falls apart has an important existential dimension that Heidigger discusses in terms of breakdown, in which the tools, the equipment, falls apart and one begins to see it for what it is for the first time.

These are just some of the features that I jotted down very quickly. I'm not talking here about *poesie pure* or prose-poetry, because I think that prose-poetry, in the conventional sense, is a highly marked form; it has a distinct tone, rhetoric, and even subject matter involved with it. I notice that Robert Bly has a book of prose-poetry, that James Wright has a book of prose-poetry, and I don't feel sympathetic to that work at all, because it feels extremely bound and constrained, and I'd like this to be as open-ended as possible. Valery described the difference between prose and poetry in a famous distinction, as the difference between walking and dancing. If he makes that distinction, I'm interested in walking at this point. The dancing seems to valorize the poetic function and that refers to qualities of language and a kind of high style, almost the Parnassian style that I would rather not—although once I say this, I keep thinking now maybe's the time to write a Parnassian prose.

The alternatives to prose-poetry are many and varied—I just mentioned Bly and Wright as negative examples. But there are two that are more immediate and tempting, and that's why I mention them as, I think, dangerous alternatives. The first is a kind of self-reflexiveness that one finds in a writer like John Barth. He wrote an essay called "The Literature of Exhaustion," where he uses Borges, Beckett, and Nabokov as writers who have come to a crisis: the novel has come to a critical and stylistic cul de sac; there's no place to go. So what does the new novelist do? What he does is provide a series of footnotes to the corpus of literature in general. Like Borges, he writes tiny tales which seem to deal with the larger problems of literature. That is to say, the novelist exhausts the various possibilities using the various forms of literature as they've been canonized. The dangers of this, to me, are that one ends up with a series of empty fabulations, of elaborate, very complex structures which lack a kind of

immediacy, a personal quality. Those of you who have read something like *Lost In The Funhouse* may know that it's absolutely competent writing in many respects, but it seems awfully vapid and empty after awhile.

The other alternative, perhaps a bit closer to home, is the language of intentionality one finds in the phenomenological *recit*. I'm thinking here of a late essay by Merleau-Ponty called "The Prose of the World." He talks about the use of language to arrive at a primordial signification. His attitude toward language is that the writer intentionalizes his experience and writes *toward* an experience which has already been stated and which lies mute and hidden in the language. And all the writer has to do, by an impeccable stroke of luck or good timing, is to uncover this hidden meaning. It sounds wonderful. And the writing of Merleau-Ponty and Bachelard and other phenomenologists has this beautiful luxurious quality of wandering around an artist's consciousness. But you know, basically, that there is a prior, originary, single consciousness that is constantly intentionalizing. And Merleau-Ponty makes the claim, which I find very dangerous, that the author's desire should be to take us beyond the words, so that the words fall away, and one is in the presence of meaning itself. Implying that meaning has been there all along, that the writer is just a sort of functionary towards this much more important *cogito* that's lying out there.

The first view, the literature of exhaustion, proposes a world completely emptied of significant alternatives, a fiction which is endlessly about fiction, in which human experience gets to sort of tag along, as a footnote to a giant text. And the intentionalist writing of someone like Merleau-Ponty proposes a world that's dense and pregnant with meaning, and the writer's activity is to uncover this meaning. I would like to see the prose of fact as living continually in the interstices between these two areas. I don't like the two alternatives, but I like being between them.

The history of prose has been the history of its difference from other things. We find that there are a series of binary oppositions that have been used to define what prose is, what facts are, what history is, and so forth. The most obvious is the opposition between prose and verse. Or, in Wordsworth, between prose and metrical construction. Read your dictionary definitions, and prose is invariably defined as that writing which does not use meter. And the other term in my title, fact, has as its opposite a whole series of oppositions, the most famous being value, or fiction. In Aristotle the opposition is between history and philosophy, or, as he

continues the discussion, history and poetry. In Plato, the opposition is between dialectic and rhetoric. These are all marked poles, by the way; there's a good side and a bad side. But in any binary opposition there's a tacit recognition that the opposite term, the term you're trying to dismiss, is so important that you need it to get at what you're trying to get at.

There has been a very interesting series of writings from the Russian Formalists, on the subject of the distinction between poetry and prose. Yuri Lotman, a more recent Russian theoretician, defines what he calls "belle-lettristic" prose, which means any art prose, as being the text plus the "minus-devices" of poetically conventionalized speech. That seems to be using the *assumed* qualities of prose and poetry against each other to create a kind of non-distinction. The minus-devices of poetically conventionalized speech are those anticipations we all have as we read a poem, and which, in the case of more recent poetry, we don't get. So when we anticipate a rhyme, we don't get a rhyme and we say, "Aha! I'm not getting a rhyme. I now recognize that this is a free verse poem." This strikes me as kind of witless on his part. Tomaschevsky says, for example, that the problems of free verse are so complicated that we should only look at the most marked and typical forms of prose and poetry, not the borderline phenomena. [laughter] I'm more interested in the borderline phenomena. So I haven't found a terrific amount of useful work in the Russian Formalists, even though they are really pioneers in the discussion of alternative modes.

Prose and verse both come from the same root, *provertere*, meaning to turn toward. So, at some point, the ploughing of a field was a direct action; there was also the turning at the end of the furrow. At some point, they got split off, but originally they didn't have quite the same differentiation. Fact has behind it *facere*, to do. The word "feat" nominalizes it, a thing done. Both words, prose and fact, in their later manifestations, seem to deal with going straight to the point; prose, referring to straightforward, direct discourse; facts seeming to be those things which are not words. One of the things that I'm interested in in the actual phrase, "prose of fact," is that when one talks about facts one is, as least ostensibly, distinguishing facts from words. In the O.E.D., there's a great section on the fact that facts have always been distinguished from words. I want to think that words and facts have something to do with each other. And I've introduced this intermediary term, "of," to suggest some connection between them, and to suggest that facts generate a kind of prose, or that

prose *is* a fact, and an activity at the same time.

The earliest prose that we have is instantly corrupted. I use this word to mean its inability to remain objective. Actually the first prose is only hearsay, which is wonderful. We have people like Herodotus telling us the stories of those historians *he* learned from. Herodotus says, right off the bat, "I'm going to tell you how it is. And I'm going to venerate the *logoi*, those who were versed in the art of telling it like it is. And, if I'm going to tell you how it is, I'm also going to have to tell you how it might not be." As soon as he starts to tell you how this might be a possible lie, because basically history means telling *everything*, including the lies, he starts on a long discourse on language. So, at the very beginning of history writing we have enormous digressions on language and representation and metaphor. And whether it's okay to say this now. And, this figure may be too strong. Or, I didn't mean to say this.

Plato's discussions of prose surround the issue of writing versus truth. He doesn't mince his words at all. Or truth versus persuasion. He's obviously on the side of truth. He's worried, in the *Phaedrus*, about what will happen with the ascendancy of writing in general. The written word has a limited meaning as far as Plato is concerned. Whereas, if one is speaking, one is able to interrogate the word, to surround and endlessly confront the word. And his attack on the written word is an attack on what Derrida calls the "supplement," the idea of the written word as a substitute for an originary presence. Plato worries about memory loss, which occurs with the written word as opposed to the spoken word. We have here the beginnings of a transcendental meaning, which exists prior to the articulation of the word. And writing is a spatialization of that truth and a very dangerous thing, as far as Plato is concerned. And I think it's become the major dualistic idea about language from that time on.

Steve Benson: Could you hit that again?

Davidson: The spoken word is coming from you, so obviously you know what you're saying, but if you write it down, you divorce yourself from the originary word. And the originary word is tied to the realm of Ideas, in Plato's terms.

Benson: So it's like a Frankenstein, or something. It's saying what *it's* saying.

Davidson: But if it's on the page, how can you trust it? Because the word can't talk back. You can't interrogate it. It's mute.

Geoff Young: Its *meaning* is not mute. You decide the meaning of it.

Davidson: You see, in a dialectical situation the way Plato's talking about it, you can feed these ideas back and forth. You can ask ideas, get answers; so the truth is constantly being formed and articulated. But the written word is cut, he says, from its source.

Bob Perelman: Isn't another strike against writing that it's persuasive and will fool you?

Davidson: Yes. Writing is aligned with oratory and rhetorical devices.

Perelman: But doesn't that contradict what you said he said: that it can't defend itself. In fact, you can't get at it.

Davidson: The danger of oratory is that you become so fascinated with the surface qualities of language that you'll lose sight of the truth. And the written word has the danger of not being involved in a discourse. So they are perhaps different areas. But he attacks them in the same dialogue. Phaedrus is talking about the orators and the rhetoricians, and Plato in his typically subtle way is trying to dig into what it is Phaedrus likes about rhetoric. And it turns out that rhetoric is just idle talk. It's designed to persuade. And writing can be involved with that.

David Bromige: He has no intentions on his readers?

Davidson: Plato? He sure does. Remember, it's Socrates talking. He's already created an elaborate shifter himself. And this is the dialogue that is the most replete with metaphors and figures of speech.

Michael Palmer: Platonic discourse is actually lyrical and enrapturing. That's of course where he's the trickster. Because he's always accusing the rhapsode of allowing rapture to seduce people, which is what he's doing all the time.

Davidson: The importance of the Platonic argument is really the issue of writing and speech, which has continued all the way to the recent period.

The first major distinction between poetry and prose is really a distinction between the poetic function and history in Aristotle. He's also making a case for philosophical possibilities that are available in poetry. Poetry, he tells us in the *Poetics*, will give you, not what happened, but what should or could or might happen. And therefore you're in touch with "real" ideas. History writing, on the other hand, is the narration of events. And we've had pretty much that to contend with in our histories of poetry and prose from that time on.

When you start to read something like Darwin, which seems to be the

ultimate prose of fact—after all, he's going to describe all the nature of the natural sciences. He has to constantly propose how all this data that he has at hand can be contained in a particular kind of discussion. What is the frame that is going to explain how this chaos of undifferentiated information holds together? Or is it all chaotic? And of course he's not writing this because he wants to maintain that it's chaotic, he wants to see unity. So, much of the discussion in *The Origin of Species* is involved with the languages of categorization and containment. In this case the issue isn't between fact and fancy, but truth and error. Error being the failure of a certain way of describing this information to fit into a logical and adequate model. So the model is still primary.

Peter Holland: There's also something like Herodotus's narration of other people's lines in that. Darwin very often comes up with things he's been told. Three quarters of his information is given to him by others.

Davidson: The evolution of so-called modern prose style is pretty much the interrogation of ideas about rhetoric and stylistic features. The most famous point of breakage prior to the 19th Century is the anti-Ciceronian movement of the 17th Century, which is a large scale argument against using the model of Cicero, with his elaborate syntax and figuration, in favor of the new plain style, in which prose is to be adequate to facts, and the less ornament it has the more appropriate it will be. This is where we begin to get the idea that prose should be seen and not heard, the idea that it shouldn't be pointing to itself. Bacon is generally thought to be the prose writer who embodies the new modern Senecan style. And he has some nice discussions of prose and poetry; he talks about poetry as being "history at pleasure," as David Antin will endlessly remind us, and that poesie is not tied to laws of matter and may join "that which Nature hath severed and sever that which Nature hath joined and so make unlawful matches," which sounds like a lot of fun to me. [laughter]

A nice example of what kinds of attacks were being levied against the Ciceronian style can be seen in a marvellous satire by Erasmus called *Ciceronianus* (this is actually written prior to the anti-Ciceronian movement, but it illustrates my point). The Ciceronian disciple describes his procedure for writing:

> . . . First I consult all the lists; I select some words strikingly Ciceronian, some tropes, and phrases, and rhythms. Finally, when furnished sufficiently with this kind of material, I examine what figures of speech I can use and where I can use them. Then I return to the question of

sentences. For it is now a work of art to find meanings for these verbal embellishments.

Perhaps the Ciceronian disciple that Erasmus satirizes is much closer to our contemporary conception of things than we might, at first, realize.

When we arrive at the 19th Century, we see the evolution of the Gradgrind method of writing prose. "'Bitser,' said Gradgrind, 'your definition of a horse.'" And so Bitser replies: "Quadruped, gramnivorous, 40 teeth and 12 incisive. Sheds coat in the spring, in marshy countries sheds hoofs, too. Hoof hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth." Mr. Gradgrind says, "Now, girl number 29, you know what a horse is." *Hard Times* is one of the places where the world of values is maintained by an interrogation of facts. In fact, I think of Dickens' novels as places of value in a world that is rapidly becoming bought up by the realm of facts. And this becomes an obsession with the turn of the century philosophers, particularly in America, where the worry about Empiricism or Positivism led to great treatises by Dewey and James focused on what world of values was possible in a scientific age.

In the middle of the 19th Century, when the novel was designated as a vessel for the rendering of facts, or empirical data, of being as close as possible to people's lives as lived—in Flaubert, Balzac, Zola, Howells, and James and so forth—the realistic writers began to realize that if they were going to democratize their subject matter, they were also going to have to democratize their language. Which means they were also going to have to pay very close attention to the language used. No longer could you have democratic subject matter and inflated rhetorical language. So the problem wasn't how much of what to put in, but what you had to leave out. In writing *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert worries about the tendency for irony to come in, he worries about metaphor. He's obsessed with figures of speech constantly coming into the writing. So he's constantly paring away. The famous story is, after writing the "comice agricol" speech in *Madame Bovary*, he read in the paper the next day an agricultural speech which was virtually the same. He was totally elated. At this point life was imitating art.

On the surface, it is odd that someone like Flaubert should be paralleled in time by Mallarmé, who wanted a pure book of language that would exist *detached* from the world. Here's Flaubert writing the great novel that's supposed to equate with the world most exactly, and yet the proposition of a world in the book leads to a totally autonomous work of art.

Both Flaubert and Mallarmé are conscious of the degree to which language shapes what we call the world, and both call for a "Pure" book of nothing.

The recent discussions of *écriture*, writing, in France, have been the most interesting and the most seductive of all the commentaries on this distinction between poetry and prose. I worry particularly about Barthes' notion of *écriture* that he develops in *Writing Degree Zero*. He talks about what the writer has had in the past to work with. One area is language, which the author inherits and has no control over. It's, as he calls it, a "horizon." Then there's the realm of style, the particular novelistic devices he has at his disposal. These are areas that are detached from the writer's willful and historical commitment; they are socially determined. Barthes introduces a third element, which he calls writing, which is the personal signature. Somehow, for Barthes, in the recent period the writing displaces those stylistic devices by which the novelist signals the fact that he's writing a novel. Barthes develops the idea of a zero degree of writing, writing that lacks the signs of literariness. Unfortunately, his models (he's writing in the 50's) are Camus, and, I think, Queneau. And of course, Camus seems highly rhetorical now, and rather old fashioned. But that's alright, because Barthes is proposing a possible horizon of prose that hasn't been reached yet. What worries me most is the part of the essay called, "Is There Any Poetic Writing?" He means poetic in the classical sense, a style we recognize as poetic: rhyme and meter. He says modern poetry destroys the functional nature of language and leaves the words standing, as he calls it (in a very phallic image), erect and vertical. And you wonder what he's getting at here. When he speaks of the "poetic function," he seems to be describing more and more an autonomy of art. Modern poetry is destroying its relationship to the real world. And, ultimately, by the end of the essay, he reveals his basic nostalgia for the realist novel, as Lukacs does in his later writings. He doesn't *care* much for modern poetry, and of course the modern poet for him is Mallarmé, not anybody more recent. Rene Char he mentions. But nonetheless, he's talking about the dangers of the autonomy of art, so that the whole proposition of art that he develops, something that would get rid of genres altogether, a writing not inscribed within the signs of literariness, all this falls down at the end as he feels the *ethical* function of writing is lost in modern poetry. I think the ethical function *is* lost in a lot of poetry he's thinking about, but I don't think that by foregrounding the material dimension of language that therefore the ethical function is lost in modern poetry.

Derrida, writing on *écriture*, doesn't address himself to genre and style, but rather the large-scale metaphysical position vis-a-vis language. He wants to invert the relationship which says that behind all language is an original consciousness which *speaks*, an original voice, an original sound, which language is a supplement of. For someone like Saussure, to take one example from the *Grammatology*, there seems to be a unitary sign made up of a sound and a meaning. Derrida attacks this, pointing to the way in which every signifier, rather than having a discrete meaning beyond it, ultimately creates another signifier. The whole open-ended quality of language seems to refuse the idea that any individual word will come down to earth. And if you don't think that's true, try to teach *Tender Buttons* sometime and say what any of the Tender Buttons *means* unitarily. It's impossible. Much modern writing gets help from the Derridian discussions of language.

This moves into the question of whether a prose of fact is possible, or has it always been a rhetoric of fact and a problem of mediation. Its history has been a history of infection, corruption, a desire on the part of the writer to come as close as he can to an event, an object, and instantly realizing the forms of mediation and seeing himself translating. And meanwhile the fact disappears into the play of signification. It's always been vulnerable to the thing it sought to displace. Even the stance of objectivity is one of the fictions that seems to be necessary to maintain facts.

A fact is not a neutral thing; it's something that poses itself as a concrete event, and instantly slips away as soon as you start to talk towards it. It's an occasion for an investigation. Wittgenstein writes a whole book, *On Certainty*, about what it means for G.E. Moore to have the sheer gall to say, "Here is my hand." [laughter] Wittgenstein has a marvellous example, by the way. He says, Okay, G.E. Moore, so you know what a thing is. He says, What would happen if G.E. Moore were in a pot and the natives were going to cook him up and eat him, and he's saying, But I am G.E. Moore and here is my hand. [laughter]

[Unidentified]: Is G.E. Moore George Moore?

Davidson: I've only known him as G.E. [laughter] You'll never find his works under George, it's always G.E.

I'd like to think that the prose of fact was at least as frustrated by G.E. Moore as Wittgenstein was. I'd like to provide a prose that's not inscribed within the usual modes of production, the usual generic and semantic codes, and yet I'd love to incur them all to see whether they are going to be

useful. But I guess because of some disabilities on my part I can't sustain the story to its completion, because I get much more interested in little distractions that occur along the way. So, not to treat the fact as a product or fetish, but as an activity.

Perelman: As a writer, what are your ways of avoiding the certainties of rhetoric you were born into?

Davidson: I don't think you can. I don't mean to imply that I can get away from the scandal of acquired gestures.

Perelman: Do you see that as a problem? How do you attack it?

Davidson: I don't think I can attack it by avoiding it. I have to attack it by going into it. The solution has been to try to provide something new and strange, some alternative. I want to see if those terms will work for me, even in the most despised prose, even in the most rhetorical and so-called artificial prose.

Perelman: So you end up finding yourself waltzing in the masquerade ball, quite often. Which is asking a lot of your readers. You're asking them to recognize that there's various degrees of quotes around certain words.

Davidson: I'm interested in persuading the reader to read. To read language as an activity and not a solution to the problem of meaning—not a solution to the problem of meaning, but as the problem of meaning itself.

Jeanne Lance: So there's a problem of meaning separate from language? And that's a problem to be solved?

Davidson: I think there's a problem of meaning that many people have thought was separate from language. I can't seem to separate them at all. The question of facts is always a question of context. In what frame does the fact occur. We have in the 19th Century a beautiful series of documents which propose to render the fact finally clear, as it is in the world. And those documents, by their omissions, by their focus on the problem of language, really address the problem of language more carefully perhaps than at any other time. Just because they're faced with the necessity of unifying words and things. By making the final synthesis between words and things, where words are substantial entities, the divorce is made complete. It's a strange paradox. I perhaps haven't answered your question.

Lance: You're sort of into it. To cite Flaubert would be to have a concrete embodiment in language of actual, physical reality. That seems to be a perfectly reasonable example. I wouldn't say James. It doesn't

seem to me that he embodies facts.

Davidson: But he certainly embodies the problem of facts.

Lance: You might *describe* it that way. It might be facts for *you*.

Barrett Watten: It seems to me a practical problem is to start from a fact. It seems like in your method you're excluding facts entirely. There's not one fact yet in the entire talk. You're not allowing yourself to be vulnerable to any decision that anyone in this room might make as to what you stand for in terms of fact.

Davidson: Well, give me a fact.

Watten: Oh, I can give you a fact instantly: today I was thinking about "no ideas but in things," and I was trying to imagine a world in which that seemed necessary. Instantly, on the street.

Davidson: Most people assume that that means: first comes the fact, then comes the idea. I think what he meant was there is no idea unrealized.

Watten: My question was a perfectly real question, and would make me keep going, questioning what writing is and what it's doing. And it would bend back into the work of any one person, and any one person's determination of fact. So that the question of hearing a fact is of great interest. And the more you know about the possibility of hearing a fact, the more you'll be interested in what specific facts people said.

Davidson: In hearing a fact, in other words, you'd be hearing language?

Watten: It's a question of ear. If you're talking about language and facts, how do you hear somebody's representation of a fact; that seems to be what you're talking about: how do you hear what somebody is saying when all you have is a text that's come down to us through history, where you have cultural differences, or translation problems, or whatever. So it becomes a question of being able to examine your own language to be able to decide how you hear a representation of fact in your own terms, so that you can hear if what somebody else is saying is a fact in their terms, so that you can hear what they're saying. So that you can hear *what is a fact* from them, okay? And to do that, you have to know that they're willing to *give you a fact*. And that's quite different, really Michael, from the method you're proposing, which is a complete avoidance of any fact.

Davidson: Well, that's a difficult question. I want to understand one aspect. When you say, "hear a fact," do you mean, in the most simplistic sense, to hear the factual quality of someone else's writing? When you hear writing as a fact? Or do you mean hearing the attitude towards the

world, the so-called empirical or physical that's being represented by writing?

Watten: There are situations where I would say there are facts, that I would write them as such, that I would treat things as facts. And any decision you make like that involves everything you do, and is about your art, how you see it. And that anybody who it's possible to read is going equally to be subject to that extent of thinking about what they're doing. So, to try to hear what Louis Zukofsky means in . . . the shades of distinction in "Songs of Degrees," just because that came to mind . . .

Carla Harryman: Which poem is that?

Watten: "Hear, her/ Clear/ Mirror,/ Care/ His error./ In her/ Care/ Is clear." Where he says these words, using different line breaks and punctuation, in four or five ways. He's making a fact of words. You could also talk about the end of "A"–22, which seems to be about going to Bermuda. Which seems like an incredible description of being on this island away from where you were, and having to see details at a specific time of your life, having lived in a very orderly way, so that investing significance in the world of facts demands a specific cultural experience. Coming to Bermuda in 1965, after the Depression, after World War II, makes Bermuda a fact, in a way it would never be for somebody like Ry Cooder. [laughter] So that's hearing what's a fact.

Davidson: I would agree.

Watten: I'm sure you would. And a lot of what you're saying comes from the kinds of questions that that would get into. But the thing that Zukofsky did, that is totally courageous and heroic and makes him the greatest poet of the century [laughter] is to write those things down. He chose. And the act of his mind choosing those facts and that representation gives you the access to this way of thinking. And that's why I just throw out all this French stuff [laughter]. Because there's no text that's reliable, there's no way that we know *what they're talking about*.

Davidson: I was trying to imply that I had real worries about what Barthes has to say about the so-called autonomy of modern art; where he sees it only as a fetish object. I'm very much worried about the purely objectified prose poem, which is an attempt to make a closed structure. Which is the limitation a lot of people saw in Imagism. What one's interested in Zukofsky for is the criterion of sincerity, of seeing something that's perhaps insignificant, that doesn't mean anything to anyone else, but seeing it very clearly and dealing with all the possible associations one

has towards the thing. So that the thing becomes a matter of concern. Not just an object, like a "Coming Out of the Paris Metro," which suggests petals on a wet, black bough. Which to me is a closed proposition. Ron?

Ron Silliman: I want to take what Barry was getting towards and ground it in a specific decision in your work. You almost called your first book, *The Mutabilities*, "The Foul Papers." And the distinction between those two terms—in fact the actual title is "*The Mutabilities*, including the Foul Papers"— represents two very different attitudes. The Foul Papers is almost hostile; like, I am entering into literature and I'm not going to like the way it's going to fit. Whereas, The Mutabilities is one of those classic book titles . . .

Davidson: It comes from Spenser, after all.

Silliman: Almost any plural group noun has been used as a book title in the last 30 years. The question I had was: How does all that mediation enter into a specific decision, such as when you have a title and you change your mind?

Davidson: I'm not sure what a specific decision is, because a specific decision is going to change, depending on the materials at hand. The idea behind the Foul Papers was to recognize, of course, the Freudian possibilities of foulness, that I was going to incur elements that shouldn't be there. I was also interested in the quality of the dramatist's text that is full of notes and marginalia and emendations and notes to the director as to where to put this prop and so forth. A writing that would be beautifully messy the way Blake's notebooks are beautifully messy. The bad music of Mahler is marvellous music. He feels the possibilities of chromaticism to the point where he carries those too far. Duncan says (he's talking about Whitman), "the beautiful wrongness that has style." I really admire that.

And in many of the more recent pieces I'm making more or less conscious variations on writers when they're going too far. John Ashbery seems to me to be somebody who listens very carefully to the moment when he's going too far, the exalted and romantic gesture, the attempt to put on another voice to avoid something. But you always see the frame as it's trying to erase itself. To me that's an ethical decision, as well as a formal one.

Young: What's ethical?

Davidson: Ethical is concern, a willingness to follow out the terms of something that's begun, including to the place where you're getting involved in the Foul Papers. Sincerity is the term the Objectivists used. It's

not a question of the adequacy of representation, but sincerity.

Palmer: So it's accepting the full terms of the activity you're in.

Davidson: And, of course, we're talking in hypothetical terms, because I don't know if that's possible. I'm saying it's a horizon I admire.

Perelman: In this last exchange I get the sense that Barry was saying that a fact was an act, but your act, Michael, is always a recognition of the dual or tripartite—the nebulousness of trying to tack a fact onto the outside world.

Watten: No, I was saying that a fact is inescapable.

Perelman: Choice, though; you said Zukofsky was courageous, he *chose*.

Watten: Choice in Zukofsky is a fact. You can't get past it.

Perelman: I.e., an act.

Palmer: So Zukofsky is directly responsible to what qualifies fact in a way that Derrida isn't.

Watten: It's obvious that it's much more useful to think about a writer's representations of fact as he's managed to be able to make them than it is to consider somebody's meditations on the possibility of representing a fact as he hasn't done. The sense that Zukofsky made works that both were facts and included the world in a very interesting way.

Palmer: Well, what if that meditation on possibility is a fact in itself? It is a fact; beyond a mere fact, an activity.

Watten: But I don't think it's that simple. When you get to something like *Three Poems* by Ashbery, which is a meditation in writing about what a fact it, and the avoidance of that, constant delay, I would find myself rejecting that, and saying, Out, forget it, enough, had it.

Davidson: I read a terrific vulnerability in those pieces. He really seems to be putting himself on the line about the need to say it all. It begins with some sort of grand gesture toward: Well, first I thought I would put everything in, and then I thought I would leave everything out.

Watten: But that's glib. That's a totally glib cliche. That isn't what writing is.

Davidson: I don't think any of us are free of that difficulty. I don't feel that in your work, for example, that there is an *absence* of your own meditative—your own mind at work on the data. Maybe I'm reading it wrong. [laughter] I'm interested in the process of your mind as it's going on in words.

Watten: In Ashbery, the question is: Is he really being himself, is he

really writing at the point where he doesn't know what he's doing. Is he encountering this system of thought in a new way. In my second reading of *Three Poems*, he was not. It was like a rap. It was completely artful and etcetera etcetera. It just doesn't help us out.

Davidson: What would help us out?

Watten: What would help us out is that the writer reveal his mind at work, as it really is to him, as far as he can get to it in writing.

Davidson: What is this "really is" business? If I see in Ashbery's writing him putting himself on the line at some points . . .

Watten: Then it becomes a matter of literary criticism and taste or choice and how far into it you are.

Perelman: I hear you, like Olson and Creeley in the '50's, voting for spontaneous form. But, how about "Non-Events," or *Ketjak*, or some of the works that are being written now in which the form is predetermined. You know, you're going to write ten stanzas of ten lines each.

Watten: Something makes me want to throw that out, because the grounds of Michael's proposal are literature as a whole. To make claims for your own work, etcetera, I don't want to do that.

Perelman: I'm just asking you how to separate those two.

Watten: Creeley and Olson saw it in their writing at a certain point for specific reasons, which also extends to a way of thinking about other possible ways of writing. It's not that you have to have spontaneous writing. But the thing I was criticizing was: I think Ashbery is not revealing anything and Michael says he is; and that question seems to relativize immediately, so that you just get demonstration, period. And I say no. That's what I'm saying about facts, also. That saying no is like facts. And that's taking a stand on what you're doing. That's where Zukofsky's great, in the sense of courage. He did his work and that stands, that's it. It's an integrity. What I'm trying to say is that thinking about is different from the thing.

Davidson: My sense was that whatever the fact was merges *instantly* into the thinking about. And that, *in fact*, the writing would be the record of a mind operating around the issue. Which is not value-neutral.

Benson: I had a thought, which is: You start writing. So you have something to say, or you want to deal with the fact that you sat down in front of the typewriter, or you want to deal with the fact that you're *really* upset about something. But we find ourselves *very* distracted and also extremely interested in all these problems that come up, which you've

noted at great length in your talk. So we get interested in enumerating and considering all the various problems in the work, in the language, and in the writing—then it's in the writing and the result would seem to me to be very manipulative of the readers in a way which seems, perhaps, regrettable. Rather than manipulative of oneself in the act of writing, which would seem to be more desirable. That's where my tendency to have mastery of the situation, to determine what's going to happen, should be: to determine what I'm going to be writing, or who I'm going to be at this writing; to know that, and to be doing that.

Davidson: I just have one argument with that idea. The sort of will-to-form and will-to-power you're talking about was the primary aesthetic of the Modernist generation and it developed an attitude about the artist as maker which is kind of imperialistic, to have total control over everything. I worry about people who I feel have total control, who *master* the form. I'm much more interested in somebody who seems to be mastering his or her own sense of anxiety; for example, someone like Emily Dickinson. Who, if you were to submit her poems to the likes of Ivor Winters, would be told she's a failure because she hadn't been able to solve each of these problems. And yet we're interested in this giant corpus of a woman's mind incredibly involved with minute attentions to her own day to day insecurities, and her own senses of power, but never with the sense of the grand gesture. But the Modernist gesture demands a *myth* that holds it all together. And the myth that holds it all together is the myth of accuracy, the myth of verisimillitude, the myth of mimesis. The various myths which propose an identity between word and thing.

July 20, 1978

Justice

The evolution of a single word involves a vision of justice.

imperfection
emphasis
renunciation
stone
radical
radish
root

The harmony of syllable and sound, allowing only as much as can be uttered in a single breath, is fair play.

Into the spaces fall the forgotten areas of living. So many strikes for oblivion, which could be seen as scaffolding, a positive space from which sticks are suspended.

Literature pursues justice, when it's honest.
However, writing good is a social act occurring in isolation.
You have the chance to see an idea through, think it out, take measure of true and untrue.
The more the result resembles nature and/or government, the more honest the writer has been.

Weights and measurements.
On the one hand, and on the other.
A line like, "There but for the Grace of God, go I."
A series of quiet and qualifying elements.
Obviously some things stand out in relief, while others fall back in exhaustion.

There is something in the human head which likes to take a stand and consider justice.
Children do it all the time.

Tiger, tiger burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The just line follows natural speech in its human frame, taking into account—saliva, gulp and gasp.
It also comes in a twinship of either/or.
Without two opposing posits, there will be no third birth.
Women don't give birth to daughters, while men give birth to sons. No way.
In the beginning was the word IN.
The number four was always connected to the number two, which is the source, while the fifth perspective was the overview, the most just.
Doubling up or down can go on forever, like the iambics of the strong-hearted breathing.
The couplets dance out ensemble. The ghazal is an admirable form, the way it spreads double lines and syllables, endless dialectics which amount to nothing.

For instance, pray to saints, not to God, as they are the visible representatives of the Mystical Nothing, human forms with the scattering of the Logos.
Saint Francis does his best, which is good enough for me.
Saint Theresa is picky, but persistent.
Angels, on the other hand, correspond to the palmate antlers on the great moose which are formed of material other than the expected fur and flesh.
Like wood or fog, angels have nothing to do with the scene as we know it and are useless, except as protectors of couplets. Wings!

Life was never easy on people.
One group calls it bad luck; the other calls it bad character.
But the third and fifth group is honestly amazed and immobilized by the quantity of perspectives and goes home, sighing.

Comfort comes from the side.
The same images return; the parallels curve.
Aging. Speeding. Settling.
This way repetition of detail can be consoling as in the chambers of the good poem.

A chilled child stands at the threshold of a New England house.

An elderly spinster sways like a gangster outside the five & ten.

Teenage voyeurs roam the streets of Boston, having to comment on everything in sight. I remember that.

What is strange is that asymmetry in language can recall an absent presence, but not just be, as is, without the suggestion or memory of an early harmony.
(The broken rhythm of the line, for instance, 'And no birds sing.')

We need to solve the riddle as if in prison. Poverty is a prison. No vows are necessary to enter that cell.

But it still wouldn't be just if one person got earth and heaven too, and another got only one, or neither.
Therefore, the reasonable process for the down-and-out and empty-handed is to invent a just system.
It's been done already, but really needs more work.
To recognize the scattering Logos, reorganize the mish-mash to get that good rhythm back.

Mutual forgiveness of each vice
Such are the gates of Paradise.

In this couplet William Blake does the job.
When the victim confesses to a crime equal to that of his or her oppressor, and vice versa, silence ensues.
So a language, and the language of this same couplet, which takes into account with a yes and a no, two, or four powerful views, justice is accomplished.
The choice of words is equal to the task.
For instance, employers should be put in their place. And each worker deserves to work by choice.

Trees are not flowers, but there are flowering trees.
What is concealed is as pertinent as what is open to view—the resemblance of root to branch, of bulb to bud, and the outwardness of one hangs on the inwardness of the other. That is called character, existence, or the relationship between flaw and charm.

Where justice enters into the picture of the flowering tree is in the way the picture is considered.
Both from the angle of the one viewing it and back again into that viewer's

eye from the picture itself.
In an aesthetic world, the flower and branch are the clear spaces and the spaces between them are words. You write your way into the clearing: out of nature into a space composed of shapes.
One result of honest concentration is the sight of the self looking back.
Right to the point are the words of one old Jewish mystic, when he described one way to achieve a divine insight:

"If it be night, kindle many lights, until all be bright. Then take ink, pen and a table to thy hand and remember that thou art about to serve God in joy of the gladness of thy heart.
Now begin to combine a few or many letters, to permute and to combine them until thy heart be warm.
Then be mindful of their movements and of what thou canst bring forth by moving them.
And when thou feelest that thy heart is already warm and when thou seest that by combinations of letters thou canst grasp new things which by human tradition or by thyself thou wouldst not be able to know
and when thou art thus prepared to receive the influx of divine power which flows into thee,
then turn all thy true thought to image the Name . . ."

The Name, of course, is unspeakable and so the chariots of the Merkabah descend in its place.
But the description of the chariots—four wheels, four faces—is provided, and the words are nearly as good as the Name.

Divine insight is not quite blinding, not quite mute.
Divine insight is another matter anyway.
What matters in the material world, as we live it, is justice.
That the governing tongue should be honest, like *no private property*, the way Marx summed it up.

Good and honest labor, good and honest language.
Blake interprets the lilies of the field accordingly: if you work good, you will be fed.
No need to hustle. No luxury in the given life.
But the luxury of honest labor lies in a point of view, an insight.
No one who hustles is allowed to have it, and no moochers need apply.
A point of view is the window, and maybe the same one Dante assigned to those in pain.

gluttony
avarice
jealousy
lust
charity
vigilance
canny
uncanny

Where is the word which does not sound like itself, unravel its parts, contain the ingredients of justice? No where!
All perspectives are given room in the given roots. In my father's house are many *mansions*, not rooms.
Now extending it further into the arrangement of words—the spoken sentence is certainly as just as the legal sentence.
The names are the same for a reason!
But neither one is entirely just, not yet.
Only until the intention of a spoken or written sentence is to give each word equal time will the score be settled.

Only until the intention of a sentence is to forgive the criminal will the world be fair.

Any honest sentence demonstrates the need for all four sides to be given visibility and equal time. This goes back to the beginning where the pod of the first word is cracked and a spill of multitudes occurs.
Since that moment, the thrust for justice has been of the utmost importance.
First letters, then syllables, then words, and the sentence.

No word was chosen without its gathered moss upon it, the moss of a moist and anonymous earth, memory, historical memory.
When each word is then placed, one beside the other, an intention must be to honor the great history, the lurching urge of the human life to find something fair somewhere, some sound or set of sounds which corresponds to the colossal crush of history. Then lets a hundred flowers bloom together.

There are, during the enactment of the Last Supper, nine words said before the breaking of the bread. They are:
"I give you peace; my peace I leave you."

Every time I hear these *mots justes*, they really shock me, or bring me up short.
The reason is, I think, that the nine words exemplify the just structure I am after.
No one, no thing, is forgotten.
I, you and me are all there. Giving and leaving, those two eternal contradictions which constitute the ultimate paradox, are there together, too.
"I give you peace; my peace I leave you."
The sublime juggle of the same action, which leaps from here to there, from gift to gone, is not an act of sorcery, but a recognition of innate justice—the magnetic grasp of invisible on visible.
Peace is what is given, and left behind.
And since peace is only a subjective quality, dependent on objective equality, it amounts to nothing, short of bliss.

April 29, 1979

[The Winter '79 issue of *fiction* contains an analysis by Fanny Howe of the text of the Eucharist based on "le mot juste."]

The New Sentence

Ron Silliman:

> To please a young man there should be sentences. What are sentences. Like what are sentences. In the part of sentences it for him is happily all. They will name sentences for him. Sentences are called sentences.

The sole precedent I can find for the new sentence is *Kora In Hell: Improvisations* and that one far-fetched.

I am going to make an argument, that there is such a thing as a new sentence and that it occurs thus far more or less exclusively in the prose poems of the Bay Area. Therefore this talk is aimed at the question of the prose poem. I say aimed because in order to understand why so little is in fact understood about sentences and prose poems a certain amount of background material is needed.

The proposition of a new sentence suggests a general understanding of sentences per se, against which an evolution or shift can be contrasted.

This poses a first problem. There is, in the domain of linguistics, philosophy and literary criticism, no adequate consensus as to the definition of a sentence. Odd as that seems, there are reasons for it.

Milka Ivić, in *Trends in Linguistics*, noted that linguists, by the 1930's, had proposed and were using more than 160 different definitions of "the sentence."

The word sentence is itself of relatively recent origin, according to the OED, deriving from 12th Century French. As a noun, the OED proposes 9 definitions. Among them:

> 5) An *indefinite* portion of a discourse or writing.
>
> 6) A series of words in connected speech or writing, forming the grammatically complete expression of a single thought; in popular use often such a portion of a composition or utterance as extends *from one full stop to another*.

This definition dates from 1447.

Contained in the sixth definition is the notation that in grammar, a sentence is either a proposition, question, command or request, containing

subject and predicate, though one of these may be absent by means of ellipsis; likewise the OED acknowledges here 3 classes of sentences: simple, compound and complex, and notes that one word may be a sentence.

In the November, 1978, *Scientific American*, Breyne Arlene Moskowitz presents a summary discussion of recent developments in the theory of language acquisition in children:

> The first stage of child language is one in which the maximum sentence length is one word; it is followed by a stage in which the maximum sentence length is two words... By the time the child is uttering two-word sentences with some regularity, her lexicon may include hundreds of words... an important criterion is informativeness, that is, the child selects a word reflecting what is new in a particular situation.

Here is an abbreviated conversation between a child at the one-word stage and an adult, which indicates the sentence-function of single words:

C: Car. Car.
A: What?
C: Go. Go.
A: What?
C: Bus. Bus. Bus.
A: Bicycle?
C: No!

Even before the one-word stage, the child is playing with the babbling prosody of sentence forms which are considerably longer, until gradually the intonation contours of normal speech are acquired. This suggests that the child *hears* sentences before it can break them down into smaller units, that is, that the sentence is in some sense a primary unit of language.

The absence of a 3-word stage is also worth nothing. From the 2-word stage, an infant enters the realm of sentences of variable length.

Finally, we should pay attention to the fact that Moskowitz is talking about speech not writing, a distinction that will be getting more important.

Here is another example of speech, a telephone conversation:

E. Hello?
L. Hi Ed.
E. Hi Lisa.
L. I'm running around here trying to get my machines done [+] and I'd like to get it all done before I leave, [+] so I won't have to come back. [−] So that might push us up till near two. How is that?
E. That's fine. My only thing is that I have to leave here like around 3:15 or so.

L. 3:15. [−] OK. Let me see how I'm doing here, [+] then I'll give you a call right before I'm going to leave.
E. OK. [−] Fine.
L. Okey doke. Bye bye.
E. Bye.

(*The Telephone Book*, Ed Friedman)

Ed Friedman has written this conversation up as 16 distinct sentences. There are at least 6 places in this short script that could have been transcribed differently, rendering the conversation into as few as 13 or as many as 19 sentences. There are, in fact, 64 separate ways to transcribe this conversation without radically altering the acceptibility of any of its sentences.

Which brings us to the question, not of sentences in speech, but in linguistics, as a discipline and tradition.

Contemporary linguistics is normally considered to begin with Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure mentions the sentence in this work on only three occasions. All take place in the second part of his course, concerning synchronic linguistics.

This first mention is in the area of locating practical delimiting units of language. Saussure is quote as saying:

> A rather widely held theory makes sentences the concrete units of language: we speak only in sentences and subsequently single out the words. But to what extent does the sentence belong to language [langue]? If it belongs to speaking [parole], the sentence cannot pass for the linguistic unit. But let us suppose this difficulty is set aside. If we picture to ourselves in their totality the sentences that could be uttered, their most striking characteristic is that in no way do they resemble each other... diversity is dominant, and when we look for the link that bridges their diversity, again we find, without having looked for it, the word...

The distinction between language and speaking (langue and parole) is critical. Saussure is analysing only one, langue, and by putting the sentence into the domain of the other, he removes it from the major area of his inquiry. More than any other reason, this is the origin of the failure of the modern human sciences to develop a consensus as to the definition of such a critical term.

Saussure's second mention completes the setting aside of the sentence into the realm of parole. It is in the section on syntagmatic relations, in the chapter which historically first divides paradigm from syntagm. The syntagmatic axis is that of connection between words, as in syntax:

> ...the notion of syntagm applies not only to words but to groups of words, to complex units of all lengths and types (compounds, derivatives, phrases, whole sentences).
>
> It is not enough to consider the relation that ties together the different parts of syntagms, one must also bear in mind the relation that links the whole to its parts.
>
> An objection must be raised at this point. The sentence is the ideal type of syntagm. But it belongs to speaking, not to language.

The sentence has been shoved back into the domain of non-investigation, the realm of parole, but without a clear and decisive argument. These two quotations conspire without proof for the dismissal of the sentence as an object of critical investigation.

The only other area where Saussure even mentions the sentence is in the problem of one-word sentences and the question of whether or not they possess a syntagmatic dimension. The language used demonstrates the problem raised by the dismissal of sentence theory from linguistics:

> To be sure, language has independent units that have syntagmatic relations with neither their parts nor other units. Sentence equivalents like *yes, no, thanks,* etc. are good examples. But this exceptional fact does not compromise the general principle.

Given this denegration at the origin of modern linguistics, it is not surprising that the sentence is neither defined nor even indexed in Louis Hjelmslev's 1943 *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*.

In America during this same period, the most influential practicing linguist was Leonard Bloomfield, who, in *Language* (1933), defined the sentence as:

> And independent linguistic form, not included by virtue of any grammatical construction in any larger form.

This definition is void of any internal criteria. The sentence is merely a limit, the point beyond which grammatical analysis cannot be further extended. In a sense this goes back to the OED definition of a sentence as being what comes between two full stops, regardless of what that might be.

I want to call attention to the concept here of a sentence as the maximum unit of grammatical integration, since later I'll be looking at Emile Beneviste's and Ferrucio Rossi-Landi's work dealing with literary integration as the origin of meaning.

One might expect a fuller treatment of the sentence in Chomsky's *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965), insofar as syntax and the syntag-

matic is the one area where Saussure even permits the sentence as a question to surface, and since Chomsky is working with such concepts as acceptibility, deviant sentences, and kernel sentences. But he raises the issue only in the prefatory "methodological preliminaries" chapter: "I shall use the term 'sentence' to refer to strings of formatives rather than strings of phones." Formative is defined in the first paragraph of the book as a "minimal syntactically functioning unit." The problem of one word or other short sentences is likewise slid over. Here is what he says about kernal sentences:

> These are sentences of a particularly simple sort that involve a minimum of transformational apparatus in their generation. The notion "kernal sentence" has, I think, an important intuitive significance, but since kernal sentences play no distinctive role in generation or interpretation of sentences, I shall say nothing about them here.

Chomsky gives us no idea as to what the important intuitive significance of kernal sentences might be.

As I noted earlier, Milka Ivić found 160 definitions of the sentence active in linguistics in the 30's. This figure arises from the work of John Ries, who first published *Was Ist Ein Satz?* in 1894, more than a decade before Saussure, and who updated it in Prague in 1931. Ries analysed 140 definitions in the latter edition, and the 20 further definitions Ivić located were critiques of Ries' analysis. Simeon Potter follows this debate in *Modern Linguistics*, which has an entire chapter devoted to sentence structure.

> The sentence is the chief unit of speech. It may be defined simply as a *minimum complete utterance*.... Clearly a sentence is not only a chain of words but also a structure.... When we assert that the sentence is a minimum complete utterance, or a segment of speech-flow between pause and pause, or an inherited structure into which word-forms are fitted, we are not saying all that might be said about it. Nevertheless, these definitions are probably more workable than John Ries' final effort: "A sentence is a grammatically constructed minimum speech-unit which expresses its content in respect to that content's relation to reality." We may, in fact, find as much difficulty in defining a sentence as in pin-pointing a phoneme, and yet, after a little training, we all recognize phonemes and sentences when we see them.

In short, the history and structure of linguistics as a profession inhibits, if it doesn't entirely prevent, an elaboration of a theory of the sentence which might then be applied to literature.

As early as the late 1920's, the Russian linguist Valentin Voloshinov

proposed this critique in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*:

> Traditional principles and methods in linguistics do not provide grounds for a productive approach to the problems of syntax. This is particularly true of Abstract Objectivism [Voloshinov's term for the Saussurian school], where the traditional methods and principles have found their most distinct and consistent expression. All the fundamental categories of modern linguistic thought, with their development stemming primarily from Indo-European comparative linguistics, are thoroughly phonetic and morphological... In consequence, the study of syntax is in a very bad state, a fact that even the majority of representatives of the Indo-European school openly admit.

I should insert here that the subsequent work of Chomsky and others merely extends this problematic base into a more thorough and sophisticated plane of analysis. Voloshinov continues:

> Meanwhile, the problems of syntax have immense importance for the understanding of language and its generative process. In point of fact, of all the forms of language, the syntactic forms are the ones closest to the concrete forms of utterance... All syntactic analyses of speech entail analysing the living body of an utterance and, therefore, powerfully resist regulation to the abstract system of language. [i.e., langue]... Our point of view, which deals with the living phenomena of language, must give precedence to the syntactic forms over morphological and phonetic ones. But... productive study of syntactic forms is only possible on the grounds of a fully elaborated theory of utterance... Linguistic thinking has hopelessly lost any sense of the verbal whole.

Voloshinov carries his critique so far as to by-pass the sentence more or less entirely, writing that "the category of sentence is merely a definition of the sentence as a unit-element *within* an utterance, and not by any means as a whole entity."

The function of the sentence as a unit within a larger structure will, in fact, become important when we look at the role of the new sentence. But what is vital here is the failure, even within this critical analysis, for a possible theory of the sentence.

So the problem of the new sentence is not going to be made simple by recourse to linguistics. A number of things can be stated at this point with regard to the sentence and linguistics:

> 1) The sentence is a term derived from writing, which in linguistics is often brought over to the study of speech. Specifically, the sentence is a unit of writing.
>
> 2) There exists in speech an open-ended form like, but not identical

with, the sentence of writing. Following Voloshinov, I am going to refer to it as the utterance.

The critical difference between the utterance and the sentence is that the utterance is indeterminate, a chain that can be more or less indefinitely extended. There is no sentence but a determinate sentence. and this is fixed by the period.

3) The focus in linguistics on the development of a description of langue over parole, and the non-addressing of the question of writing (which, as Derrida notes, is reduced in Saussure to the mere graphic representation of speech and thus not treated as a domain in and of itself) has rendered the question of the sentence invisible.

Derrida, however, does not offer much corrective to this problem, beyond the real accomplishment of making it fashionable and thus visible. Someday there may exist a positive science of writing called grammatology, but Derrida has been content to deconstruct linguistics around its problematic and contradictory center in the work of Saussure.

If linguistics fails to deal with the sentence because it fails to separate out writing from speech, superimposing a reality of one realm over the different reality of the other, philosophy deals with language neither as speech nor writing. Language is either:

1) Thought itself

a) sometimes understood as constricted and formal, as in logic or a calculus, e.g., Quine's "austere canonical scheme," by which, if one only knew the complete set of proper eternal sentences, one could logically construct the whole of possible correct knowledge;

b) sometimes understood as unconstricted, as when language is taken to be identical with the sum of possible thought, a position Chomsky takes in his occasional forays into philosophic discourse.

2) A manifestation or transformation of thought, also breaking down into constricted or unconstricted models, Wittgenstein being an example of both, constricted in his early *Tractatus* and unconstricted in *Philosophical Investigations*, both of which argue that language is a disguise for thought.

Wittgenstein's model for language, in both his early and late writings, closely parallels that of Saussure. The dramatic shift between these periods is one of object and goal—from the disentangling of an idealized discourse in the *Tractatus* to an exploration of the problems of meaning in the actual use of language in *Philosophical Investigations*. The break comes in the '30s and is documented in *Philosophical Grammar* and its appendices. The following sections from the *Investigations* show how

close some of his later work comes toward a type of discussion that surrounds certain examples of the new sentence:

498. When I say that the orders "Bring me sugar" and "Bring me milk" make sense, but not the combination "Milk me sugar," that does not mean that the utterance of this combination has no effect. And if its effect is that the other person stares at me and gapes, I don't on that account call it the order to stare and gape, even if that was precisely the effect I wanted to produce.

499. To say "This combination of words makes no sense" excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reasons. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players be supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may shew where the property of one man ends and that of another begins and so on. So if I draw a boundary line that is not yet to say what it is for.

One of the things that makes Wittgenstein (and, more recently, Derrida) so useful, suggestive and quotable to poets is the high degree of metaphor in his work. Not all philosophical discourse is like that—in fact, most shuns it.

A.J. Ayer is an example of this latter type. Writing in 1936 in *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer tried to separate sentences from propositions from statements, a classic attempt at the compartmentalization of connotation:

Thus I propose that any form of words that is grammatically significant shall be held to constitute a sentence, and that every indicative sentence, whether it is literally meaningful or not, shall be regarded as expressing a statement. Furthermore, any two sentences which are mutually translatable will be said to express the same statement. The word "proposition," on the other hand, will be reserved for what is expressed by sentences which are literally meaningful.

This definition of the sentence is no more well-defined than any from linguistics. In fact, it does not even propose the possibility of a distinction between a simple sentence, a compound or a fragment, since it doesn't address the question of a full-pause or maximum grammatical integration of meaning. But it does draw a sharp line between the categories proposed, or at least attempts to. But even this succinct formulation has resisted acceptance:

Ayer says (a) that his use "proposition" designates a class of sentences

> that all have the same meaning, and (b) that "consequently" he speaks of propositions, not sentences, as being true or false. But of course what a sentence means does not enable us to say that it is true or false...
> (J.L. Austen, *Sense and Sensibilia*)

The problems posed by making sentences synonymous or even approximate with propositions can be viewed in an extreme form in Quine's *Word and Object*, in the section entitled, appropriately, "Propositions and Eternal Sentences":

> A sentence is not an event of utterance, but a universal.... In general, to specify a proposition without dependence on circumstances of utterance, we put... an *eternal* sentence: a sentence whose truth value stays fixed through time and from speaker to speaker.

Quine represents philosophy in its grossest decadence, a parlor game for the educated class. Here the discourse has been severed from the possibility of a material subject.

Literary criticism ought to serve as a corrective. Unlike philosophy, it is a discourse with a clearly understood material object. Like philosophy, it is centuries old as a discipline. In addition, it is fortunately situated in western societies, where literature is treated in the schools as a natural extension of language learning.

As Jonathan Culler cautions in *Structuralist Poetics*, literary criticism is the study of reading, not writing. If a theory of the sentence is to be found in poetics, it won't necessarily be of great use to writers. However, it might function as the basis on which to create such a theory.

I want to look first at the New Critics, partly because they were so dominant that, until recently, all other critical tendencies were defined by the nature of their opposition. The New Critics were strongly influenced by the British philosophical tradition, with I.A. Richards, for example, playing a major role in both communities. In addition, René Wellek was a product of the Prague school of linguistics, and as such was thoroughly familiar with the work of Saussure on the one hand, and Shklovsky on the other, both of whom are cited with approval in the *Theory of Literature*, written by Wellek and Austin Warren in 1949.

These influences already suggest that the *Theory of Literature* is not going to contain a coherent theory of the sentence. The Saussurian model of linguistics is implicit in this famous statement:

> Every work of art is, first of all, a series of sounds out of which arises the meaning. In some literary works, this stratum of sounds is minimized in its importance; and it becomes, so to speak, diaphanous, as in

> most novels. But even there the phonetic stratum is a necessary precondition of the meaning. The distinction between a novel by Dreiser and a poem like Poe's "The Bells" is in this respect only quantitative and fails to justify the setting up of two contrasting kinds of literature, fiction and poetry.

A definition as generalized as this will have a limited explanatory capacity. The differences between an oral poem composed within a preliterate society and a novel such as Judith Krantz's *Scruples*, intended even by its author to be sold at the checkout counter of supermarkets, are more than just quantitative.

Formally, this statement represents a reduction, a mode of analysis heavily influenced by the practice of philosophy, based in turn on logic, itself based on mathematics. The desire of Wellek and Warren is to construct a science of literature, with precisely the prestige of science.

What is the reduction? Literature is equal to language, which in turn means phonetic linguistics. Everything which has already been said criticizing modern linguistics, and particularly the work of Saussure, can be brought to bear on this reduction. Wellek and Warren are aware of this also, and defend themselves with a little sleight of hand, arguing that:

> A...common assumption, that sound should be analysed in complete divorce from meaning, is also false.

This does not, as it might have, lead them toward an examination of syntax—let alone sentences. But it does put them in the enviable position of defending a point of view from which their own assertion—which equates phonemes, the units of sound, with morphemes, the units of meaning—could easily have been attacked.

The *Theory of Literature* is not a theory of writing. In part, this is due to the very accurate perception that not all literature is written. Nonetheless, Wellek and Warren fail to address the specific changes which occur once literature is submitted to the process of writing. They justify this gap by arguing that the written text is never the "real" work:

> That the writing on the paper is not the "real" poem can be demonstrated by another argument. The printed page contains a great many elements which are extraneous to the poem: the size of the type, the sort of type used (roman, italic), the size of the page, and many other factors. If we should take seriously the view that a poem is an artifact, we would have to come to the conclusion that every single copy or, at least, every differently printed edition is a different work of art. There would be no a priori reason why copies in different editions should be

> copies of the same book. Besides, not every correct printing is considered by us, the readers, a correct printing of the poem. The very fact that we are able to correct printers' errors in a text which we might not have read before . . . shows that we do not consider the printed lines as the geniune poem.

30 years after it was written, this sounds half obvious and half presumptuous—the authority of a reader to be the judge of what is or isn't a "correct printing of a poem," is the sort of prerogative that comes easily to one who prepares Variorum Editions of the dead.

But the importance of the argument is that it allows Wellek and Warren not only to devalue the text as arbiter of the work, but to put aside any consideration of the impact of printing on literature, beyond the most banal acknowledgement of its existence.

Viktor Shklovsky notes the importance of this consideration in an interview in the Winter 1978-79 issue of *The Soviet Review*, when he says:

> At one time only poetry was recognized, and prose was regarded as something second class, for it seemed a counterfeit; for a long time it was not admitted into high art. It was let in only when they started printing books.

If we argue—and I am arguing—that the sentence, as distinct from the utterance of speech, is a unit of prose, and if prose as literature and the rise of printing are inextricably interwoven, then the impact of printing on literature, not just on the presentation of literature, but on how writing itself is written, needs to be addressed. This would be the historical component of any theory of the sentence.

But Wellek and Warren avoid any such discussion. Instead, they divide literature into a binary scheme, one side devoted to character and plot construction, the other devoted to wordplay. Generally speaking, these become the axes of fiction and poetry. This also parallels Saussure's division of language into a paradigmatic and a syntagmatic axis. And it also parallels the strategies of Structuralism.

Now this wordplay, the paradigmatic axis of poetry, could go itself toward an investigation of the sentence, but it doesn't. The realms Wellek and Warren carry it to are image, metaphor, symbol and myth: successively broader groupings of referentiality.

Like New Criticism, Structuralism—and here I mean structuralist poetics—is founded on the model of linguistics first constructed by Saussure and later codified by Louis Hjemslev and Roman Jakobson. However, it has several practical advantages over New Criticism: it is not

heavily influenced by the British school of philosophy; it has not identified itself with the conservative movement in literature; and it is at least conscious of the critique of Saussurian linguistics posed by Derrida.

Structuralism has come closer to a recognition of the need for a theory of the sentence than any tendencies we have thus far examined.

But this doesn't mean one has been developed. The most recent classic of French Structuralism to be translated into English is Pierre Machery's *Theory of Literary Production*. Following a division made by Wellek and Warren of discourse into three broad categories—everyday, scientific, and literary—Machery proposes that everyday discourse is ideological, scientific discourse is empiral, and literary discourse moves back and forth between these two poles. This model echoes the one made by Zukofsky of his work having a lower limit of speech and an upper one of music. Machery's revision makes a real distinction and moves it well towards something that could be put into a contextualized theory of utterance such as that proposed by Voloshinov. But Machery's divisions are inaccurate.

Everyday discourse is purely ideological, but so too is all specialized discourse. The constraints posed on all modes of professional jargon and technical language, whether scientific, legal, medical or whatever, communicate class in addition to any other object of their discourse. There is no such thing as a non-ideological or value-free discourse.

Tzvestan Todorov's *The Poetics of Prose* actually addresses the function of the sentence, for about two paragraphs. Todorov defines meaning according to the formula of Emile Beneviste: "It is the capacity of a linguistic unit to integrate a higher-level unit." This definition of meaning is central to Todorov's work. It is based on an observation by Valery:

> Literature is, and can be nothing other than, a kind of extension and application of certain properties of language.

Todorov demonstrates his understanding of the importance of the question of integration, both in *The Poetics of Prose* and in a brief lecture he gave along with Roland Barthes at Johns Hopkins in 1966. I'm quoting from the talk:

> While in speech the integration of units does not go beyond the sentence, in literature sentences are integrated again as part of larger articulations, and the latter in their turn into units of greater dimension, and so on until we have the entire work... On the other hand, the interpretations of each unit are innumerable, for their comprehension depends on the system in which it will be included.

I want to give an example of how meaning shifts as units are integrated into successively higher levels. Here are three sentences from *Tjanting*:

> Someone calld Douglas. Someone calld Douglas over. He was killed by someone calld Douglas over in Oakland.

Roland Barthes, of course, is the most celebrated of Structuralist critics. He also has been the most explicit in calling for a theory of the sentence. In the same symposium with Todorov, he goes so far as to say:

> The structure of the sentence, the object of linguistics, is found again, homologically, in the structure of works. Discourse is not simply an adding together of sentences; it is, itself, one great sentence.

This statement has the glaring flaw that the sentence is not the object of linguistics, and Barthes is deliberately being audacious in the way he states this. But there is an important insight here, which is that the modes of integration which carry words into phrases and phrases into sentences are not fundamentally different from those by which an individual sentence integrates itself into a larger work. This not only gives us a good reason for demanding a theory of sentences, but also suggests that such a theory would lead us toward a new mode of analysis of literary products themselves.

In *S/Z*, Barthes demonstrates how a structuralist interpretation of a specific story ought to proceed. He takes Balzac's "Sarrasine" and analyses it according to several different codes. In a sense, he goes word by word through the text, but he does *not* break his analysis into sentences. Instead, he uses what he calls lexias, anywhere from one word to several sentences long. Barthes himself describes the selection of lexias as being "arbitrary in the extreme," although he treats them as "units of reading."

His earliest work, *Writing Degree Zero*, which is also the one most widely quoted in conjunction with so-called language writers, does address the question, but in a highly metaphoric style and with a certain primitiveness, really only a reflection of the other work which had been done in this area in the past 25 years. I want you to listen to this passage with Beneviste's theory of integration in mind:

> Classical language does not reach the functional perfection of the relational network of mathematics: relations are not signified, in it, by any special signs, but only by accidents of form and disposition. It is the restraint of the words themselves, their alignment, which achieves the relational nature of classic discourse. Overworked in a restricted number of ever-similar relations, classical words are on the way to becoming an algebra....

> Modern poetry, since it must be distinguished from classical poetry and from any type of prose, destroys the spontaneously functional nature of language, and leaves standing only its lexical basis. It retains only the outward shape of relationships, their music, but not their reality. The Word shines forth above a line of relationships emptied of their content, grammar is bereft of its purpose, it becomes prosody and is no longer anything but an inflexion which lasts only to present the Word.

Barthes is here casting against the temporal plane of history a proposition originally proposed by Roman Jakobson for all poetry:

> The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.

Jakobson's formula suggests the primacy of the paradigmatic to the extent that it imposes itself on the supposed value-free combinations of the syntagmatic.

Barthes suggests that the Jakobsonian projection of the paradigm is not a constant, but that history has seen the movement from a syntagmatic focus to a paradigmatic one, and that a break has occurred at a point when some critical mass—not specifically identified by Barthes—renders it impossible for units to continue to integrate beyond grammatical levels, e.g., the sentence.

Barthes is, I believe, wrong in this. What has occurred is that printing has made literature and literacy more available across a progressively more stratified scale of social classes and that the poles of paradigm and syntagm have become more and more identified with the limits, respectively, of high and low art.

Writing occurs in every literate class, although only a fraction ever gets into print. Each class which has writing also has a range of literary art extending from high to low. This is obscured by the presentation of literature as a unified body of work without internal class markers. Helen Adam represents an instance of high lumpen art, although from the idealized and imaginary point of view of a unified literature, she is often taken as an example of how poetry can still aspire to the condition of low art without being, by virtue of that, bad writing.

How do sentences integrate into higher units of meaning? The obvious first step here is toward the paragraph, and here I want to quote Voloshinov one last time:

> ...in certain crucial respects paragraphs are analogues to exchanges in dialogue. The paragraph is something like a vitiated dialogue worked

into the body of a monologic utterance. Behind the device of partitioning speech into units, which are termed paragraphs in their written form, lie orientation toward listener or reader and calculation of the latter's possible reactions.

The definition here is not that radically different from partitioning strategies in some current work, such as David Bromige's essay poems. David Antin, in his talk at 80 Langton Street, described his own work in just Voloshinov's terms, as a vitiated dialogue.

Ferrucio Rossi-Landi, the Italian semiotician, focuses on this problem more closely, when he argues that the syllogism is the classic mode of above-sentence integration. For example, the sentences "All women were once girls" and "Some women are lawyers" logically lead to a third sentence or conclusion, a higher level of meaning: "Some lawyers were once girls." Literature proceeds by suppression, most often, of this third term, positing instead chains of the order of the first two. For example:

> He thought they were a family unit. There were seven men and four women, and thirteen children in the house. Which voice was he going to record?
>
> ("Plasma," Barrett Watten)

But this integration is, in fact, a presumption by the reader. In the next paragraph, Watten plays with the reader's recognition of this presumptiveness:

> That's why we talk language. Back in Sofala I'm writing this down wallowing in a soft leather armchair. A dead dog lies in the gutter, his feet in the air.

Whereas two paragraphs before, the separation of the sentences was so large as to suppress integration altogether:

> The burden of classes is the twentieth-century career. He can be incredibly cruel. Events are advancing at a terrifying rate.

Rossi-Landi also gives us a final means of looking at the importance of the sentence. *Linguistics and Economics* argues that language-use arises from the need to divide labor in the community, and that the elaboration of language-systems and of labor production, up to and including all social production, follow identical paths. In this view, the completed tool is a sentence.

A hammer, for example, consists of a face, a handle, and a peen. Without the presence of all three, the hammer will not function. Sentences relate to their subunits in just this way. Only the manufacturer of hammers would have any use for disconnected handles; thus without the whole there

can be no exchange value. Likewise, it is at the level of the sentence that the use value and the exchange value of any statement unfold into view.

As such, the sentence is the hinge unit of any literary product.

Larger literary products, such as poems, are like completed machines. Any individual sentence might be a piston. It will not get you down the road by itself, but you cannot move the automobile without it.

I have said that the sentence is a unit of prose writing. Certainly sentences exist in literature before the arrival of prose literature. Grammar, and thus the idea of the sentence, not only extended from models of high discourse, but was and has always been taught and predicated on the idea of such models. As Shklovsky noted, prose enters literature with the rise of printing a little more than 500 years ago. As such, its social role as an index of education became progressively more important as education spread to the bourgeois classes. The more educated the individual, the more likely her utterances would have the characteristics of well-formed sentences. The sentence, well-formed and complete, was and still is an index of class in society.

Now prose fiction to a significant extent derives from the narrative epics of poetry, but moves toward a very different sense of form and organization. Exterior formal devices, such as rhyme and linebreak, diminish and the units of prose become the sentence and the paragraph. In the place of external devices, which function to keep the reader's or listener's experience at least partly in the present, consuming the text, fiction foregrounds the syllogistic leap or integration above the level of the sentence to create a fully referential tale.

This does not mean that the prose fiction paragraph is without significant form, even in the most compelling narrative. Consider this paragraph from Conrad's *The Secret Agent*:

> In front of the great doorway a dismal row of newspaper sellers standing clear of the pavement dealt out their wares from the gutter. It was a raw, gloomy day of the early spring; and the grimy sky, the mud of the streets, the rags of the dirty men harmonized excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printers' ink. The posters, maculated with filth, garnished like tapistry the sweep of the curbstone. The trade in afternoon papers was brisk, yet, in comparison with the swift, constant march of foot traffic, the effect was of indifference, of disregarded distribution. Ossipon looked hurriedly both ways before stepping out into the cross-currents, but the Professor was already out of sight.

Only the last of these five sentences actually furthers the narrative. The rest serve to set the scene, but do so in the most elegant manner imaginable. Every sentence here is constructed around some kind of opposition. The first takes us from the "great doorway" to a "dismal row" in the "gutter." The second contrasts "spring" with "raw and gloomy," and then has the "grimy sky," "the mud," "the rags of the dirty men" "harmonize excellently" with the "damp rubbishy sheets soiled with ink." And so forth, even to the presence of Ossipon and the absence of the Professor.

This kind of structure might well be foregrounded in a poem, by placing key terms in critical places along the line, by putting certain oppositions in literal rhyme, and by writing the whole perhaps in the present tense. Fiction has a much greater tendency toward the aorist or past tense in general. More importantly, the lack of these foregrounding devices permits the syllogistic or fetishistic capacity of the language to become dominant.

It is this condition of prose that we find also in the work of Russell Edson, the best known English language writer of the prose poem. This is from "The Sardine Can Dormitory":

> A man opens a sardine can and finds a row of tiny cots full of tiny dead people; it is a dormitory flooded with oil.
>
> He lifts out the tiny bodies with a fork and lays them on a slice of bread; puts a leaf of lettuce over them, and closes the sandwich with another slice of bread.
>
> He wonders what he should do with the tiny cots; wondering if they are not eatable, too?
>
> He looks into the can and sees a tiny cat floating in the oil. The bottom of the can, under the oil, is full of little shoes and stockings...

Other than the hallucinated quality of the tale, derived from surrealism and the short stories of Kafka, there is really nothing here of great difference from the conditions of prose as one finds it in fiction. If anything, it has less of the formal qualities of poetry than the Conrad passage above.

In good part, what makes Edson a prose poet is where he publishes. The poems in *Edson's Mentality*, from which this was taken, were first published in *Poetry Now, Oink!*, and *The Iowa Review*. By publishing among poets, Edson has taken on the public role of a poet, but a poet whose work participates entirely in the tactics and units of fiction.

Edson is a good example of why the prose poem—even that name is

awkward—has come to be thought of as a bastard form.

Even today in America the prose poem barely has any legitimacy. There are no prose poems at all in Hayden Carruth's anthology, *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*.

Nor in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*.

Nor in the Kelly/Leary anthology *A Controversy of Poets*.

The prose poem came into existence in France. From 1699, the rules of versification set down by the French Academy proved so rigid that some writers simply chose to sidestep them, composing instead in a "poetic" prose style, writing epics and pastorals in this mode in the 18th Century. At the same time, poetry from other languages was being translated into French prose. It was Aloysius Bertrand who, in 1827, first began to compose poems in prose. He published these works in a book called *Gaspard de la Nuit*. By the end of the 19th Century, the prose poem had been incorporated fully into French literature by Baudelaire, Mallarme, and Rimbaud.

The French found the prose poem to be an ideal device for the dematerialization of writing per se. Gone were the external devices of form that naggingly held the reader at least partially in the present. Sentences could be lengthened, stretched even further than the already long sentences which characterized Mallarmé's verse, without befuddling the reader or disengaging her from the poem. And longer sentences also suspended for greater periods of time the pulse of closure which enters into prose as the mark of rhythm. It was perfect for hallucinated, fantastic and dreamlike contents, for pieces with multiple locales and times squeezed into a few words. Here is a six sentence poem by Mallarmé, translated by Keith Bosley as "The Pipe":

> Yesterday I found my pipe as I was dreaming about a long evening's work, fine winter work. Throwing away cigarettes with all the childish joys of summer into the past lit by sun-blue leaves, the muslin dresses and taking up again my earnest pipe as a serious man who wants a long undisturbed smoke, in order to work better: but I was not expecting the surprise this abandoned creature was preparing, hardly had I taken the first puff when I forgot my great books to be done, amazed, affected, I breathed last winter coming back. I had not touched the faithful friend since my return to France, and all London, London as I lived the whole of it by myself, a year ago appeared; first the dear fogs which snugly wrap our brains and have there, a smell of their own, when they get in under the casement. My tobacco smelt of a dark room with leather furniture seasoned by coaldust on which the lean black cat luxuriated;

the big fires! and the maid with red arms tipping out the coals, and the noise of these coals falling from the steel scuttle into the iron grate in the morning—the time of the postman's solemn double knock, which brought me to life! I saw again through the windows those sick trees in the deserted square—I saw the open sea, so often crossed that winter, shivering on the bridge of the steamer wet with drizzle and blackened by smoke—with my poor wandering loved one, in travelling clothes with a long dull dress the color of road dust, a cloak sticking damp to her cold shoulders, one of those straw hats without a feather and almost without ribbons, which rich ladies throw away on arrival, so tattered are they by the sea air and which poor loved ones retrim for a few good seasons more. Round her neck was wound the terrible handkerchief we wave when we say goodbye for ever.

Here we almost have a prefiguring of the new sentence: the absence of external poetic devices, but not their interiorization in the sentence. Mallarmé has extended their absence by reducing the text to the minimum number of sentences. The dematerialization of the text in this manner is an example of prose shaping poetic form and beginning to alter sentence structure. But note that there is no attempt whatsoever to prevent the integration of linguistic units into higher levels. These sentences take us not toward language, but away from it.

The prose poem did not take root in England or America. Oscar Wilde and Amy Lowell made stabs at it. The influence of poems in other languages being translated into English prose, such as Tagore's rendering of the Indian songs, *Gitanjali*, was quite visible.

Alfred Kreymbourg's 1930 anthology, *Lyric America*, has four prose poems. One is a long and tedious one by Arturo Giovanni, called "The Walker." The other three are by the black poet Fenton Johnson. I'm going to read the longest of these because Johnson uses a device here which points in the direction of the new sentence. Each sentence is a complete paragraph; run-on sentences are treated as one paragraph each, but two paragraphs begin with conjunctions. Structured thus, Johnson's is the first American prose poem with a clear, if simple, sentence:paragraph relation.

THE MINISTER

I mastered pastoral theology, the Greek of the Apostles, and all the difficult subjects in a minister's curriculum.

I was learned as any in this country when the Bishop ordained me.

And I went to preside over Mount Moriah, largest flock in the Conference.

I preached the Word as I felt it, I visited the sick and dying and

comforted the afflicted in spirit.

I loved my work because I loved God.

But I lost my charge to Sam Jenkins, who has not been to school four years in his life.

I lost my charge because I could not make my congregation shout.

And my dollar money was small, very small.

Sam Jenkins can tear a Bible to tatters and his congregation destroys the pews with their shouting and stamping.

Sam Jenkins leads in the gift of raising dollar money.

Such is religion.

Johnson is clearly influenced by Edgar Lee Masters, but his sentence:paragraph device brings the reader's attention back time and again to the voice of the narrator in this poem. It is the first instance in English of a prose poem which calls attention to a discursive or poetic effect. Even though the referential content is always evident, the use of the paragraph here limits the reader's ability to get away from the langauage itself.

But Fenton Johnson may not be the first American prose poet of consequence. Here, from *Kora In Hell: Improvisations*, is the third entry in the twentieth grouping, accompanied by its commentary:

One need not be hopelessly cast down because he cannot cut onyx into a ring to fit a lady's finger. You hang your head. There is neither onyx nor porphyry on these roads—only brown dirt. For all that, one may see his face in a flower along it—even in this light. Eyes only and for a flash only. Oh, keep the neck bent, plod with the back to the split dark! Walk in the curled mudcrusts to one side, hands hanging. Ah well... Thoughts are trees! Ha, ha, ha, ha! Leaves load the branches and upon them white night sits kicking her heels against the shore.

A poem can be made of anything. This is a portrait of a disreputable farm hand made out of the stuff of his environment.

Certainly we have strategies here which echo the French prose poem, such as the constantly shifting point of view. More important: the sentences allow only the most minimal syllogistic shift to the level of reference, and some, such as the laughter, permit no such shift whatsoever.

But note the word "portrait" in Williams' commentary. His model here is not the French prose poem so much as the so-called cubist prose of Gertrude Stein, who as early as 1911 wrote *Tender Buttons*:

CUSTARD

Custard is this. It has aches, aches when. Not to be. Not to be narrowly. This makes a whole little hill.

It is better than a little thing that has mellow real mellow. It is better than lakes whole lakes, it is better than seeding.

ROAST POTATOES

Roast potatoes for.

Stein says in "Poetry and Grammar" that she did not intend to make *Tender Buttons* poetry, but it just happened that way. It is sufficiently unlike much that she later called poetry to suggest that it is something other than that. The portraits in *Tender Buttons* **are** portraits. The syllogistic move above the sentence level to an exterior reference is possible, but the nature of the book reverses the direction of this movement. Rather than making the shift in an automatic and gestalt sort of way, the reader is forced to deduce it from the partial views and associations posited in each sentence. The portrait of custard is marvellously accurate.

The sentences also deserve some examination. They are fragmented here in a way that is without precedent in English. Who but Stein would have written a sentence in 1911 that ends in the middle of a prepositional phrase? Her use of elliptical sentences—"Not to be. Not to be narrowly."—deliberately leaves the subject out of sight. Custard does not want to be a hard fact. And the anaphoric pronoun of "this makes a whole little hill" refers not to custard, but the negated verb phrases of the two previous sentences. Likewise in "Roast Potatoes," Stein uses the preposition "for" to convert "roast" from an adjective into a verb.

Stein has written at great length about sentences and paragraphs. Her essays on them are works in themselves, and in them, she reveals herself to have thought more seriously about the differences here than any other poet in English.

Because of the nature of her arguments, I'm going to simply quote, in order, some passages which shed some light on the issue in the terms in which I have been talking about it. From "Sentences and Paragraphs," a section of *How To Write* (1931):

> 1) Within itself. A part of a sentence may be sentence without their meaning.
>
> 2) Every sentence has a beginning. Will he begin.

> Every sentence which has a beginning makes it be left more to them.
>
> 3) A sentence should be arbitrary it should not please be better.
>
> 4) The difference between a short story and a paragraph. There is none.
>
> 5) There are three kinds of sentences are there. Do sentences follow the three. There are three kinds of sentences. Are there three kinds of sentences that follow the three.

This of course refers to the simple, compound, complex division of traditional grammars.

From the essay, "Sentences," in the same book:

> 6) A sentence is an interval in which there is a finally forward and back. A sentence is an interval during which if there is a difficulty they will do away with it. A sentence is a part of the way when they wish to be secure. A sentence is their politeness in asking for a cessation. And when it happens they look up.
>
> 7) There are two kinds of sentences. When they go. They are given to me. There are these two kinds of sentences. Whenever they go they are given to me. There are there these two kinds of sentences there. One kind is when they like and the other kind is as often as they please. The two kinds of sentences relate when they manage to be for less with once whenever they are retaken. Two kinds of sentences make it do neither of them dividing in a noun.

Stein is here equating clauses, which divide as indicated into dependent and independent, with sentences. Anything as high up the chain of language as a clause is already partially a kind of sentence. It can move syllogistically as a sentence in itself to a higher order of meaning. That's an important and original perception.

> 8) Remember a sentence should not have a name. A name is familiar. A sentence should not be familiar. All names are familiar there for there should not be a name in a sentence. If there is a name in a sentence a name which is familiar makes a data and therefor there is no equilibrium.

This explains Stein's distaste for nouns quite adequately. The concern for equilibrium is an example of grammar as meter, which points us clearly toward the new sentence.

In her 1934 American lecture, "Poetry and Grammar," Stein makes a few additional comments which shed light on the relation of sentences to prose, and hence prose poems. The first is, I believe, the best single statement on the problem as it is faced by a writer:

9) What had periods to do with it. Inevitably no matter how completely I had to have writing go on, physically one had to again and again stop sometime and if one had to again and again stop some time then periods had to exist. Besides I had always liked the look of periods and I liked what they did. Stopping sometime did not really keep one from going on, it was nothing that interfered, it was only something that happened, and as it happened as a perfectly natural happening, I did believe in periods and I used them. I never really stopped using them.

10) Sentences and paragraphs. Sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are. I can say that as often as I like and it always remains as it is, something that is.

I said I found this out in listening to Basket my dog drinking. And anybody listening to any dog's drinking will see what I mean.

Stein later gives some examples of sentences she has written, also from *How To Write*, which exist as one sentence paragraphs and capture the balance between the unemotional sentence and the emotional paragraph. My favorite is "A dog which you have never had before has sighed."

11) We do know a little now what prose is. Prose is the balance the emotional balance that makes the reality of paragraphs and the unemotional balance that makes the reality of sentences and having realized completely realized that sentences are not emotional while paragraphs are, prose can be the essential balance that is made inside something that combines the sentence and the paragraph...

What Stein means about paragraphs being emotional and sentences not is precisely the point made by Emile Beneviste: that linguistic units integrate only up to the level of the sentence, but higher orders of meaning —such as emotion—integrate at higher levels than the sentence and occur only in the presence of either many sentences or, at least Stein's example suggests this, in the presence of certain complex sentences in which dependent clauses integrate with independent ones.

So what is the new sentence?

We are now ready to ask that question. It has to do with prose poems, but only some prose poems. It does not have to do with surrealist prose poems, whether of the European or American variety, or the non-surrealist prose poems of the middle-American variety, which is poetry by function of social context. The Surrealists, on the other hand, manipulate meaning only at the higher or outer layers well beyond the horizon of the sentence.

Bob Grenier's *Sentences* directly anticipates the new sentence. By removal of context, Grenier prevents most leaps beyond the level of grammatic integration. This is the extreme case for the new sentence.

However, most of Bob's "sentences" are more properly utterances and in that sense follow Olson and Pound and a significant portion of Creeley's work in that area.

Periodically, some sentence and paragraphs in Creeley's *A Day Book* and *Presences* carry the pressurized quality of the new sentence, in that the convolutions of syntax often suggest the internal presence of once exteriorized poetic forms, although here identified much with the forms of speech.

One glimpses it in the work of Charles Bernstein, Clark Coolidge and Bernadette Mayer, East Coast poets with much relevance to many of us in San Francisco. But one doesn't see it consistently there.

A paragraph from the 18th section of "Weathers," by Clark Coolidge:

> At most a book the porch. Flames that are at all rails of snow. Flower down winter to vanish. Mite hand stroking flint to a card. Names that it blue. Wheel locked to pyramid through stocking the metal realms. Hit leaves. Participle.

In other contexts, any one of these could become a new sentence, in the sense that any sentence properly posed and staged could. Each focuses attention at the level of the language in front of one. But seldom at the level of the sentence. Mostly at the level of the phrase or, at most, the clause. "Flower down winter to vanish" can be a grammatical sentence in the traditional sense if flower is taken as a verb and the sentence as a command. But "Names that it blue" resists even that much integrating energy. Coolidge refuses to carve connotative domains from words. They are still largely decontextualized—save for the physical-acoustic elements—readymades.

This is not an example of the new sentence because it works primarily below the level of the sentence. However, there is another important element here as a result of that: the length of sentences and the use of the period are now wholly rhythmic. Grammar has become, to recall Barthes' words, prosody. As we shall see, this is an element whenever the new sentence is present.

Here are two paragraphs of new sentences:

> An inspected geography leans in with the landscape's repetitions. He lived here, under the assumptions. The hill suddenly vanished, proving him right. I was left holding the bag. I peered into it.
>
> The ground was approaching fast. It was a side of himself he rarely showed. The car's tracks disappeared in the middle of the road. The

dialog with objects is becoming more strained. Both sides gather their forces. Clouds enlarge. The wind picks up. He held onto the side of the barn by his fingertips.

These paragraphs are from *a.k.a.*, by Bob Perelman.

In them we note these qualities: (1) The paragraph organizes the sentences in fundamentally the same way a stanza does lines of verse. There are roughly the same number of sentences in each paragraph and the number is low enough to establish a clear sentence:paragraph ratio. Why is this not simply a matter of the way sentences are normally organized into paragraphs? Because there is no specific referential focus. The paragraph here is a unit of measure—as it was also in "Weathers." (2) The sentences are all sentences. By which I mean that the syntax of each resolves up to the level of the sentence. Not that these sentences make sense in the ordinary way. For example, "He lived here, under the assumptions." This sentence could be rewritten, or have been derived, from a sentence such as "He lived here, under the elm trees," or, "He lived here, under the assumption *that* etc." (3) This continual torquing of sentences is a traditional quality of poetry, but in poetry it is most often accomplished by linebreaks, and earlier on by rhyme as well. Here poetic form has moved into the interiors of prose.

Consider, by way of contrast, this first stanza of Alan Bernheimer's "Carapace":

> The face of a stranger
> is a privilege to see
> each breath a signature
> and the same sunset fifty years later
> though familiarity is an education

There are shifts and torquings here also, but these occur hinged by external poetic form: linebreaks. In "Carapace," the individual line is so-called ordinary language and is without this torque or pressurization of syntax. Torquing occurs in "Carapace" through the addition of the lines, one to another.

a.k.a., by contrast, has redeployed the linebreak to two levels. As I noted, the length of the sentence is a matter now of quantity, of measure. But the torquing which is normally triggered by linebreaks, the function of which is to enhance ambiguity and polysemy, has now moved directly into the grammar of the sentence. At one level, the completed sentence (i.e., not the completed thought, but the maximum level of grammatic/linguistic integration) has become equivalent to a line, a condition not previously imposed on sentences.

Imagine what the major poems of literary history would look like if each sentence was identical to a line.

That is why an ordinary sentence, such as "I peered into it," can become a new sentence, that is, a sentence with an interior poetic structure in addition to interior ordinary grammatical structure. That is also why and how quoted lines from a Sonoma newspaper in David Bromige's "One Spring" can also become new sentences.

In fact, the increased sensitivity to syllogistic movement enables works of the new sentence a much greater capacity to incorporate ordinary sentences of the material world, because here form moves from the totality downward and the disjunction of a quoted sentence from a newspaper puts its referential content (a) into play with its own diction, as in the sentence "Danny always loved Ireland," (from *Tjanting*, referring to Dan White); (b) into play with the preceding and succeeding sentences, as quantity, syntax, and measure; and (c) into play with the paragraph as a whole, now understood as a unit not of logic or argument, but as quantity, a stanza.

Let's look at this play of syllogistic movement:

> I was left holding the bag. I peered into it.
> The ground was approaching fast. It was a side of himself he rarely showed.

This is not the systematic distortion of the maximum or highest order of meaning, as in surrealism. Rather, each sentence plays with the preceding and following sentence. The first sounds figurative, because of the deliberate use of the cliche. The second, by using both a repetition of the word "I" and the anaphor "it," twists that, making it sound (a) literal and (b) narrative, in that the two sentences appear to refer to an identical content.

But the third sentence, which begins the next paragraph, works instead from the direction one might take in looking into a bag and associating from there the sense of gravity one feels looking down, as though falling.

The fourth sentence moves outside the voice of the narrative "I" and presents the sequence of previous sentences as leading to this humorous conclusion.

This double-relation of syllogistic movement, which nonetheless does not build up so far as to move the reader away from the level of

language itself, is highly typical of the new sentence.

Further, the interior structure of sentences here reflects also how such issues as balance, normally issues of line organization, recast themselves inside sentences. A sentence like "Clouds enlarge" is no less concerned with such balance than those of Grenier's *Sentences*: the word "enlarged" is an ordinary word *en*larged.

Let's list these qualities of the new sentence, then read a poem, listening for their presence:

1) The paragraph organizes the sentences;
2) The paragraph is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument;
3) Sentence length is a unit of measure;
4) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity;
5) Syllogistic movement is (a) limited (b) controlled;
6) Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences;
7) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
8) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below.

My example is the poem "For She," by Carla Harryman. It is one paragraph:

> The back of the hand resting on the pillow was not wasted. We couldn't hear each other speak. The puddle in the bathroom, the sassy one. There were many years between us. I stared the stranger into facing up to Maxine, who had come out of the forest wet from bad nights. I came from an odd bed, a vermillion riot attracted to loud dogs. Nonetheless I could pay my rent and provide for him. On this occasion she apologized. An arrangement that did not provoke inspection. Outside on the stagnant water was a motto. He was more than I perhaps though younger. I sweat at amphibians, managed to get home. The sunlight from the window played up his golden curls and a fist screwed over one eye. Right to left and left to right until the sides of her body were circuits. While dazed and hidden in the room, he sang to himself, severe songs, from a history he knew nothing of. Or should I say malicious? Some rustic gravure, soppy but delicate at pause. I wavered, held her up. I tremble, jack him up. Matted wallowings, I couldn't organize the memory. Where does he find his friends? Maxine said to me "but it was just you again." In spite of the cars and the smoke and

> the many languages, the radio and the appliances, the flat broad buzz of the tracks, the anxiety with which the eyes move to meet the phone and all the arbitrary colors, I am just the same. Unplug the glass, face the docks. I might have been in a more simple schoolyard.

I have just a few more things to say. One is that I first noticed the new sentence in the poem "Chamber Music" in Barrett Watten's *Decay*. I think that since then it has come forward in the work of not just one or two of us, but through the collective work and inter-influence of the entire local poetic community.

If "language writing" means anything, it means writing which does focus the reader onto the level of the sentence and below, as well as those units above. Heretofore, this has been accomplished by the deliberate exclusion of certain elements of signification, such as reference and syntax. The new sentence is the first mode of "language writing" which has been able to incorporate all the elements of language, from below the sentence level *and* above.

> Everywhere there are spontaneous literary discussions. Something structurally new is always being referred to. These topics may be my very own dreams, which everyone takes a friendly interest in. The library extends for miles, under the ground.
>
> ("Plasma")

PERIOD

September 16, 1979

Contributors' Notes

Bill Berkson lives in New York. His collected poems, *Blue Is The Hero*, recently appeared from L Publications.

David Bromige lives in Sonoma County. His books include *Tight Corners & What's Around Them* (Black Sparrow), *Birds of the West* (Coach House), and *My Poetry* (The Figures).

Barrett Watten lives in San Francisco, where he edits *This* magazine and This Press books. He is the author of *Plasma/Paralleles/"X"* (Tuumba) and *1-10* (This, forthcoming).

Steve Benson lives in San Francisco. His books include *As Is* (The Figures) and *Blindspots* (Whalecloth Press).

William Graves, formerly of San Francisco, now lives in Washington, DC.

Warren Sonbert is a San Francisco filmmaker. His films include "Divided Loyalties, "Rude Awakening," and "Carriage Trade."

Douglas Woolf lives in Eugene. His books include *On Us* (Black Sparrow), *Ya!/John-Juan* (Harper & Row), and *Fade Out* (Grove Press). He co-edits *Vital Statistics* and Wolf Run Books.

Bob Perelman lives in San Francisco. His books include *Braille* (Ithaca House), *7 Works* (The Figures), and *a.k.a.* (Tuumba).

Fanny Howe lives in Boston. Her books include *The Amerindian Coastline Poem* (Telephone Books), *Holy Smoke* (The Fiction Collective), *Bronte Wilde* (Avon), and *First Marriage* (Avon).

Ron Silliman lives in San Francisco. His books include *Ketjak* (This Press) and *Tjanting* (forthcoming).

$5.00